Building an International, Cross-disciplinary, Collaborative On-line English Course Focusing on Advanced Listening and Speaking Skills and Cross-cultural Communication

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This paper describes the process of planning, building and implementing an international, cross-disciplinary, collaborative on-line course as a joint effort of three English teachers from Finland and the Netherlands. The focus of the course was on developing the students' listening and speaking skills in English and their cross-cultural communication competences.

Keywords: Online, English, cross-cultural, collaboration

Introduction and Background

In October 2014, the Degree Programme in International Business at Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) organized an international week. One of the participants, the Dutch author of this paper, wished to meet with English language teachers from TAMK, but unfortunately the scheduling did not work out. She was, however, given the contact information of one of the Finnish authors of this paper who invited the second author to participate in the e-mail exchange related to on-line learning in both countries. As a result, the authors started cooperating on the basis of a joint desire to build an on-line course that would be part of both universities' syllabus and include students from both universities.

There were two clear reasons behind the decision to build the course. Firstly, a leading idea was to provide the students with more possibilities to develop their cross-cultural communication skills. Even though both universities have a fairly good number of international students and the number of students heading for a study exchange or a practical training period abroad is relatively high in both universities (Tampere University of Applied Sciences, 2014; Stenden University of Applied Sciences, 2014), the fact is that there are still many students who graduate without having any intercultural experiences whatsoever during their study time. The authors thought that developing a joint course would give those students one kind of a possibility to amend this lack. The other reason for building the course was the need to have an on-line English course that would be genuinely collaborative. Typically, traditional English on-line courses have largely focused on reading and writing skills and the students have very often had to work alone without even necessarily knowing how many other students are taking the same course at the same time. The authors wanted to turn this scheme upside down by developing an on-line course that would focus on listening and speaking skills and enable the students to work collaboratively utilizing the latest technology.

In addition, the authors thought that since the students taking the course would need to co-operate with each other only using a variety of on-line tools and hence never seeing each other physically, it would be logical to mirror the student experience in the process of planning and building the course. In a way, both the authors and the future student groups could actually be seen as communities of practice, which have been defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, the authors utilized a variety of collaborative tools, such as Google Hangouts and

Google Drive, to build the course. The authors also acknowledged the importance of transparency, as it has been pointed out that the potentially "fragile" nature of digital ecosystems might cause obstacles in an on-line project (Annala, Haukijärvi & Pratas, 2015), and hence they addressed all challenges and tasks with a transparent and mutually respectful way of working.

Somewhat similar experiments have been carried out quite recently (e.g. Kersten & O'Brien, 2011; Chen, Caropreso, Hsu & Yang, 2012; Yang, Huiju, Cen, & Huang, 2014), and results from them supported the authors' decision to build the course: the students' cross-cultural skills and interest towards other cultures had increased, their attitude towards collaborative on-line working methods had become very positive, and their critical thinking skills and self-esteem had increased, among other benefits. In addition, in Yang et al.'s experiment (2014, 219), the students had preferred synchronous activities to asynchronous, which also encouraged the authors to design a course where the students would be able to work together in small groups utilizing various web 2.0 tools with real-time interaction.

Building the Course

The chosen platform for the course implementation was Eliademy (see Figure 1), although none of the teachers had previous experience with it. The reasons for choosing Eliademy over other alternatives, such as Google Sites or Google Classroom, included the ability to have multiple teachers for the course, easy-to-use and relevant privacy controls, good tools for interaction, an easy and quick registration process, and a clear and user-friendly layout. Eliademy proved to be easy to use for the teachers, even though it had some limitations, which became apparent during the course implementation. These limitations will be discussed in detail later in this paper. As the idea of the course was to use spoken language in addition to writing, other tools were also used. The students had regular meetings with the teachers using Google Hangouts and both the students and the teachers submitted assignments and feedback using the Vocaroo on-line recording tool. The students were also encouraged to keep in touch with each other using on-line tools of their choice, such as e-mail, Facebook, Skype, etc.

