



Cross-Boarder Project as a Learning Tool. Student and Instructor Experience

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Abstract

This paper discusses our joint project named "English at Work" between two universities (Stenden and Haaga-Helia) which involves over 50 students, three instructors and 20 enterprises. The project entailed a research on the use of English in businesses in the Netherlands and Finland. It was managed and conducted by the students. The paper gives a description of the project and discusses participant experiences.

The project initiated cooperation on student level, and included both blended learning and inquiry learning techniques. The main learning objectives were to improve skills in business communication, intercultural and project management. The Finnish and Dutch students were managed by the student project managers. First, supporting workshops were offered but soon most work was conducted through the designated student teams. An advisory team of lecturers were available for consultation on process. In the end, the results were gathered and presented.

The students decided on their roles and tasks, data collection etc., which catered for learner empowerment. Also, peer teaching took place. The students documented their work in memos, learning diaries and portfolios. Reflection discussions took place, and peer and self-evaluation was also conducted.

There was enthusiasm and motivation within the student teams despite challenges of different learning cultures (cultural, psychological and physical) and distance. Lack of familiarity with the methods resulted in some confusion. The commitment and input levels varied resulting in different outcomes, as the Dutch and Finnish approach varied.

It is recommended that an outline of tasks be made and that the instructors visualise their roles more, with more workshops on goal setting, methods, reflection and self- and peer evaluation being arranged. The co-operation continues and topics, and third country partners are sought.

1 Introduction

English at Work is a cross boarded learning project with an objective of learning business communication for international settings via a semester project.

The universities involved were Stenden University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands, and Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Finland. The student-lead project entailed a research on use of English in businesses in the two countries. This paper describes and discusses participant experiences. The project initiated cooperation on student level, and included blended and inquiry learning. The learning objectives were improving skills in business and intercultural communication, and project management. The students were managed by student project managers. Some workshops were given but most work was conducted in student teams. A team of lecturers supervised and coached the process.

2 Framework

The two university campuses resemble one another. The approaches implemented are inquiry learning and problem-based learning (PBL), and promote learning by doing and cooperation with enterprises.

Inquiry learning requires that the learning should take place in a social setting where problems are solved through study, discussion, testing and sharing. The learner is seen as an active creator of knowledge and social interaction is vital to learning. Knowledge creation takes place through creating solutions via social collaboration and problem solving. The six steps of inquiry learning are 1) creating a problem, 2) creating goals and content for a project/study/implementation plan, 3) agreeing on work practices and theories, 4) constructing knowledge together, 5) reflecting and 6) sharing the knowledge.

The pedagogical approach of PBL implemented on Stenden Emmen Campus is quite similar to Haaga-Helia's inquiry learning. Stenden applies PBL in Seven Steps: Students first delineate the

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problem by formulating a description of the case study. Secondly, students formulate concrete targets in order to, later on, analyse and (re) structure them (3rd Step). Next Step should be to define the task objectives (4th Step) to individually, by means of self-study look for additional information and reflect on the findings within the group (5th Step). After having done so, students synthesise and merge all concepts (6th Step). In order complete the cycle students give feedback to each other, evaluate the entire process and draw up points for improvement for the next assignment (7th Step).

With the globalization of the world economy and the increasing number of intercultural corporations, it is imperative that students are sensitive to differences in intercultural communication which will demand a broad range of skills that are crucial to effective intercultural encounters, in this particular case virtual encounters mostly. The most significant issues being both verbal and non-verbal communication, and cultural shock. It is equally important that students, the managers of the future, are attuned to the issues associated with managing valuing diversity within and intercultural team.

While recognizing the significant differences that can exist among cultures and subcultures, it is important to acknowledge the existence of individual differences within any given group. Although people in that group may share certain common values and characteristics, it can be important how these differences are applied and exhibited in specific situations. Furthermore, it is significant to note that cultural values and norms do evolve over time.

As contact occurs among cultures, diffusion takes place. Diffusion is the process by which cultures learn and adapt materials and adopt practices from each other (Jandt, 2000). In order for the diffusion to take place intercultural communication must occur.

Because an international activity involves communication, students need to be aware of the means of communication that is being used and the tool of communication that would be in many cases spoken and written communication in English.

As mentioned before intercultural communication occurs many times in English, and therefore to be able to have an effective communication exchange would be advisable to have participants that share a certain level of the foreign language, they are communicating in.

In order to determine the whether participants/students would be able to collaborate effectively in a project of these characteristics, tools such as the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) should be taken into consideration to overcome barriers to effective communication. Being a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enrichment of otherness in language and culture.

Taking into consideration these levels of language, it was decided that students whose CEFR level was C1 should be matched together since the English skills central to the project were not necessarily vocabulary or grammar. The Dutch university was more interested in students developing their meeting and presentation skills at a C1 level which according to the CEFR implies the following:

Can easily keep up with the debate, even on abstract, complex unfamiliar topics. Can argue a formal position convincingly, responding to questions and comments and answering complex lines of counter argument fluently, spontaneously and appropriately (www.coe.int/lang-CEFR)

Whereas the Finnish University was interested in a more integrated development of all skills in spoken as well as written communication in English.

