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MULTILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: FUTURE WORK-LIFE SKILLS THROUGH VIRTUAL LANGUAGE STUDY

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Abstract

Universities of applied sciences have the task of preparing students for work life through practical and academic study. The top skills in demand for the job markets (World Economic Forum 2020) are analytical thinking, active learning, problem-solving, critical thinking and analysis, creativity, originality, and initiative. All these skills require the use of language and cultural understanding. Digital skills and the ability to adapt to digital transformation are valuable to learn for future careers. Digitalization is already prevalent in education, learning online, teaching, and virtual learning are frequent phenomena in higher education. Hence, learning languages and culture with digital tools enhances future skills, and prepares for work life.

The paper aims to share the experiences and excellent practice of a Nordic-Baltic Nordplus Nordic languages project funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, “Swedish for beginners - Multilingualism to Enhance Employability,” and its online language learning materials that contribute to inclusive content and motivation enhancement of online language learning. The project aims to create a virtual Swedish A1 level beginner course to be studied independently, as supplementary material for language class or in combination with intensive studies in an immersive surrounding.

The paper describes student experiences of an autonomous learning period combined with an intensive pilot course with international participants in spring 2024 and compares them with experiences of virtual studies during autumn 2024 with amended online learning materials. It is already evident that autonomous pre-study motivates students by giving them more responsibility and autonomy for their learning, i.e., student empowerment. The autumn pilot is an independent virtual study with minimal coaching. The virtual course has started well with students taking responsibility and action.

The bias for the need for the Swedish language in this Nordic-Baltic region is that more Scandinavian businesses are establishing businesses in the Baltic States. Naturally, they look for staff with skills in the Scandinavian languages. Possessing the basic skills of the Swedish language enhances students’ career chances, especially in the Scandinavian capital businesses. Furthermore, the materials are useful to the non-Swedish and non-Finnish speaking students and even the workforce in Finland that will benefit from learning the local language and about the culture.

Keywords: Autonomous learning, blended learning, language learning, multilingualism, online learning, university cooperation, future work-life competence.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses an online language course designed and piloted in the Nordplus Nordic Languages project, “Swedish for beginners - Multilingualism to Enhance Employability.” The objective of the project is to create a beginner-level blended course comprising an independent online course and an intensive course. The online course created is called “Swedish from Scratch” and it can be used in blended, flipped, and virtual learning. The materials also include cultural information regarding Sweden and Swedish-speaking Finland. Thus, the course aims at enhancing students’ employability through language and cultural competence.

Further, the course materials aim at improving and enhancing learners’ employability. This takes place on the online course where students develop their meta-competences such as digital skills, autonomous learning, problem-solving and time management via virtual study. According to the World Economic Forum [1], skills in demand in the job market are analytical thinking, active learning, problem-solving, critical thinking and analysis, creativity, originality, and initiative. Each of the skills listed requires language use and cultural understanding, and students use all of them in the online learning course Swedish from Scratch. Digital skills and the ability to adapt to digital transformation are valuable for future careers. The online material is designed to be used in independent study and students manage

their time, take an active role and responsibility for their learning, and solve problems. They are asked to assess their own learning and give feedback on the learning environment. Here the assessment and feedback can be seen as putting skills in critical thinking and analysing into use, and thus future work-life skills are practiced.

According to the 2023 edition of The Future of Job Report [2] analytical thinking and creative thinking are top skills for workers to have. The skills following are a set of three self-efficacy skills, namely “resilience, flexibility and ability; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning.” It is important to notice that the report underlines the importance of the ability to adapt to changes and disruptions at work. The need for cognitive skills is estimated to increase together with problem-solving. Computer literacy remains a top skill, and self-efficacy rates higher than skills for working together.

