

## Language learning 2.0 – international collaboration made easy

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**Abstract.** The Internet has become part of our daily life and serves as a source of knowledge as well as a space for interaction. E-learning is thus a vital element in teaching, and digital media offer not only the possibility to support the individual learning processes of students, but also to foster multilingualism and to immerse into authentic learning environments. In this paper, the project “JAMK-VUAS online learning” will be described and reflected upon in detail, i.e. its aims, outcomes, lessons learned, learning styles, and Internet platforms. In addition, a brief outlook on future areas/topics/themes for such online collaborations, which need to be beneficial and fruitful for all parties involved, will be presented.

**Keywords:** e-learning, online interaction, authentic learning environment, multilingualism.

### 1. Introduction

Internationalisation has become an integral part across university campuses around the globe. Besides the mobility of students, lecturers and administrative staff, the implementation of international projects is often encouraged as another tool to increase the internationalisation level within higher education institutions (c.f. [de Wit, 2013](#); [EUA, 2013](#)). This aspect is both a great contribution and a challenge for the English classroom, where such projects can easily be implemented and should be beneficial for all parties involved. This article is a work-in-progress study that aims to explore some possibilities of enriching individual English courses by providing local students the chance to cooperate with students from another

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**How to cite this article:** Kotikoski, T.-H., & Doshi, N. (2014). Language learning 2.0 – international collaboration made easy. In S. Jager, L. Bradley, E. J. Meima, & S. Thoušny (Eds), *CALL Design: Principles and Practice; Proceedings of the 2014 EUROCALL Conference, Groningen, The Netherlands* (pp. 185-190). Dublin: [Research-publishing.net](http://Research-publishing.net). doi:10.14705/rpnet.2014.000215

linguistic and cultural background using English as a lingua franca and completing real-life-tasks with the opportunity of receiving direct feedback (c.f. Marsh, 2002).

## 2. Method

When starting international co-operation with a partner university, the first item on the agenda is understanding your partner. One way to get to know how the partner university operates is to visit each other, the simplest means for this is to arrange teacher exchanges. With Erasmus support this was possible and it was a natural way to meet and discuss the curricula and possibilities of implementing courses together. Both authors (from JAMK and VUAS) participated in teacher exchange and in addition, there were the student exchanges, during which both sides learnt more about the students, their ways of learning and different teaching methods.

JAMK University of Applied Sciences is located in Central Finland, Jyväskylä and has 8,000 students and over 30 degree programmes. JAMK has only one compulsory English course for all degree students on bachelor level, 4 ECTS at present. They also offer one compulsory Swedish course, 4 ECTS and provide elective courses in Spanish, German, French, Italian, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Each One Teach One (language tandem) and Language Café. One important aspect that was also taken into account when trying to find common areas of interest was JAMK's "Internationalisation at Home", i.e. international semesters in all degree programs (30 ECTS – English-medium courses).

At VUAS, which is situated in Austria's most western part, there are about 1000 students and degrees can be completed in engineering, business, IT, media design and social work (both bachelor and master). English is compulsory in all programs (5-6 semesters, 12-15 ECTS) and the courses are content-based. Other languages are offered as electives, mostly Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Mandarin, and Russian; in addition "international semesters" (integral part of the "Internationalisation at Home"-strategy) are realised in all degree programs (about 30 ECTS with English-medium courses).

These significant differences between VUAS and JAMK were the reason why the following JAMK course was chosen for the pilot project: English for Working Life (3 ECTS). This course contains the following units: business communication, talking about yourself and your studies, job application process, and intercultural communication. This course is offered both as a face-to-face or an online implementation. Due to the teaching commitment of the involved lecturer, the following two courses at VUAS were an option for joint activities: Applications

(second semester of InterMedia, BA) and Intercultural Communication (elective course on Master level for students from all disciplines).

### **3. What we want(ed) to achieve**

The aims we hoped to achieve were to increase international co-operation on different levels: both students and staff exchanges, learn from each other, offer students and lecturers international experience and new learning styles as well as find out whether collaboration actually works. We also hoped that collaborating on small projects might lead to bigger (possibly EU-funded) projects with a larger number of partners.

#### **3.1. Pilot project**

The online projects started with the idea of taking our first steps on a small scale, and the first project started in November 2012: 18 master students from VUAS who had chosen the elective course “Intercultural Communication” and 18 engineering students (ICT, 2nd year) from JAMK participated in this project. As a pre-assignment for the three-day intensive block, the Austrian students were asked to find out as much as possible about Finnish culture. For this, they just received a short email with a short description of the task and the contact details of the Finnish partners. At this stage, the students had never met their lecturer and had not spent any time in class to discuss the task. In most cases, the VUAS students sent emails to the JAMK students with ready-made questions about Finnish culture, which then were either discussed via email or via Skype using English as the common language. The underlying aim of this activity was to reflect on communication styles and stereotypes, which was then done together in class when students at VUAS actually met for their elective course.

