

Please note! This is a self-archived version of the original article.

Huom! Tämä on rinnakkaistallenne.

To cite this Article / Käytä viittauksessa alkuperäistä lähdettä:

Annala, H. & Leikomaa, M. 2017. Creating an On-line Course with a Foreign Partner. Teoksessa TAMK-konferenssi - TAMK Conference 2017. Learning and working together. Tampere: Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulu, Tampereen ammattikorkeakoulun julkaisuja, 86-92.

DOI / [URL:http://julkaisut.tamk.fi/PDF-tiedostot-web/Muut/TAMK-Conference2017.pdf](http://julkaisut.tamk.fi/PDF-tiedostot-web/Muut/TAMK-Conference2017.pdf)

*Henri Annala, Marianna Leikomaa*

## 11. CREATING AN ON-LINE COURSE WITH A FOREIGN PARTNER

### **Abstract**

**T**WO TAMK TEACHERS had the opportunity to create a fully on-line course, English Speaking and Listening, with a Dutch partner. The three teachers designed and built the course using the same on-line tools they expected their students to use during the course instead of meeting face-to-face.

The collaboration with a foreign partner proved to be surprisingly easy with the help of current technology, but that does not mean it was without its problems. Testing and selecting the tools and platforms for the course took time and effort, as well as scheduling and structuring the actual course. In addition, finding the common learning goals was very important.

The article focuses on the practical process and tools used in creating the course in the learning environment Eliademy and hopefully offer ideas and support for other TAMK teachers interested in creating an on-line course with a non-Finnish partner.

### **Introduction**

“Genuinely international teaching! Digital pedagogy that facilitates the learning process!” Way too often these are just empty phrases that educators throw around, but sometimes they can be actually put into practise as well. It is often the case that teachers have wonderful ideas on how to develop their courses and also the necessary drive to implement the required changes. However, sometimes the idea does not turn into reality because of lack of

relevant examples and models. The purpose of this article is to provide a clear and practical example of how ordinary language teachers can build an international and collaborative on-line course through international and collaborative on-line work.

## Background

The English Speaking and Listening course was born almost incidentally. A Dutch English teacher from Stenden University of Applied Sciences participated in the International Week hosted by TAMK School of Business and Services and had wished to meet Finnish language teachers during her stay. Unfortunately, the scheduling did not work out, but the Dutch teacher and the authors of this paper started discussing through email. It did not take long for both parties to realise that the learning objectives were very similar in Finland and in the Netherlands: students should learn how to communicate better in multicultural environments using on-line tools. Hence, the teachers decided to start building a joint English course which would emphasise the abovementioned skills.

When designing the course, two special goals were focused on besides developing English language skills: 1) developing the students' intercultural communication skills, and 2) utilising digital tools in a versatile manner. Even though both universities have a relatively large number of foreign exchange and degree students, and the number of students going for an exchange period abroad is also fairly high, there are a lot of students who graduate without having ever been in contact with a representative of another culture. This course was seen as one option to offer a chance to get internationalisation at home (e.g. Kotikansainvälisyys – Kansainvälisyystaitoja kaikille, 2013).

In a way, both the authors at the building stage and later the student groups taking the course could actually be seen as communities of practise, which have been defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, the authors utilised a variety of collaborative tools, such as Google Hangouts and Google Drive, to build the course. The authors also acknowledged the importance of transparency, as it has been pointed out that the potentially “fragile” nature of digital ecosystems might cause obstacles in an on-line project (Annala, Haukijärvi & Pratas, 2015), and hence they addressed all challenges and tasks with a transparent and mutually respectful way of working.

Somewhat similar experiments have been carried out quite recently (e.g. Kersten & O’Brien, 2011; Chen, Caropreso, Hsu & Yang, 2012; Yang, Huiju, Cen, & Huang, 2014), and results from them supported the authors’ decision to build the course: the students’ cross-cultural skills and interest towards other cultures had increased, their attitude towards collaborative on-line working methods had become very positive, and their critical thinking skills and self-esteem had increased, among other benefits. In addition, in Yang et al.’s experiment (2014, 219), the students had preferred synchronous activities to asynchronous, which also encouraged the authors to design a course where the students would be able to work together in small groups utilising various web 2.0 tools with real-time interaction.

Traditional on-line courses have usually focused on reading and writing, and the student has usually worked alone. One of the leading thoughts in designing the course in question was to turn this idea upside down and to design and build an on-line

course which would instead focus on listening and speaking and in which the student would work in constant interaction with other students. Therefore, the materials used were mostly video and audio files, and the students were also expected to create video and audio files themselves. However, no special technical skills or tools were required from the students, and so for instance cell phone video quality was good enough for the purposes of this course. On the European Framework of Reference, the target skill level of the course was set as C1 (Council of Europe, 2014), which means that the course was aimed at advanced students.

