

# Non-native Speakers Learning Swedish Together in Virtual Interaction

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to give an overview of a cooperation project launched three years ago, under which students who study Swedish at two universities across the Baltic Sea have a chance to complete a part of relevant courses in their study programmes together in an online course. The primary goals of joint studying are: to encourage students from different nationalities to actively communicate with one another, using Swedish as the lingua franca (communicative and social competence), to motivate students to use a range of sources in Swedish to get information, and to give the participants a chance to gain new knowledge about their neighbouring country and the student life there (internationalisation competence). The common difficulties in carrying out joint studies at two different universities (Guth, Helm, & O’Dowd, 2012), e.g. timetabling and technical problems, are overcome by focusing on asynchronous dialogue and by choosing a technically workable platform with good technical support from one of the partner universities. The authors consider the cooperation a very positive experience, easy and inexpensive to implement, and highly recommend it to their colleagues. Our experience confirms what previous studies (Guth et al., 2012) have already outlined: despite the belief that foreign languages should be learned face-to-face and preferably with native speakers, students seem to appreciate using information and communication technology for connecting up with other people using the target language as their lingua franca. We also feel that these exchanges are particularly suitable for the teaching of less commonly taught languages and offer all parties both change and satisfaction.

**Keywords:** collaborative learning, virtual interaction, less-taught languages, non-native speakers, target language as lingua franca.

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## **1. Introduction**

Comparing language learning today with language learning 20 years ago, it is evident that changes are significant. The difference is particularly noteworthy in the use of online technologies and not only in language teaching methodology. Paper textbooks and exercise books have been replaced by electronic ones, and fast Internet connections give the language learner an opportunity to use (unlimited) audiovisual material accessible on the Internet. Online projects also bring language learners all over the world into contact with one another and create opportunities for authentic communication.

The authors, who work as Swedish language lecturers at Turku University of Applied Sciences and Tallinn University, wished to give their students a possibility to complete a part of their Swedish language course in virtual collaboration with the partner university. Hereby, we present an overview of the cooperation that has been ongoing for three years by now.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Students and language levels**

The prerequisite for successful cooperation in language learning is a more or less equal level in language proficiency; differences in language proficiency can be a challenge to successful collaboration (Guth et al., 2012). The Finnish students who participated in the project had studied Swedish both in the comprehensive school and upper secondary school, and were on B1+/B2 language level. The students studying Swedish at Tallinn University start from zero and by the time of the joint study they are also on the same level.

Similar prerequisite skills make the formulation of tasks and communication between the students considerably easier. The number of students participating was 12 (Turku) and 9 (Tallinn) in 2011, 20 (Turku) and 7 (Tallinn) in 2012, and 18 (Turku) and 10 (Tallinn) in 2013.

### **2.2. Web platform**

As Finnish and Estonian higher education institutions use different study environments, a decision on which platform to use had to be made first. As Turku University of Applied Sciences has been offering different online courses for students for a long time, and as the used platform Optima has also a Swedish

language version, it was the most appropriate choice for the implementation of the joint study. The students of Tallinn University received a temporary user name and password in Optima.

### 2.3. Tasks

The primary goal of the joint online course was to encourage students to use Swedish as lingua franca when communicating with the students of the partner university. Therefore, group work formed a large part of the joint study. The first task consisted of presentations of the students' personal and academic backgrounds followed by a peer discussion on the virtual forum. Students were divided into Estonian-Finnish pairs and could comment each other's presentations on the forum and ask questions.

The next task was listening comprehension by following television and radio programmes in Swedish and commenting on them in a diary. The students wrote down a brief summary of the programme and complemented it with a small glossary of new vocabulary that was used in the programme. In addition, students evaluated their listening skills with reference to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages<sup>3</sup>.

The third task was to discuss current social topics that they had given in their individual essays in groups. Argumentation was carried out on the virtual discussion forum the following week. Some exemplary themes were given for the students, for instance:

- Should Turkey become/not become a member of the EU?
- Smoking in public places must be/should not be forbidden.
- Higher education should be/should not be free of charge.
- Nature needs our help.
- Present-day society – a consumption society?

Some examples of the topics proposed by students:

- Marriage or living together?
- The dangers of wind energy.
- Children have a right to home care.

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3. [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_en.pdf)

Thereafter, the students were divided into groups of 4-5 members and the communication continued on the virtual forum. All students had to read through their group members' essays and give argumentations for or against the opinions presented there.