This paper discusses two pilot courses with “Swedish from Scratch” online materials and compares the results. The first pilot was a blended course of online study and an intensive programme. The second pilot was a virtual course. The project team wanted to evaluate how the online materials would function as an individual self-study course virtually. The academic results, learner activity, interaction and feedback will be discussed and analysed.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted to evaluate the course outcomes, covering academic parameters and students’ feedback and reflection, and to outline the results of the Nordplus Nordic languages project “Swedish for beginners - Multilingualism to Enhance Employability” NPLA-2022/10005. The focus of the above-mentioned project is 3 ECTS online Swedish A1 courses, which are believed to be highly beneficial for students, those seeking employment in Scandinavian capital enterprises, and those who wish to study languages independently.

This research aims to analyse the results of a virtual implementation of the course in autumn 2024 and compare them with the results of a blended course in spring 2024. The research is conducted with two surveys. The first survey is similar to the survey used in spring 2024 with slight alterations, and the second survey is a study feedback survey with a focus on virtual implementation and instruction.

The online Moodle course was designed in collaboration with the project team, and the course was constructed using the Digital Pedagogy Quality Manual [3]. The manual’s guidelines help course designers ensure that the content is clear and user-friendly, the layout can be easily followed, the learning objectives are clear, and the learning process is introduced with instructions for learners. Further attention is paid to the learning tasks that are linked to the learning objectives and introduced at the beginning of each chapter. The learning contents and activities are similar from one chapter to the next, and there are varied autocorrected tasks. The Moodle materials support learning with clear learning tasks, up-to-date materials, and reliable sources. Students have opportunities for interaction during the course via an online forum and email to the course administration. The virtual course itself offers guidance and feedback. The evaluation process is also described and how it functions throughout the course. Students can follow the evaluation, and there is a possibility for self-assessment with online tools.

3 RESULTS

The results are discussed in three parts. First, the overall results of the blended course are presented. Then, the results of the virtual course are presented, followed by a comparison. Lastly, the enhancement of work-life skills is discussed.

3.1 Results of the blended and virtual courses

In the following the course types and the main findings are presented.

3.1.1 Blended study

The blended study implementation was given in January – March 2024, and it started with independent online studies and ended in a five-day intensive course. The participants came from the three universities and the programme comprised of language and cultural studies, including study visits.

The main goal of the study was language learning. In general, the project set out to teach Swedish through an online environment, followed by a one-week intensive course in Swedish-speaking Finland. The Moodle course pilot was built up to include a real-life intensive learning week in Swedish-speaking

Finland. This, 2 ECTS intensive part of the altogether 3 ECTS course was – according to many students – in terms of actual practice – one of the best parts of the course.

For many students one of the highlights of the total course was exactly this part - the International Program part of the course - a week of intensive language training sessions in the morning, shared by our Finnish and Estonian language teachers. This was followed every afternoon by an interesting cultural program set up by our Finnish hosts. The intensive week and the whole online plus in-real-life (IRL) experience were analyzed by our Lithuanian colleagues, including inspiring on-site self- and group analyses through engaging games and an online questionnaire.

Thus, in which way was the in-class and on-spot learning period useful for students? The real class work enabled us also to test the efficiency of the digital Moodle course, as well as the special collection of links to e-learning materials (*Länksamling*) that we had prepared for them. It proved that students who had had an opportunity for in-class learning in addition to the web-based one, had some benefits as compared to only online learning. This suggests that the classroom-based learning part (through some similar international on-site intensive-learning week program, or locally at each university), could – perhaps - in the future be a welcome constituent part of the otherwise mainly Moodle-based learning experience.

However, with in-class revision and actual speaking practice, the e-experience through the main product of the project: the Moodle-environment based course and the other product: the collection of links to learning materials (*Länksamling*) proved to have been a rewarding learning opportunity. During our in-class sessions, most students opened up, they took their time to review the up-to-now solely e-based materials and skills, and we could reach a workable language level also in real life. This was well to be noticed in the essential topics for this beginner level – introducing oneself, speaking about one's day, shopping, finding the way, etc. Thus, the main idea of the build-up of the course justified itself. Results were achieved, and the level planned was achieved.

