Finnish students' perceptions of key elements in effective online language courses: insights from the KiVAKO project

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Abstract. This study explored Finnish students' perceptions of online language courses with the KiVAKO project **(**KiVAKO is an acronym in Finnish meaning strengthening the language capital at higher education institutions). The aim was to identify and make visible the aspects that need to be taken into account in designing an effective online language course. The research context included eight pilot courses created and implemented within the framework of the KiVAKO project, which seeks to develop a nationwide online language course offering. Language instruction is offered in Chinese, Estonian, Finnish Sign Language, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish on Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels A1-C1. The research data consisted of responses to a post-course online questionnaire. The data were analysed according to a qualitative content analysis method. The findings indicate that clearly structured course design, relevant learning materials, appropriate teacher activities, and aligned assignments enhanced the students' positive learning experiences.

Keywords: higher education, online learning, foreign language learning, languages other than English.

1.   Introduction

In the context of higher education in Finland, the offering of language courses is becoming more and more one-dimensional. The dominance of the English language is apparent, with less frequently studied languages, such as Spanish,

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German, French and Russian, increasingly no longer offered in tertiary-level education. However, as contemporary working life requires versatile language skills, possession of fluent English skills is clearly insufficient. Therefore, higher education institutions need to invest in language education.

The KiVAKO project aims to help bridge this gap between higher education and working life in terms of language skills. Funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the KiVAKO project aims to develop nationwide online language courses which are available to all students in higher education in Finland. The project started in Autumn of 2018 with participation from 86 language teachers at eight universities and 18 universities of applied sciences. In Autumn of 2019, a total of eight courses were piloted.

Even if online language courses are offered in higher education institutions, the high drop-out rates require actions to improve the courses in order to engage the students in completing the courses. Therefore, the courses must be carefully designed. The language teachers in the KiVAKO project had the opportunity to develop the courses according to their own pedagogical preferences. As a rule, the courses were created in teams according to the target language of instruction, with one of the team members implementing (i.e. teaching) the pilot course. In this paper, we investigate which key elements the students perceived as contributing to the effectiveness of online language courses.

2. Method

The context of this research are the eight piloted language courses, which were created and implemented as part of the KiVAKO project. Table 1 provides an overview of the languages targeted for instruction in these courses, along with the number of students who enrolled in, were accepted in, started, and completed each course. In this nationwide project with several higher education institutions involved, the students' demographic information was not available. A total of 204 students participated in the courses, of which 142 completed the courses.

To explore which elements the students considered most effective in advancing their learning, an online questionnaire in Finnish was administered to all students who fully completed a given online course. Each teacher posted the link to the online questionnaire for their students on the Moodle platform. Sixty-five students responded (a response rate of 46%). The questionnaire consisted of five open-ended questions (questions 6-10 in supplementary materials) and 15 opinion statements,

to which the participants responded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ('totally disagree') to 5 ('totally agree').

Table 1.   The number of students in the piloted KiVAKO courses in the Autumn of 2019

Course	Enrolled	Accepted	Started	Completed
KiVAKO Chinese and Chinese characters 1	50	30	30	17
KiVAKO Spanish 1	220	30	30	27
KiVAKO Italian 1	112	30	28	18
KiVAKO Korean 1	89	30	25	22
KiVAKO Portuguese 1	30	30	28	14
KiVAKO German 1	103	30	26	19
KiVAKO Russian 3	16	16	8	7
KiVAKO Estonian 1	77	30	29	18

An analysis of the students' responses to the open-ended questions was conducted by adapting the content analysis method (Krippendorff, 2004), using the software Atlas.ti (version 8.4.18). In the first stage, the data was read and segmented, and all mentions related to advancing learning were marked and named descriptively. The number of these segments totalled 185. All segments were then explored thematically, with the following subcategories emerging to describe the students' perceptions of the elements advancing learning: course design, instructions, teacher activities, learning materials, and assignments. The quantitative data was used to compliment the qualitative data, and will be analysed separately in another study.

3.   Results and discussion

The results of the content analysis of elements that were seen as advancing learning are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.   The elements advancing learning

Category	Amount (%)
Course design	51 (27.57%)
Learning materials	43 (23.24%)
Teacher activities	41 (22.16%)
Assignments	36 (19.46%)
Instructions	14 (7.57%)
Total	**185 (100%)**

As can be seen from Table 2, the element that students considered the most effective in advancing learning was course design. If the course structure was divided according to topics with a clear timetable and relevant grammar, it was considered beneficial to learning. Even though clear timetables were considered supportive of learning, the fact that the students were able to study according to their own timetable, regardless of time and space, was also valued. This is in line with the work of Driscoll et al. (2012), who state that the planning phase is paramount in designing online courses.

Learning materials also had a positive impact on learning, as the students appreciated having relevant, timely, multifaceted, and challenging material. The students benefited from being able to download the material to their own device. Particularly, the teacher's own materials in the target language, e.g. animations, videos, and recordings, were highly valued. Similarly, Nielson and González-Lloret (2010) concluded that, in online language learning, it is important for students to be provided with sufficient learning materials in the target language.

Further, teacher activities were also seen as promoting learning. This included teacher support and guidance, as well as the teacher's clear instructions and timely feedback. Additionally, the teacher was considered as immensely influential to the learning atmosphere through their positive and supportive interactions. Our results corroborate previous research, which found that teacher presence, timely guidance, and feedback all supported learner autonomy and learning through online language teaching (e.g. Nielson & González-Lloret, 2010).

Assignments aligned with the learning objectives were considered as contributing positively to language learning. The students regarded digital games as helpful in advancing their learning, and they liked the opportunity to conduct their assignments through voice recordings or videos. Interaction with peers, in particular, benefited oral language skills. Previous research has also shown that, with relevant digital tools and appropriate assignments, language learning can be enhanced (e.g. Trinder, 2016). Likewise, clear instructions benefited the students in the learning process. They considered clear and accessible instructions about the learning material or the ways to conduct the assignments as having enhanced learning.

4.   Conclusions

The KiVAKO project enables a unique collaboration between Finnish higher education institutions in constructing online language courses which are offered

nationwide. This allows students to select courses of several foreign languages, regardless of their home institution's course offering. Thus, students can widen their language competence, which promotes their employability.

In our research, we investigated the pilot courses to discover elements which enhance language learning according to the students. To summarise, it can be concluded that course design is of paramount importance in online language learning. Further, the learning materials and assignments need to be aligned with the learning objectives. Carefully developed courses, with a clear timetable and appropriate digital tools, along with interaction with peers and teachers, enhanced the students' learning experiences. Teacher activities, timely guidance, and support contributed positively to the students' experiences, and benefited learning. The data offers multiple interesting research topics to investigate in the future, such as drop-out rates in online language courses.

5.   Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/iuill60y4x98dzecrilgshopf6u2yzby

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