The course consisted of three sections, each of which had its own theme and teacher responsible for organizing a Hangout and giving feedback. The first section focused on listening, the second one on speaking and the third one on creating a joint video presentation in small groups. Each section contained theoretical materials, both written and in video formats as well as assignments, both individual and team-based. The students had three weeks to complete each section.
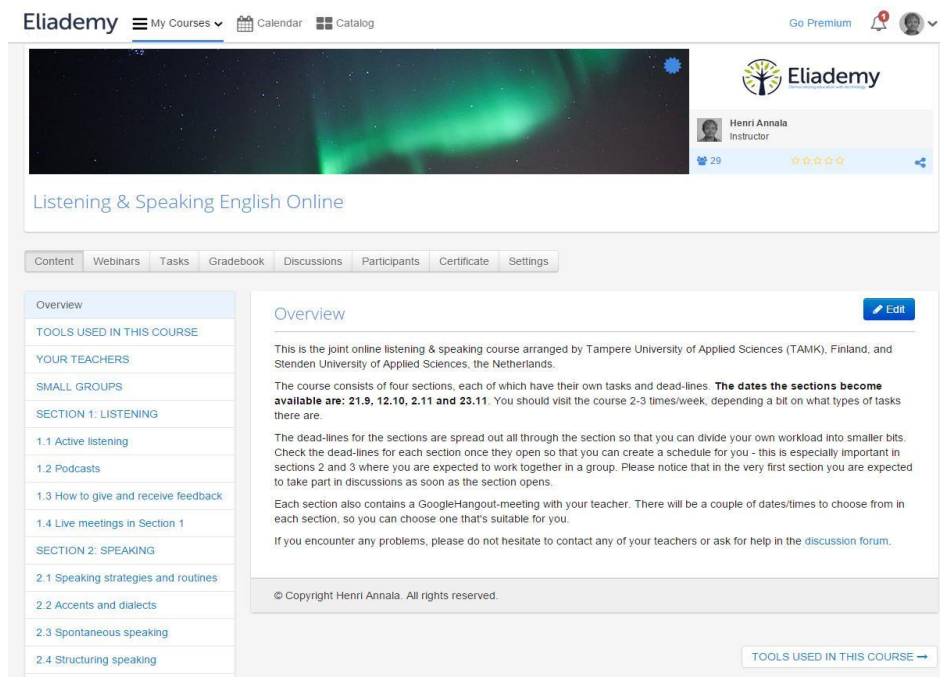

Figure 1. A screenshot of the course view in Eliademy.

The students formed the small groups they would be working in following a variation of the model proposed by Daradoumis and Xhafa (2005). The students first told each other a little bit about their previous e-learning experience and their expectations for the course, and then read each others' comments and tried to find students who had similar expectations. The students contacted each other, formed the groups, and in the final stage told the teachers who would be in a group with them. The students were asked to create groups of 3 people, but in the end most groups consisted of 5 people, and each group had students from both the Netherlands and Finland. Even though most of the course communication was carried out using spoken language, the discussion forum of the platform was used for group formation in order to make the process quicker. The group formation process was fairly similar to the first stage of the topic setting model (referred to as "social lounge") described in Yang et al.'s (2014, 217) study.

The students had to meet in their small groups during sections 2 and 3 using either Google Hangouts or some other suitable on-line meeting tool. In both sections, the students were asked to complete an assignment together and then post the results to the course discussion forum either in the form of a podcast (section 2) or a video (section 3) for the rest of the groups to experience. Additionally, each section contained students' own reflection in the form of a podcast submitted only to the teachers. The teachers gave each student individual feedback using Vocaroo, as well as collective feedback for the entire group.

Each of the three sections also contained a Hangout meeting with the teacher. The students met in small groups and each Hangout had a separate theme. The first one concentrated on the students becoming familiar with the on-line tools and each other, discussing active listening, and giving feedback in an on-line setting; in the second one, the students each gave a short presentation about a topic of their choice; and in the third one, the teacher acted as a mentor in instructing the students in their video assignment.