The test trial of both the e-products and IRL week also enabled us to judge the possible vistas for improvement. This is only positive, as the project was *meant* to be a pilot – to test and see if the originally planned format justifies itself. In principle, it did. At the same time, as pilots do – they also test some possible problems and deviant processes from the originally planned. In our case, it demonstrates that in the event of unexpected changes in the circumstances, alternative steps can be taken, that in the long run may even improve the original idea.

The problem in this pilot was that the electronic learning environment (Moodle) where the e-course was planned to be built up jointly, did not align between two universities. A prudent solution became to make both universities create their content in their respective systems linked to their servers.

The main Moodle course did receive some input part from partners, the unity of design and content had to be polished in one server. At the same time, to compensate for work and add attractive individual learning materials, also another source of e-learning materials – links to different native speaker videos on beginner and intermediate language levels were created by the other partner universities.

These links worked well to support students who were also having a real-life language course in parallel to the online one, substituted for this in case they didn't have access and provided a general database for support at different other levels of language learning.

Thus, the problem was solved positively. Furthermore, due to this, we were able to produce even more and even richer content than originally planned. Now, in addition to just one course, we thus produced two courses, where the other is a collection of links (*Länksamling*) to relevant learning materials and videos useful for language learners at different levels of language ability. Making the e-products thus suitable for more language learners than was originally planned.

The challenges of the blended course were that the contents of the online course were slightly different in the three universities, not all participants were absolute beginners, and not all participants had completed the pre-course online studies. This resulted in varied abilities to participate in the intensive course activities, required streaming in class. Despite this, all participants found the course useful and were satisfied with the outcome. Everyone also passed the course with good grades – 3 to 5 on a scale from 1 – 5, 5 being the highest.

According to the survey given in April [4] most students claimed that the course met or surpassed their expectations, 40% claimed that their language proficiency was enhanced, 30% claimed it remained the same and ca. 10% disagreed with the effectiveness of an online course. These responses are interesting and let one assume that not all were beginner learners. All participants who completed the intensive course passed the blended course including the online part. They enjoyed the vocabulary and listening

exercises and struggled most with grammar. According to the survey, the respondents were convinced that the skills would enhance their employability.

3.1.2 Virtual study

The virtual course implementation took place from October to December 2024, and the participants came from one university. They had no prior knowledge of the Swedish language. The students responded to two surveys: 1) Swedish from Scratch survey and 2) Study Feedback. The Swedish from Scratch survey was modified to the virtual implementation as the first pilot was a blended course.

All the respondents agreed that they had learned the basics of Swedish. They rated the course module to meet their expectations (50%) and to somewhat exceed their expectations (50%). The participants enjoyed most learning grammar and completing the reading activities. However, they reported having struggled most with the reading activities and vocabulary tasks.

Half of the respondents believed that they were extremely likely to benefit from the skills learnt in their professional lives, and the other half thought it to be somewhat unlikely.

Once the survey questions were inspected on the functions of the online course, the respondents were unanimously very satisfied with the course navigation. They were rather satisfied with the relevance and easiness of finding, memorising, and learning the materials.

They were very and extremely satisfied with the feedback on the results. Most of the online activities were auto-corrected and the students received feedback in numerical and written form, including encouraging notes. In addition, the course instructor sent weekly inspirational messages with feedback on the overall progress.

In the end, 50% of the respondents were very satisfied and 50% were extremely satisfied with the quality of the virtual course. They mostly enjoyed H5P exercises, Quizlet exercises, and the structure of the course, which introduced weekly grammar, vocabulary, and communicative topics. Furthermore, the videos and reading about Sweden were found useful. Also, suggestions for improvement of the course were given, such as limiting the amount of vocabulary, adding supplementary materials such as dictionaries, and video assignments, and using more varied digital applications for the activities.

The respondents agreed that 50% that Swedish is likely to enhance their career chances and 50% were neutral in this aspect. Half of them were somewhat likely to pursue further studies in Swedish and the other half somewhat unlikely. All would recommend the course.