The evaluation of this first pilot project, which was carried out on both sides in the form of questionnaires and interviews, showed that students were faced with mostly the following challenges:

- The IC course at VUAS took place only on three days (no face-to-face contact before online activity) during a weekend, therefore the timetable had to be tight.
- JAMK students did not take a similar course, their English course only contained some elements of intercultural communication; however, it was only one unit among many.

- The time-frame had to be carefully considered; we did not want to spend too much or too little time on this task.
- The students' levels of language skills were very heterogeneous.
- The age levels were also different: there were both bachelor and master students, full-time and part-time students, as well as mature students.
- The students represented different cultures; at VUAS there were Austrian, German, French, Indian, US-Austrian, Russian, and Czech-German students participating in the course, whereas the students at JAMK were Finnish.
- One issue that caused anxiety was the actual contact with a "stranger" and what to say or do when the contact had been established.
- Skype conversation was also considered stressful and students were shy and nervous at the beginning.
- For the Finnish students, understanding the task and reflecting on its outcome was the most difficult task.

The outcomes at VUAS after the 3-day course on intercultural communication were mostly positive. The students were surprised by the task and were very eager to discuss intercultural issues with their Finnish counterparts. Some students mentioned that they had a two-hour talk on Skype. The students learnt to take notes based on discussions and prepared well for the online discussion. The Austrian students became more aware of differences in communication styles. The theory learnt was applied to practice and this task served as an ideal opening for intercultural communication and, in particular, stereotypes. JAMK students' attitude was also very positive and they suggested another similar task for next year's students. They enjoyed the authenticity of the situation and appreciated the opportunity to use the language in a natural context with peers in another country. This pilot experiment supported the Finnish students' course content very well: the students learnt to introduce themselves, talk about themselves and life in Finland. After the small talk phase, they moved on to discuss intercultural communication issues utilising social media (c.f. [Stanley, 2013](#)).

There were also negative comments: some VUAS students did not receive any response to their email even after the lecturers sent reminders. Skype was regarded

as scary and intimidating and many students mentioned that emails would have been easier. Not all Finnish students got an Austrian counterpart either, as the group sizes were quite different. As the Finnish students study only one semester, it is challenging to find the perfect time for the Austrian contact and match the course content in both universities. Since this was a pilot study, the two lecturers noticed during their reflection and evaluation period that preparation time should have been longer and that one needs to carefully plan such activities as not only academic calendars can be quite different, but that also differences in working styles, communication styles, time-management, etc. can be rather challenging.

### **3.2. Second project**

The second project, which was implemented in spring 2013, focused on the job application process, with special emphasis on CV writing, which was an important content in both universities and their English courses. The core question here was “can an outsider understand my CV?”. This time, the teams had more in common as all students were on bachelor level with similar degree programs and age groups. Both teams had a short introduction to the activity and they were asked to tell about their university and home-town to get started. Both VUAS and JAMK groups received guidance on how to get in touch with their partner students, how to write a proper email, how to handle the task and the time was now announced already at the beginning of the course with information on the given time-frame. The teachers offered students continuous support if they needed it.

This time, the outcomes at VUAS were very positive. According to the feedback given in surveys and in direct form in class, the students were eager to complete the task and showed great interest in Finland and the Finnish people. The task was clear, it was a helpful activity, easy to manage and not too time-consuming. There were some concerns such as self-confidence issues, e.g. “How do I pronounce this Finnish name?”, “Will they know who I am?”, “What shall I write in this first email?”, “I need to check them on Facebook first” or “Can you [teacher] check my work first?”.

The outcomes at JAMK were also positive, which was demonstrated in their written evaluation of this second project. For the teacher, this was an excellent project; emails had just been discussed and written in class. This task with VUAS was a hands-on project with authentic material and peer feedback on CVs. The students were concerned that they might not get a reply from anyone or that they might not understand the Austrian students. The timetable was critical again since the Finnish students’ course was almost finished and they were worried about “What if they

write to me when I am already working and the term has finished?’. Of course, they also wanted to get their grades as soon as possible.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The collaboration between VUAS and JAMK continues this fall with another small project and new themes/topics are constantly being explored by the involved teachers, who both feel that –even though small and easy to implement– these joint activities are worth the effort and enrich the learning environment of the involved students and are thus very beneficial for both institutions.

The course evaluations on both sides, as well as individual statements and comments from students involved, show that using such online projects is a great opportunity to improve the learning environment and change the dynamics of existing courses. In general, one can say that students were more motivated to complete the given tasks, which was mostly due to the interactive part. This enabled new possibilities for authentic materials and assignments. From the perspective of the lecturers, it seems that the involved students profited not only on linguistic and content-specific aspects but also on social aspects, which is another reason to continue such online-projects in the future and increase the learning opportunities in this direction for even more student groups.

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