3 Project experiences

The students were organised into eight international teams with varied focus areas which created a business environment. They were empowered to design and lead the project tasks, and take responsibility. The teams worked virtually on research tasks that investigated how Dutch and Finnish companies use English at work. The tasks included working in teams across cultures towards a common goal. Language workshops were given on debate, presentation and meeting practice in business writing. Much peer-to-peer teaching took place as the student project managers lead their teams.

The students were enthusiastic despite some challenges of different learning cultures and the distance. Lack of familiarity with the methods resulted in some confusion. The commitment levels, the outcomes as did the Dutch and Finnish approach.

3.1 Student experiences

The students objectives were to improve language and communication skills, and intercultural and project management competences, but they did not all understand the project goals. As the project proceeded more understanding was gained and the skills would improve. The team selection, face-to-

face meetings, and the partnership with a foreign university worked well. Furthermore, the students requested coaching on management and leadership, and advice on research and social media writing. The communication across the international teams was not very successful, and not everyone attended their team meetings.

In the Netherlands, the project was presented to the students in the kick off session IMCCM as part of their course International Business Communication in English and as a requirement to round up successfully their English module. Once the project manager was appointed, a series of meetings with the Finnish project manager and instructors were established, and both parties started to fine tune objectives, processes, and products to be delivered. Also, ad hoc meetings among the already mentioned actors were arranged when necessary to redefine the project and address issues. Dutch students collected data from companies they already worked with in IMCCM “ Export Carrousel”, which allowed them to experience from the inside the use of English in those companies on a daily basis.

Dutch students gave feedback on a weekly basis in the sessions for English, and via the sessions arranged with the project manager, which allowed to provide a framework needed by the Dutch students, and address issues which might have deterred students from finalising the project successfully. The main issues addressed by the Dutch project manager and instructor were related to work load, lack of clear goals and instructions on the project, and miscommunication within the international teams.

All the students met in Finland to finalise the project and present the results. During the visit the students met in person for the first time and the Dutch students participated in workshops given by Haaga-Helia students. The joint activities during the final week created unity and team spirit. Some tension occurred as the students had high expectations when meeting their counterparts and were somewhat stressed with the full schedule of the week. Also, differences in motivation could still be visible as not all students were eager to network, work face-to-face and socialise. The students were committed and satisfied with the input by the project managers, the hospitality in Porvoo and company involvement. The largest source of discontent was the difference in credits awarded as Haaga-Helia students gained 6 credits whereas Stenden students did not gain as many. The feedback shows that the students were involved on different levels and some benefited from the project as they were using higher-order thinking skills in e.g. comparing and analysing the learning cultures, comparing this research with other research projects.

The Dutch students shared their knowledge with 1st and 2nd year IBL students, and experimented with peer-teaching, in topics related to virtual meetings and Finnish culture, in order to finalize the project. In their final self-assessment the Finnish students reflected on their achievements, and most had reached their goals. Most felt they had learnt communication and language, and some also leadership and research skills. The criticism given was on project and management issues. The students without previous experience of project work were the least motivated. However, they developed their language skills in the project.

3.2 Instructor and project manager experiences

The instructors participated in the project because of a desire to offer students an international experience that would help them to develop their meeting and presentation skills. To co-teach in an international team and to experiment with project-based teaching and applied research. The student project managers wished to develop leadership and project management, and communication skills. All expected motivated and committed students delivering insights into how local languages and English co-exist at workplaces.

The instructors and project managers experienced communication challenges. There are many points for improvement since often communication was 1-to-1 or with an external party to the project which was experienced as disturbing. It is vital that the instructors ensure that they all receive the right information and agree on the way the cooperation should be carried out and therefore, give similar instructions to students. The project managers exchanged messages on a daily basis and encouraged each other.

The instructors feel that most of the objectives were met and that the pilot gave much valuable information. This was the first time that such cooperation took place and the instructors are pleased with the overall results.

The project managers thought that many students lacked enthusiasm but still many learned much and developed as leaders. The quality of work might not have been consistent across the teams. The companies could have been involved more in the process, and a connection between the companies and students across the countries was missing.



4 Recommendations

The instructors would like to implement this project again. It is recommended that a general outline be written at the beginning of the semester. Thus the individual learners may better understand the scope of the project and input required of successful participation. The instructors may create a model with tasks and responsibilities, and more coaching on goal setting, methods, reflection might be arranged. Regarding the acquisition of certain skills in English imperative for the project, it is recommended to pair up students from both universities whose competences in English are similar, in this particular case C1 (CEFR). In this manner both parties would benefit from the collaboration equally. It should be also advisable that students are aware that the development in specific skills is expected from them by means of clear assessment forms, evaluations and so forth.

In order to achieve a successful collaboration, thorough knowledge of both educational systems and cultural differences in both countries, by instructors and to a certain extent by students, should play a key role in carrying out a project of these characteristics.

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