The content of the Study Feedback survey was somewhat similar to the first survey but included an evaluation of own learning experience, and an evaluation of various aspects of the virtual course such as how the materials supported learning, working instructions, diversity of materials, interaction and collaboration, guidance and feedback and information on assessment and the opportunity to track one's grade formation.

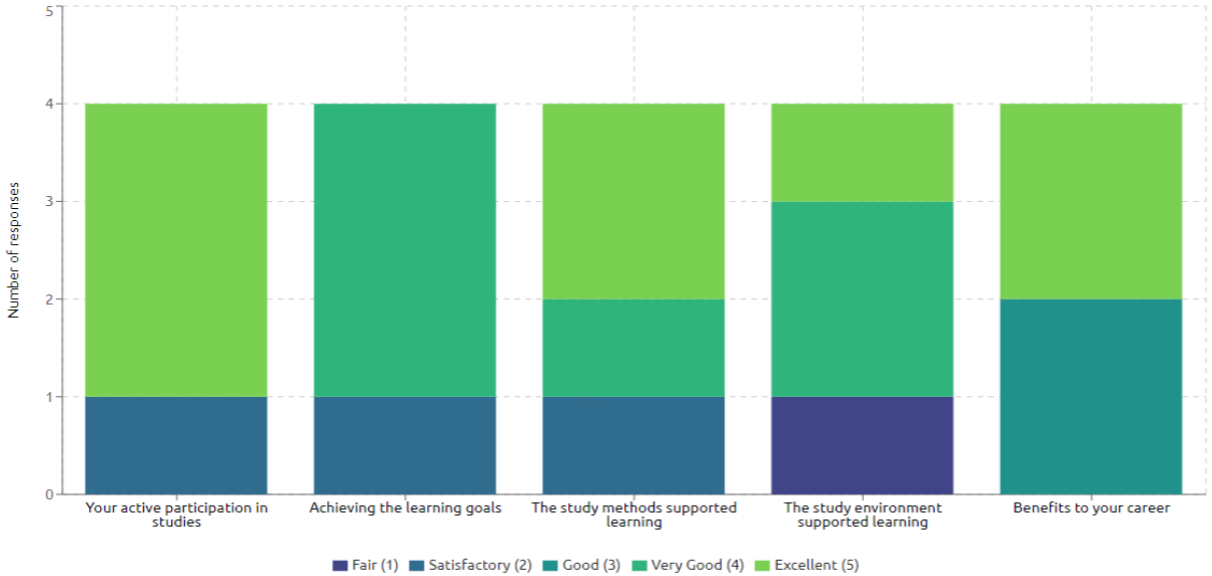


Figure 1. Caption of Study Feedback: Evaluation of own learning experience.

The pilot group was rather small and hence the respondent number is also low. 75 % of them claimed to have been active participants in the course and had achieved their learning goals very well. Half of them felt that the study method supported their learning in an excellent way but the study environment supported very well or excellently 75% of the respondents. It seems like one participant's experience was not very good, which might result from previous studies, previous language studies and personal preference. In the end, all the respondents felt that the course would benefit their careers well or in an excellent way.

