

ICT-Based Studying Model Supporting Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Development in Continuing Education

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Abstract

An ICT-based studying model was developed for continuing education to support foreign language teachers' professional development in a regional developing project "LinguaMedia" (2008-2009) of Turku University (coordinator) and its partners: Åbo Akademi University, Lingonet Ltd. and Turku University of Applied Sciences. The model is based on flexibility, community building, sharing expertise and building of the personal learning environments by utilizing the opportunities of ICT. Important goals are to support multilingualism and to create the new possibilities for networking and cooperation for the language teachers, despite of the regional location of their school.

The studying model was widely piloted and tested with nearly 400 Finnish foreign language teachers in a continuing education program "Language Fair" 2009-2011, organized as a part of the national language teaching developing program funded by Finnish National Board of Education. The developing program itself was organized as a part of a national "POP-project" aiming to improve the quality of basic education in Finland. University of Turku coordinated the continuing education program the partners being Åbo Akademi University, Lingonet Ltd., University of Oulu and University of Eastern Finland.

During "Language Fair" program the studying according to a developed model was organized as a process of blended learning, aiming to support the developing work of teaching, to strengthen the teachers' didactical and pedagogical skills, to offer theoretical knowledge based on current research and to promote regional and collegial networking between teachers of foreign languages. ICT had a central role in the process, as another goal was to improve the teachers' capacities to develop modern learning environments, resources and materials for language teaching and learning by utilizing the opportunities of the new media in pedagogically meaningful way. There were four regional face-to-face sessions organized simultaneously in three areas, partly connected online through so-called "mega-conference". Otherwise the studying was based on regional project work and active use of an online platform, a social network and the variety of ICT tools, the main emphasis being in the use of the "open source" software available for free in the Internet. The idea of this approach was to put the theory into practice and to support the participants' "learning by doing", by getting acquainted with the opportunities of ICT in reality. The participating teachers were offered both theoretical and practical knowledge and case examples of the content during the learning process. In the center of attention were the participants' regional developing projects, which they carried out in groups and reported online, using a common platform. The studying was supported by instructive study material and common process feedback at the end of each reporting period. There were stabile online forums for support in any matters concerning both the learning content and the technical questions of studying. According to the feedback the teachers' skills for carrying out eLearning were strengthened during the learning process. Both project activity and attending the social network's theme forums were found to promote collegial networking and sharing expertise and the best practices between the teachers.

1. Introduction

In Finland the multiple language skills have been considered as one of our national strengths throughout the years. Since 1970's the Finnish students in basic education and in high school have had very good opportunities to learn foreign languages, starting already from an elementary school. The most common first foreign language to learn in Finnish schools has usually been English or Swedish, the latter being another one of bilingual Finland's national languages. However in late 1970's, with a council of state's permission, it was possible at elementary school to learn also French, German and Russian. Around the same time the council of state supported comprehensive language learning by lowering a minimum group size of students. From an international perspective, especially in 1970's and 1980's the Finnish government put quite a remarkable note into the planning of our foreign language learning programs, and the basis of foreign language learning in Finland today rises from these early days. [1]



Presently in Finnish basic education the first compulsory foreign language (A1) starts in elementary school on 3rd grade, at the age of nine. In secondary school on 7th grade starts another compulsory foreign language (B1), being either Swedish or English, depending on the first compulsory language. As Swedish is our second national language, it is another one of the two compulsory languages for every Finnish student. Depending on a county, on 5th grade a first voluntary foreign language (A2) and on 8th grade a second voluntary foreign language (B2) may be offered. After 9th grade when the basic education ends, the students going into high school may yet start another voluntary foreign language according to the schools' course offering.

