



Elements for Successful Online Language Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate which elements contribute to a successful online language learning from the students' perspective. The context of the study was the pilot language courses which were created within the KiVAKO-project (KiVAKO is an acronym in Finnish meaning strengthening the language capital at higher education institutions) [1]. The KiVAKO-project is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture [2] and its aim is to develop and build a nationwide online language course offering on a shared platform. The project started in autumn 2018 with 86 language teachers of 26 universities and universities of applied sciences. The project covers the following languages: Chinese, Estonian, Finnish Sign Language, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish on the levels CEFR A1-C1. In addition, a UniTandem course was created for peer language studying. After piloting the eight courses in the autumn term 2019, the students were asked to respond to an online questionnaire for feedback. The research data consist of the replies of this questionnaire, and they were analysed according to the qualitative content analysis method [3]. The findings suggest that the course design, study materials, teachers' actions and assignments affect the students' positive perception of the online language course, whereas technology, study materials, course design and assignments are the aspects that hinder the learning experience the most. This study provides recommendations for educators to contemplate in designing an online language course.

Keywords: *online learning, language learning, higher education.*

1. Introduction

In Finland, language course offering in tertiary-level education is becoming increasingly one-dimensional. The English language dominates, and less frequently studied languages such as Italian, Spanish, German, French and Russian are not often studied in higher education institutes either. This is problematic because contemporary working life increasingly operates at the global level and requires versatile language skills; even fluent English skills are not enough.

The KiVAKO-project, which is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, aims to bridge this gap between higher education and working-life in terms of language skills. The target of the project is to create nationwide online language courses which will be available to all higher education students in Finland regardless of their home institutions. The duration of the project is three years and the participants are 86 language teachers of 26 universities and universities of applied sciences. Eight of the language courses were piloted in autumn 2019.

The challenge with online language learning is that students are eager to enrol in courses, but they easily drop out as well. Therefore, the study module must be designed in a manner that it engages and motivates the students to complete it. Several learning designs models such as Compton's [4] and Richards' [5] ones were introduced to the teachers participating in the KiVAKO-project, but the teachers were given free rein to craft their module according to their own pedagogical preferences. The language courses were created in teacher teams and one or two team members implemented the course on the Moodle platform.

2. Methods

In this paper, we investigate the elements students considered having impact on their online language learning in the piloted KiVAKO-courses. This study addresses two research questions:

- Which elements do students perceive advancing their learning in an online language course?
- Which elements do students perceive hindering their learning in an online language course?

Our research settings are the eight pilot online language courses which were created and implemented within the KiVAKO-project. To provide an overview, Table 1 depicts the number of students who enrolled, were accepted, started and finally completed the courses. As this is a nationwide project, the students' demographic details are not in our disposal.



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

Course	Enrolled	Accepted	Started	Completed
KiVAKO-Chinese & 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

3. Data and analysis

The research data comprise a post-course questionnaire which was sent as an online link to all the students completing the KiVAKO-courses. After finishing the course, each teacher posted the link to the questionnaire on their own Moodle platform. The questionnaire covered five open-ended questions and 20 statements to which the participants responded according to their opinion using the Likert-scale items (1= totally disagree to 5= totally agree). Out of 204 students who started the courses, a total of 142 completed them; and 65 of whom (46 %) answered voluntarily to the anonymous post-course questionnaire.

The qualitative data, i.e. the students' responses to the open-ended questions were analysed adapting the content analysis method [3]. The analysis was conducted with the help of the software Atlas.ti (version 8.4.18). At first, the data were read several times after which all mentions regarding both research questions were marked as segments. Thereafter the segments were named descriptively; these segments were all together 358 of which 185 included mentions regarding advancing learning whereas the mentions concerning hindering learning totalled 173. In the next stage, the segments were examined inductively, resulting in the following subcategories describing students' perceptions; the elements advancing learning included: course design, instructions, teacher activities, learning



materials and assignments. The elements hindering learning comprised the following subcategories: instructions, teacher activities, course design, learning materials, students' competences, technology and assignments.

4. Results

4.1 The elements that advanced learning

The elements that advanced learning are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. The elements that advanced learning.