Even though Eliademy was an easy tool to use for both the students and the teachers, it had its own problems. Some of the students had trouble submitting their assignments, and it took the teachers far too long to realize that after the students had uploaded their assignments, they also had to press a separate button in order for the assignment to be visible for the teachers, too. This created scheduling problems as the teachers thought the students had not submitted their work, even though they actually had. Another issue was contacting the students. Even though Eliademy has discussion forums for each course, the students needed to remember to visit the platform in order to see the messages - there was no automatic e-mail sent to the students about new messages, nor even a possibility to use such a function. In the future, the teachers will need to create a mailing list for the course, just to be absolutely sure all students in the course get the relevant announcements on time.

Results

The results of the course were varied. The greatest problem was a large number of drop-outs, most of which happened even before the course had even begun, especially amongst TAMK students. There were a number of reasons for dropping out of the course, but the main reason seemed to be that the course was not a mandatory course for the TAMK students, so apparently they decided to concentrate their time on their mandatory studies. In the end, only 5 of the 15 TAMK students who had originally enrolled for the course, completed it. In comparison, the number of students from Stenden who completed the course was 8.

Another issue was the language used. Even though the course description clearly defined the course as an "advanced course in English" and further specified the CERF level C1-C2 (Council of Europe, 2014), some of the students did not have sufficient skills to begin with and struggled with the language used in the materials. In the future, more care needs to be put into making sure the students have read and understood the course description before enrolling for the course.

The students who did complete the course seemed to enjoy it and considered it useful.
The students especially enjoyed the working in groups and practicing speaking in meetings with other students from other countries. According to the course feedback, which was gathered (both in writing and verbally) as a final task of the course, the students felt more confident about speaking in English at the end of the course. They also mentioned that at the end of the course they were more at ease speaking English to an unfamiliar crowd than before.

The students improved their presentations skills in English in an online setting and now have more knowledge about voice recording and video editing, both of which are important skills to have in today's business world.

Second Implementation of the Course

A second implementation of the course was carried out in the spring of 2016. Although the basic model for the course was the same as before, some changes were made based on the feedback and the teachers' experiences from the first implementation. More instructions were added to how to submit the assignments, and some of the materials were slightly updated.

The first big addition was adding one more, optional on-line session with one of the teachers during the first week of the course. The students did not have to participate, but quite a few of them did. This enabled the teachers to establish an immediate contact with the students, to get the students more committed - having realized the course was not a self-study course but also included collaboration and synchronous meetings with people - and, perhaps most importantly, diminished the amount of technical difficulties. The few students who had problems with their technology were able to check their equipment and settings in a setting, which was not quite as time-driven and topic-focused as the rest of the on-line sessions.

Another advantage of the initial on-line session was that it gave the teachers the possibility to scope the language level of the participants before the course work actually begun. During the second implementation it became obvious that just listing the language level in the course requirements was not enough, as a few students with language skills on the CERF level A1 had enrolled on the course. However, now the teachers had a chance to identify the students' language level during the initial on-line session and hence they were able to direct the students to other courses which better suited their language skills.

The teachers also tried to make the dead-lines and the importance of following the dead-lines more transparent. The students were reminded that one of the best ways of learning was to learn from the feedback given by the teachers, and if the students did not meet the dead-lines, the teachers would not have the time to give the feedback to them. Even though some of the students still missed the dead-lines, overall the students were much better at keeping track of them and this, in its part, might have resulted in a better overall completion rate for the course.

In addition to making the dead-lines more apparent, an e-mail mailing list for the course was also created, as it had become apparent during the first implementation that the Eliademy message-function did not reach the students very well. The teachers used the mailing list to remind the students when the different sections opened, when there were dead-lines coming up and to sign up for the on-line sessions with the teachers. The students seemed more active in Eliademy during the second implementation and it seemed that they benefitted from this slightly more traditional approach to communication as a supplementary tool for the course.

Conclusion

Building a collaborative on-line course as a joint effort of teachers and universities from different countries proved to be a fruitful and positive experience from the point of view of students and teachers alike. In the future, more attention needs to be paid to the inclusion of students from the very beginning of the course. The student commitment to the course needs to increase in order for all the students to be able to complete the course successfully, as group work is an integral part of learning in this course. The methods described above (a course mailing list, clearer instructions on how to submit assignments, and a more detailed description of the difficulty level) should help with student participation and commitment.

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