Today the variety of foreign languages to learn depends on what languages each county decides to offer at their schools. As many of the former regulations have changed during the years, the schools are not any more obliged to offer the voluntary language options. Due to some other changes as well, the learning of languages has generally started to lean on more voluntary basis. As English has become so general and used globally almost anywhere, choosing it as a first foreign language (A1) has become more and more popular and an easy option in Finnish schools. With other foreign languages this has, especially in rural areas or smaller schools, led into a situation in which voluntary languages are not offered at all or the study groups cannot be established because of the group sizes being too small. [1]

During the last few years there has been a national concern addressed by the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland about the weakening of language skills and learning of foreign languages in our country. Due to the changes in working life and society the expectations towards Finnish citizens having good foreign language skills are bigger than ever. One of the central skills needed in modern working life is multilingualism. Globalization, added mobility and our national intercultural growth increase the need for more comprehensive language skills than before, and according to current research the learning of foreign languages especially at early age is remarkable important. However, instead of moving towards the nationwide objectives such as multilingualism and plurilingualism, the development has seemed to move into the opposite direction. In fact the Finnish students graduating from basic education and high school are threatened to have narrower language skills than in earlier years, with many of them currently only being able to study the two compulsory languages. Confronting the situation, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland has set the objectives and means to act in their developing plan for education and research for 2007 – 2012. According to the plan the ground for all international skills are good and comprehensive language skills, base of which should be developed already in basic education. The actions to be done mentioned in the plan were reporting about the language offering and continuum of language studies at schools, supporting language immersion activity, working towards more comprehensive language learning program and developing the quality of teaching. [1, 2]

2. ICT-based studying model – main idea, aims and development

Challenged by the national developing needs, University of Turku and its partners' Åbo Akademi University, Lingonet Ltd. and Turku University of Applied Sciences started to develop an ICT-based studying model for language teachers' professional development in regional LinguaMedia-project 2008-2009, funded by Finnish Ministry of Education. In the project a studying model, based on the experts' community building, sharing expertise and building of personal learning environments by utilizing the opportunities brought by ICT and the new media, was being developed. The aims of the model were to support multilingualism and to create teachers the new possibilities for networking and cooperation despite of the areal location of their school. The model was tested locally in an online community based on social networking platform Ning.

In 2009, subsequent to succeeding in a national competitive bidding set by Finnish National Board of Education, there became an opportunity for the developed studying model to be adapted in the nationwide context. In Language Fair-project 2009-2011 [3] organized as part of a national so called "POP"-project aiming to improve the quality of Basic Education in Finland, a wide national continuing education program for foreign language teachers was being carried out. University of Turku was chosen to coordinate the Language Fair-continuing education program, the partners being Åbo Akademi University, Lingonet Ltd., University of Oulu and University of Eastern Finland. There were nearly 400 foreign language teachers from 88 counties, 14 private basic education organizers, 3 language schools and 9 universities' teacher training schools participating in the program, in which the studying model was piloted.

3. ICT-based studying model supporting foreign language teachers' professional development in Language Fair-continuing education program

Language Fair-continuing education program's objectives set by the National Board of Education were to support the developing of teaching, to strengthen the teachers' didactical and pedagogical skills, to offer theoretical knowledge based on current research and to promote regional and collegial networking between teachers of foreign languages, especially other than English. ICT was to have a central role in the process, as another aim was to improve the teachers' capacities to develop modern learning environments for language teaching and learning by utilizing the opportunities of the new media in pedagogically meaningful way. To reach these objectives, organizing the studying in Language Fair-continuing education program leant on the developed studying model's main ideas: community building, sharing expertise and building of personal learning environments by utilizing the opportunities of ICT.

3.1 Studying according to the model in practice

The studying in practice was organized as a process of blended learning, in which online and distance learning had an important role, even though there were face-to-face sessions included. During the learning process the teachers were led to the most current theoretical and practical knowledge in the field by being offered activating learning environments, instruction, process support and networking forums based on or richened with the multiple ICT solutions. The central element in the model was the idea of "sharing" (cf. Fig. 1.), based on openness, community building and sharing of expertise and practices in the field networks to support and activate individual learning and development as a process. The aim was to create a richening and an innovative online community, the idea of which the Finnish expert Pekka Himanen [4], has described "the more people there are to connect, to exchange ideas and to communicate, the bigger the potential of the community is". [5]