### **3. Discussion**

As our wish was to offer an online course with active feedback, the students received comments from both their peers and their teacher. In the case of the first task we also exchanged roles between ourselves, so that students would receive feedback not only from their own teacher but also from the so-called guest teacher. When working out the tasks, both lecturers took part again, since the joint course consisted of varied types of tasks.

In a joint study where group work comprises a large part of the study, it is of special importance that all the participants follow the given deadlines. When the deadline of a particular task was coming closer, we therefore sent a reminder by email. In the authors' opinion, the students were very committed to completing the tasks, and there were only a few cases when a student forgot about the deadline. We believe that students tend to consider their studies of value if they are credit-bearing and part of the study programme (O'Dowd, 2013).

In joint teaching, it is also important that the partner teachers have common visions, approaches and practices in their teaching (O'Dowd, 2013). We believe that a reliable teacher-partnership is vital to long-term collaboration and successful co-teaching. An online course can definitely be prepared online as well, but we presupposed that a physical meeting makes planning considerably easier, something that was also confirmed by our own experience.

#### **3.1. Feedback from students**

After the period of joint study, all students were asked to fill in a feedback questionnaire, in which they answered the following questions:

- How would you evaluate your language development during the course? Which sub-skills (reading, writing, online communication, listening, cultural competence) developed the most/least during the course?
- What did you like the most about the joint study? What kind of tasks suit best for an online course?

- Did you encounter any difficulties in using Optima? Was the timetable suitable for the course? Did you understand the feedback provided by the teacher?
- How would you evaluate the cooperation with the partner university on a scale from 10 (very good) to 1 (very bad)? Please explain your answer.
- Would you be interested in a similar joint study also with other higher education institutions and not only in the framework of language training? Why?
- Do you have any remarks or suggestions for modification?

All of the respondents noted that their language skills developed during the course. As the answer to the most developed sub-skill, listening, writing, and online communication were mentioned. Interesting was the fact that students evaluated the development of cultural competence very differently. In the opinion of approximately half of the students, this developed most of the sub-skills, and in the opinion of approximately the other half, the least.

When answering question number 2, it was mentioned that the tasks were varied and interesting and the reading and commenting of fellow students' texts exciting.

None of the students experienced problems with understanding the use of Optima or the instructions. The timetable was considered suitable and the majority also stated that they looked at the feedback provided by the teacher.

The feedback clearly indicated that students liked to study internationally. The evaluation of the participants in 2013 was on average 7.2 in Estonia and 8.2 in Finland on a scale from 10 to 1. Among other issues, students mentioned the following about the joint study:

- “a new way to study language”;
- “a good way to learn to know Finnish/Estonian students”;
- “thanks to online communication, language use seemed natural”;
- “I learned a lot, also from other participants in the course”;
- “exciting, good variation in study routine”.

None of the students had anything negative to say about the joint study. It is evident that in students' opinion the internationality gave the course extra value and the

form of study was motivating. Let us use the formulation of one of the students' feedback: "More similar sort of studies!"

### **3.2. Recommendations**

Online studies suit well for several different types of tasks: reading comprehension, writing (analysis, report, summary), listening comprehension, translating, vocabulary and grammar exercises, and different assignments for group and pair work on communication forums. In our opinion, the best solution is to integrate a joint online course into an already existing course. In the present case, Estonian students "visited" the course *Svenska på nätet* (Swedish on the Net) during five weeks, after which both groups continued their respective Swedish language courses in Finland and Estonia.

In comparison to "ordinary studies", online studies require a more detailed planning and precise instructions (Koli, 2008), but in the authors' opinion, this one-time amount of time spent is rewarding. Relying on our experience, we can say that the course is easily manageable if the task for each coming week opens only after having completed the previous one. The teachers, on their side, have to strive for a good learning atmosphere and make the game rules clear for the students.

## **4. Conclusions**

The project has turned out to be viable, key factors being students at approximately the same language level, partner teachers with similar aims and practices, good adaptation to existing study programmes and a workable platform. In all three years, students have evaluated the joint study project as successful and they have noted that it has been exciting and motivating.

It has been successful also in the opinion of the authors. As we had counted with the fact that we do not meet our students face-to-face, we were ready to interrupt at any moment if anybody would have problems with Optima or the instructions. The students, however, managed everything. Virtual communication is so natural and usual to present-day youth, that it should be used by teachers in creating virtual classrooms.

Successful online learning presupposes very thorough planning and preliminary work. In the authors' opinion online cooperation is also variation for the teacher; besides the physical classroom, they must create a virtual one, which is different

from the former. Considering more and more complex economic situations at higher education institutions, we believe that such a joint study also has good future prospects.

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