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

Course design was the element the students considered to be the most effective one advancing their learning according to the responses to the online questionnaire. Logical course structure was considered as beneficial, and the students appreciated division according to topics. Further, a transparent timetable and related grammar were considered as positive elements. In addition, the students appreciated relevant webinars, and the possibility to organize their own learning activities regardless of time and space, even if they considered clear timetables to be a supportive element to learning on an online course.

Both relevant and timely, as well as multifaceted and challenging learning materials were considered to enhance learning. The possibility to download the learning materials to the students' own device was appreciated. Further, the students valued the learning materials which were clearly structured, in particular those produced by the teacher, e.g. animations, videos, and recordings.

Aligned learning activities and assignments had a positive impact on learning. Digital games were considered as a supportive element in language learning, and especially assignments including voice recordings or videos were valued. Oral language skills were enhanced particularly in interaction with peers.

Teacher support and guidance were valued by the students, and clear instructions as well as timely feedback were considered to have an enhancing impact. The teacher's supportive interaction style contributed positively to the learning atmosphere.

Additionally, the students valued clear instructions both concerning the learning materials and the assignments.



4.2 The elements that hindered learning

The elements that hindered learning are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. The elements that hindered learning.

Category	Amount (%)
Assignments	28 (16.19 %)
Course design	28 (16.19 %)
Instructions	13 (7.51 %)
Learning materials	34 (19.65 %)
Student	9 (5.20 %)
Teacher activity	24 (13.87 %)
Technology	37 (21.39 %)
Total	173 (100 %)

According to the students' responses, technology related elements were those which hindered the learning most. This included technical difficulties, such as poor sound quality in peer assignments, and the requirement that an answer had to be perfectly correct in order to be accepted by the system on the learning platform. The auto-correcting assignments where misspelling was interpreted as a wrong answer was regarded as a technology-based hindrance as well and cause of frustration. Even some technology-based features which were related to the layout of the course material were mentioned in this category.

Learning materials were criticized to inhibit learning if they were hard to find. Even insufficient amounts of the learning materials or irrelevant requirement levels in them were considered as elements which did not support learning. Especially lack of teaching grammar or timely access to the learning materials were mentioned as negative elements.

Course design was considered as contributing negatively to learning if the amount of online teaching was insufficient or the requirement level was incoherent. Additionally, too quick increase in the requirement level and lack of alignment in course design had a negative impact. New study modules presented at the end of the course hampered learning, as well.

The assignments and learning materials caused a similar negative impact on learning; if grammar exercises were too few, one-sided, irrelevant or they did not cover all the competence areas of language skills, they were considered as unsupportive. Especially the amount of oral exercises as well as those developing writing skills were considered as insufficient and thus hindering the learning.

As for teacher activity, lack of guidance, feedback and teacher presence had a negative impact. Insufficient or unclear instructions were considered to have the similar, negative consequence.

In addition, certain elements depending on the students themselves inhibited the learning. Inexperience in online learning, the student's own learning style or former inadequate competences were mentioned. Even lack of commitment to the studies could hamper learning.



4. Discussion and conclusions

Our research investigated the elements the students perceived either advancing or hindering their learning within the KiVAKO-project piloted online language courses. The paramount negative effect was caused by shortcomings of technology, followed by weaknesses in learning materials, course design and assignments. In addition, insufficient teacher activity or limitations in students' previous language competences inhibited learning. In comparison, the students regarded that skilfully structured course design advanced their learning the most; clear timetables as well as the alignment between assignments, learning materials and learning objects with enough interaction with peers and teachers provided opportunities for positive learning experiences. Additionally, teacher presence, their timely, positive and encouraging feedback benefited the students' learning process. Our results corroborate previous research regarding benefits of carefully crafted course design [4] sufficiently learning materials and suitable digital tools [6,7] as well as in terms of feedback and facilitation which enhance learner autonomy in online language learning [e.g. 6].

We recommend language teachers to design their online courses to cover all competence areas of language skills and particularly pay attention to the quality of learning materials and assignments to match the learning objectives. The learning materials should be timely, relevant and multimodal, similarly the pair, group and individual assignments should utilise multimodality: videos, recordings and written format. Additionally, timetables, deadlines and sections according to topics are essential to a successful online language course.

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