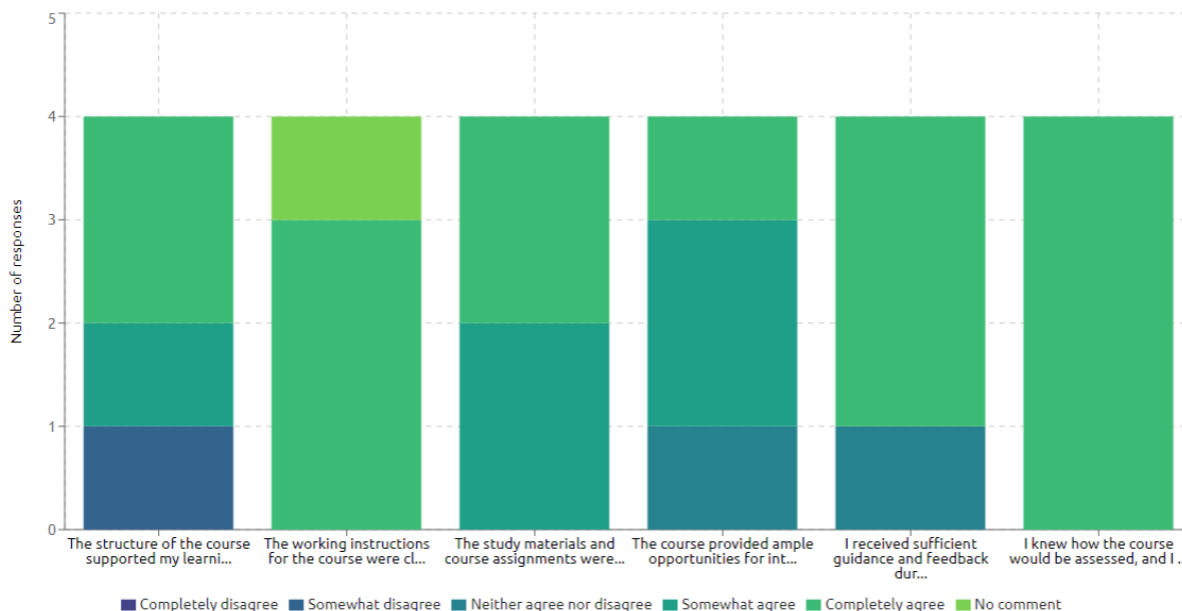


Figure 2. Caption of Study Feedback: Evaluating the learning environment

The evaluation of the learning environment is valuable to the project team as we aim to develop a user-friendly online course. Analysing the responses on structure, instructions, materials and assignments, interaction and collaboration, guidance and feedback, and assessment, one can gather that the instructions and assessment information were good and provided sufficient information for the participants. The structure of the course supported the respondents' learning well or rather well. Most respondents claim that they received sufficient guidance and feedback but that there might have been more opportunities for interaction and collaboration. Here one should bear in mind that this was a virtual implementation with no online lessons and automated exercises. Interactive and collaborative activities would be highly likely to increase engagement and motivation. However, such activities as discussion forums would require instructor monitoring and grading. Study materials and course assignments were diverse and supported learning rather well.

The respondent gave also open feedback on various aspects of the course as follows. The possibility to give feedback after each chapter, attractive content and clear structure were points that promoted the respondents' learning. They would develop the implementation further so that the learning goals could be achieved better by reducing the number of vocabulary activities, giving more focus on pronunciation, and adding links to further reading and supplementary materials. One respondent commented that one can learn the basics but one does not learn to speak on such a virtual course, which might suggest that virtual courses be combined or followed-up with online or contact lessons].

3.2 Comparison of the two experiments

After comparing and analysing the results of the blended and virtual course one can state the following

1 Navigation

The blended course respondents evaluated the navigation from extremely good to fairly good, and the virtual course respondents as extremely good. This is a positive result as the online content had been developed after the blended course. Another reason for the very positive result can be the respondents' familiarity with the course layout which follows the outline of the university's online course instructions and thus the participants were familiar with it.

2 Feedback

The respondents of the blended course had 60% satisfaction with the feedback during the course, and the virtual course had a 100% satisfaction rate. The difference might be explained by the more varied feedback of the virtual course. The students received automatic feedback on the activities and exercises in the blended course's online part. In the virtual course, additional feedback was given in weekly messages with positive encouragement and some feedback encouragement messages had been added to the automated feedback.

3 Overall quality

Satisfaction with the overall quality of the blended course was 70% and that of the virtual course was 100%. It is noteworthy that the blended course included an intensive week offering face-to-face practice of the language which might have been a reason for the results. Those signing up for a blended course are likely to have more interest in contact study and interaction while studying whereas the virtual course participants might have chosen virtual study because of the accessibility and ability to study regardless of time and place.