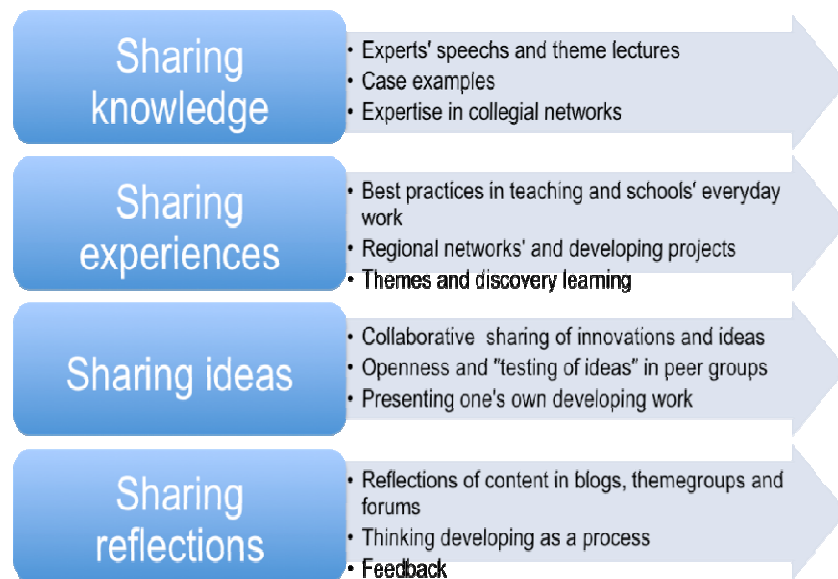


Fig. 1. The idea of "sharing" actualized through actions in the learning process

3.2 ICT solutions in the learning process

There were four regional face-to-face sessions organized simultaneously in three areas (Southern Finland, Eastern Finland and Northern Finland), partly connected online as so-called "mega-conference" organized via Adobe Connect web-conferencing platform. The mega-conferences included online keynotes, lectures and case-examples concerning current theoretical research and practical developing work in foreign language learning and future IT-based learning environments presented by experts and pioneers of the field. Mega-conferences were recorded and the participants had an access to the recordings afterwards i.e. in case they were absent.

The main media used for teachers' community building online was a social network Ning [6], where collegial networking and interaction, thematic deepening of the subjects and expertise sharing among peer groups of teachers took place. Also during the mega-conferences the participants were



encouraged to use Ning for sharing reflections, giving straight feedback about the conference and writing comments into their own blogs.

In the center of attention were the participants' regional developing projects, which they carried out in groups and reported online, using a common online platform Moodle. Supporting the project work was during face-to-face sessions organized by carrying out activating workshops and peer group meetings, where a new stage of the project work was being getting started to be continued independently among the regional groups. During the distance periods the project work was supported by instructive study material and common process feedback at the end of each reporting period. In Moodle there were stable online forums for support in any matters concerning both the content and the technical questions of studying. Moodle was also used as a material bank, where the studying instructions, assignments and schedules, materials and recordings of online lectures were situated.

In the program supporting the creating of the modern future learning environments meant, that all along on the side of the learning process went the active use of not only the chosen media solutions such as Moodle and Ning, but also the variety of other ICT-based tools, the main emphasis being in the use of the open source software available for free in the Internet. The different tools and solutions, adjustable for networking, learning content production and expertise sharing, were introduced to the teachers as a resource, in order to encourage the experiments in teaching and developing work. The idea was to share experiences and practices of ICT and to find the new ways for them to be adjusted in the context of language learning and teaching. It was important that these tools had right from the beginning a significant role in the learning-process. The point was to put the theory into practice by supporting the teachers' "learning by doing" and getting them acquainted with the opportunities of ICT in reality.

3.3 Participating teachers' feedback

During the Language Fair-continuing education program the teachers gave feedback of the carryout and reaching of the program's objectives. Summarizing the feedback is difficult both because of the length of the process and the amount of the feedback gained. However all in all, according to the feedback, the participants experienced that by having supported regional developing projects and networking of regional and language groups' colleagues, developing of teaching and gaining perspective of current matters and future visions in language learning, the program had reached the objectives set for it quite well. Additionally it was experienced, that participating in the program had strengthened the teachers' professional identity and self-confidence and increased the visibility, the position and appraise of the foreign languages in the participants' regions. The didactical and pedagogical skills were mentioned to have strengthened as well, and among them also the motivation to develop the new ideas and practices in teaching had increased. Also the knowledge of the ICT opportunities and the courage to use them in everyday work was experienced to have grown. [7]

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