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Author(s): Pollari, Pirkko; Kotikoski, Tuula

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Language education culture and practice under change at *JAMK Language Centre*

Pirkko Pollari¹ and Tuula Kotikoski²

Abstract. Universities of applied sciences in Finland are higher education institutions with emphasis on practical working life skills and strong links with working life. Students typically study in field-specific groups where they receive language and communication instruction alongside their professional courses. The development of language and communication studies is the chief responsibility of *JAMK Language Centre* at *JAMK University of Applied Sciences*. To create flexibility in language and communication teaching and to improve language and communication teachers' working practices, a two-year project was started at *JAMK Language Centre* in autumn 2017. In the experiment, JAMK's students in Finnish degree programs began studying languages and communication in multidisciplinary groups instead of field-specific groups. There were administrative reasons as well as a pedagogical development aims behind the change. Two Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) analyses have been performed to find out about the experiences of the *JAMK Language Centre* staff members regarding the change. So far the experiment has been both challenging and rewarding and it continues until 2019 when the final results can be seen. The aim of this article is to present the first phase of the experimental project highlighting the experiences of the *JAMK Language Centre* staff.

Keywords: digitalization, language teaching, multidisciplinary student groups, paradigm change.

1. JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Jyväskylä, Finland; pirkko.pollari@jamk.fi
2. JAMK University of Applied Sciences, Jyväskylä, Finland; tuula.kotikoski@jamk.fi

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1. Introduction

The literature on the future needs for working life emphasizes working in networks and complex problem solving (see e.g. [Davies, Fidler, & Gorbis, 2011](#); [Fidler, 2016](#)). According to [Davies et al. \(2011\)](#), most real-life problems require a multidisciplinary approach to solve them. For example, [Metsäportti and Saarinen \(2017\)](#) have experimented with multidisciplinary nursing and engineering student groups when teaching English to them. We wanted to experiment this multidisciplinary approach with JAMK students from all Finnish degree programs, and started in autumn 2017.

In the past, different degree programs of *JAMK University of Applied Sciences* ordered their mandatory language and communication courses (English for Working Life, Swedish for Working Life, and Communication Skills for Working Life) from *JAMK Language Centre* once per year. This model was not flexible enough to meet the changing and increasing needs of degree programs and their students, especially the growing demand of online courses. Since *JAMK Language Centre* was now in charge of the entire language and communication course offering, it meant that the teachers had more freedom to choose the course modes they preferred. This change contributed to teachers' pedagogical development, e.g. how to implement online teaching flexibly and interactively in a student friendly way. The research focuses on the teachers' experiences of how they perceive the new situation and what implications it has on their teaching practices.

2. Method

2.1. SWOT analyses

In her doctoral thesis begun in 2017, Tuula Kotikoski studies the paradigm change at *JAMK Language Centre*. The first steps of the research consisted of two SWOT analyses which were performed in August 2017 and May 2018. Both the administrative staff (N=3) and language teachers (N=19) wrote about their concerns and expectations regarding the new system and teaching multidisciplinary groups.

3. Discussion

In autumn 2017, with the experiment starting, expectations were very high and almost the entire staff was full of optimism: 20 out of 22 SWOT respondents felt

the new multidisciplinary approach offered a way to help the *JAMK Language Centre* administration with the planning and implementation of courses. In addition, studying in this new system would empower the students in many ways: they could choose when (wide selection of courses), where (four campuses), and how (face-to-face, online, or blended learning) they would like to complete their mandatory language and communication studies. Teachers would be able to connect and communicate with students from different study fields.

In the 2017 SWOT questionnaire, the expectation of the lecturers was that they would now gain further control over their own annual teaching schedule timetables with a more even distribution of courses and a better balance of implementation modes. In the old implementation model, the autumn and spring terms could potentially be very unbalanced for many lecturers. In addition, the new approach would lessen the lectures' need for special knowledge of their students' particular fields of study, since the groups could be very heterogeneous and a stronger emphasis could be placed on making the course content generic. Prior to 2017, some lecturers had specialized their teaching within certain fields of study. The 2017 SWOT analysis revealed that a few lecturers, understandably, were disappointed and felt their motivation sinking since they felt that their long specialized teaching expertise was no longer needed.

Nevertheless, the overall view of the staff was generally very positive and the lecturers were looking forward to more collaboration in the form of creating materials together and implementing new ways to deliver the contents of their courses. During the 2017-2018 academic year, *JAMK Language Centre* allocated some resources to lecturers willing to create materials, which consisted mostly of generic themes and some specific materials for JAMK's various fields of study (e.g. nursing, engineering, and business) for the new multidisciplinary groups. Several respondents were very excited since they felt they were creating something new in collaboration with their colleagues. The younger lecturers, in particular, perceived an opportunity to gather new material for their multidisciplinary groups. Material repositories were created on the learning platform at JAMK for language and communication studies to be used in online courses. Many new digital tools were experimented with and information on their uses was shared and discussed in staff workshops. For example, Kahoot!, Padlet, Screencast-O-Matic, and some other tools were taken into use.

In the 2018 SWOT questionnaire (N=22 respondents), the reported atmosphere was still optimistic overall, and there seemed to be a consensus that multidisciplinary groups are easier to teach. The group dynamics in the new multidisciplinary classes

were now highlighted by many respondents. The learning situations were more authentic and resembled real working life situations. The administrative staff has found ways to successfully direct all students to language study groups. According to lecturers, some students have really enjoyed the multidisciplinary groups. One respondent stated that the silent students were more active as members of multidisciplinary groups. However, at the beginning of a new course, students needed more time to get acquainted with one another.

4. Conclusions

For the *JAMK Language Centre* lecturers, the academic year 2017-2018 was a time of learning and adapting. They felt that it was more interesting to work with their students and that there was an aspect of unpredictability as well, since the composition of the groups could be quite random. The year was also replete with professional development activities, collaboration with colleagues creating new materials, and the challenge of working with students from unfamiliar fields of study. According to two SWOT analyses, some lecturers were stressed and anguished as they felt they were drifting away from their own comfort zones because of the experiment.

For the administration of *JAMK Language Centre*, the biggest challenge was to determine the right amount and the right mix of courses to offer to meet the demand. Since certain courses received too few enrollments, not all of the courses could be implemented. Likewise, there was added stress and anguish for teachers who wondered what would happen if their annual quota of working hours could not be realized.

Online learning has gained great popularity among JAMK students since it is sometimes difficult for them to find suitable or convenient times for classes. Online language and communication courses are now more popular than ever. During the experiment the group sizes varied; sometimes the groups were very small, and sometimes too large. It seems that within certain degree programs there is not yet a sufficient understanding of how the new system works. It also appears that there is a general lack of awareness with regard of the vast selection of language and communication courses on offer. Finally, one *JAMK Language Centre* staff member expressed a weakness in the new system: "If perceived quality slips as a result of the recent changes, there may eventually be an even stronger push to get things back to the way they were before the changes were made". There is still one year left of the experiment in which languages are taught in multidisciplinary

groups using different study modes (face-to-face, online, or blended). During the academic year 2018-2019, a decision will be made whether to continue the experiment or return to the former model.

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