4 Struggles

The blended course students struggled most with grammar-related tasks and were able to receive help in the contact classes. The virtual course students struggled with reading and vocabulary tasks. One might presume that the amendments and additions made to the materials after the blended course have been further beneficial for the learners.

5 Effect on professional activities and career chances

The likelihood of skills in Swedish to have a positive impact on their careers was higher in the blended course. The positive impact rate was 92% in the blended course and 50% in the virtual course. The difference might be explained by the study programmes and the location of the respondents in the two courses. In the blended course most students were from the Baltic region where the young might associate their careers in a Baltic-Nordic environment. In the virtual course, the students study digital marketing and aviation where English is the prevailing professional language.

6 Suggestions from the respondents

The blended course respondents gave few suggestions for improvement of the online materials, which might be due to unfamiliarity with studying online and the fact that not all respondents had completed the online module before the intensive course. The virtual course participants suggested more variety to the applications used to create the activities, limiting the amount of vocabulary introduced in a beginner course, adding video exercises and addition of supplementary materials such as dictionaries.

3.3 Enhancing work-life skills

Neither of the surveys used focused on asking explicitly about the enhancement of work-life skills other than asking whether the Swedish language might be an advantage in their future careers. Despite this one can gather that the students have improved their digital skills during the studies as they have had all instruction and interaction in asynchronous digital form. The study time was limited to eight weeks and time management was required. Completing the tasks and reading the feedback required analytical thinking, reasoning and problem-solving as well as reflection. At the end of each, there was a feedback section asking to analyse the usability and contents of the chapter. In addition, there was a possibility to pose questions and comments on an open discussion forum. Participant initiative was used as they asked for further help related to the language and technical aspects of the course.

Remote work has become usual in work life, and it requires self-management skills, people are expected to work online and follow instructions online via e.g. company intranet sites, training videos and courses. This asks for new types of communication and work practices making use of various communication tools. New ways of creating community feeling, a sense of belonging and finding meaningfulness in work. One can argue that virtual studies may alleviate the anxiety of remote work and could be seen as a way to learn and practice using various beneficial tools in future work life. Having studied virtually can make it easier to participate in virtual job interviews and start virtual onboarding training. Knowledge of different languages and cultures builds towards cultural accessibility and tolerance at work. The experience of joint courses in international settings, in this case, the intensive course of the blended implementation, enhances further cultural understanding.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, one might state that the motivation and preferences of students enrolling on blended and virtual courses are likely to be different. Blended course participants might seek interaction, feedback, and communication in contact lessons, whereas virtual course participants might choose virtual studies because of the possibility of studying regardless of time and space. Virtual course students might also be more ready to take the initiative to contact the instructor and seek help. Likewise, they might be more accustomed to analysing their progress and learning practices on virtual courses.

The overall experiences of both the courses are positive and the user-friendliness of the online materials seems to have improved from the blended to the virtual course. There is still a place for further improvement in e.g. the variety of exercise types. One could consider how to enhance motivation through video materials and gamification. On the other hand, the development of digital applications is fast, and, likely, much of the materials will soon seem outdated. Artificial intelligence is not incorporated into the online course, which might be a defect. Still, the basic components of learning a new language will not change even though the tools and methods might change. To learn a language, one must learn to listen and speak, learn, and write; one needs grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural insights into the language use. It is the tools that are changing but learners need to be active and take responsibility for their learning.

Online language learning materials can benefit many types of learners and be used in diverse types of courses. It is important that the online materials and eventual contact lessons build unity, and that the learners familiarize themselves with it. Goals, methods, materials, processes, and assessments need to be presented clearly. Also, students should be able to follow their learning process and receive feedback during the course not only after completing it.

The Swedish from Scratch online materials will be evaluated yet a third time before final amends are made. We hope that the results of the two previous pilot courses will help us improve the materials and make the learning process more visible to the participants. Also, train-the-trainer sessions will be arranged, and teacher materials be added to the online Moodle course.

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