### **Designing and facilitating the course**

Building an on-line course requires planning, just like building traditional courses. Additional challenges were posed by the physical distance and the partner who was previously unknown to the authors of this paper. Even though the TAMK teachers could meet each other fairly regularly, the communication with the Dutch partner had to be taken care of using other means of communication. In spite of this, the collaboration started and proceeded quickly, and it took less than half a year to build up the course from scratch. The teachers started to plan the course in early spring 2015 and the first implementation was started already in the autumn of the same year.

The planning and eventually course implementation work was carried out by using tools mostly familiar to the teachers beforehand and no completely new tools were actually needed. The initial contact was made by e-mail, after which the teachers met face-to-face in a video meeting. After trying different video conferencing software (Adobe Connect, Skype, appear.in), the teachers settled for using Google Hangouts, simply because it was familiar to all. The live discussions focused on the course pedagogics and

contents. The work load was then divided between the teachers in e-mail messages and all teachers started by creating and uploading their materials into a shared Google Drive folder. All teachers had access to all the materials even during the creation phase, which made it easier for all to see the whole learning process. Each teacher then uploaded the materials they had created into Eliademy, as agreed.

The first joint challenge was finding a common Learning Management System (LMS). Because TAMK used Moodle and Stenden used Blackboard, the teachers wanted to select a third, completely different LMS to create equal circumstances for all students and also to avoid the trouble of organising the log-in procedure. Hence, the teachers searched for information on various LMSs and tested many of them comprehensively, which took plenty of time and effort. At one point, they already started to build the course on Google Sites, just to find out later on that defining user roles for teachers and students was really tedious and in some cases impossible. In the end, the LMS that was chosen for the course was Eliademy. Learning how to use Eliademy was luckily easy. On a practical level, the course was divided into three modules, and each teacher had a module he/she was responsible of developing. Later on when facilitating the course, the division of work was similar, with the exception that all the teachers were able to facilitate all the modules. Because the teachers' schedules varied a lot in different years, this arrangement was beneficial in easing up the workload of the teachers when they were busy with other work.

The greatest challenge was implementing a pedagogically meaningful learning design in Eliademy. In Eliademy, unlike for example in Moodle, the materials and tasks are separated from each other, which caused some problems in planning the course.

How to communicate clearly which materials and tasks belong together? How to ensure that the students have understood when each task should be done? In the latest implementation of the course, the teachers decided to write a very detailed “what happens in which week” schedule on the front page of the course, which partly seemed to facilitate the students’ understanding of the course structure. In autumn 2016, some changes were done in Eliademy, which in turn helped linking tasks and materials to each other.

## Results

The teachers benefitted greatly from this way of working. Not only was it, naturally, useful to collaborate with new people from different cultures, but working together using the same on-line tools the students were expected to use gave the teachers insights into what kinds of problems the students might run into. As the teachers had to learn how to collaborate with people not in the same country or even in the same time zone with them, they could also expect their students to do the same.

The same was true for the technology used. The teachers tried out different tools for collaboration and were able to recommend them to the students, and choose different ones if the ones initially chosen did not seem suitable.

The course has now been taught three times with multicultural participants. It is not being implemented in the spring of 2017 due to the lack of time in the teachers’ schedules, but will be offered again in the autumn 2017. In the meanwhile, the teachers are making sure all the materials are still up-to-date and continue improving the student experience, using the same tools as thus far: e-mail and Google Hangouts.



## Sources

ANNALA, H., HAUKIJÄRVI, T. & PRATAS, A.C. (2015). Designing an Online Community for Language Teachers. (TAMKjournal). Saatavilla 18.11.2016 <http://tamkjournal-en.tamk.fi/designing-an-online-community-for-language-teachers/>

CHEN, S.-J., CAROPRESO, E.J., HSU, C.-L. & YANG, J. (2012). Cross-cultural Collaborative Online Learning: If You Build It, Will They Come? *Global Partners in Education Journal*, 2 (1), 25–41.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE. (2014). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Saatavilla 18.11.2016 [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp)

KERSTEN, M. & O'BRIEN, T. (2011). A Cross-cultural Collaborative Learning Project: Learning about Cultures and Research Methods. (Proceedings of the 44th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences). Saatavilla 18.11.2016 <https://www.computer.org/csdl/proceedings/hicss/2011/4282/00/01-01-01.pdf>

OPETUSHALLITUS & CIMO. (2013). Kotikansainvälisyys – Kansainvälisyystaitoja kaikille. (Informaatioaineistot 2013:8). Saatavilla 28.11.2016 [http://www.edu.fi/download/152457\\_kotikansainvalisyys\\_kansainvalisyystaitoja\\_kaikille.pdf](http://www.edu.fi/download/152457_kotikansainvalisyys_kansainvalisyystaitoja_kaikille.pdf)

WENGER, E. (1998). Communities of Practice – A Brief Introduction. Saatavilla 18.11.2016 <http://wenger-trayner.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/06-Brief-introduction-to-communities-of-practice.pdf>

YANG, J., HUIJU, Y., CEN, S.-J., & HUANG, R. (2014). Strategies for Smooth and Effective Cross-Cultural Online Collaborative Learning. *Educational Technology & Society*, 17 (3), 208–221.