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OBSERVATIONS ON HOW TO MANAGE AND MOTIVATE A LARGE STUDENT GROUP ON AN ONLINE LANGUAGE COURSE

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In the autumn term of 2020, I taught an English Communications course for a fresh international group of first-year software engineering students. The course took place entirely online due to the corona pandemic, instead of the usual combination of weekly meetings in a physical classroom and online homework assignments.

The number of students participating on the course was quite a bit larger than what had originally been planned – a total of 50 instead of 30. During the last few weeks preceding the beginning of the first courses, a greater than anticipated number of potential applicants to the International Software Engineering programme were confirming their interest and ability to participate. When the situation was introduced to the teachers in a meeting led by the head of the programme, Hanna Kinnari-Korpela, a mutual decision was made to make an exception and take in a larger cohort.

The challenges

The English Communications course is designed to introduce new students to some of the key field-specific vocabulary and communication skills needed in working life situations, such as

business correspondence, job hunting, and professional presentations. As is often typical to language courses taught in UASs, the focus is on giving students hands-on practice in communication. Given the nature of the subject area, work in the classroom very often consists of various types of exercises done in small groups. Alongside language competence, students are also learning about some of the basic concepts related to autonomous learning, such as study strategies and reflection on personal skills and development.

Bringing young first-year students with very different cultural and educational backgrounds to work and communicate together successfully in a Finnish learning environment was an already existing challenge on the course. Having a larger group of students and going fully online obviously presented an additional layer of complexity, and some reconsideration was required on the practical implementation.

In addition and also in relation to the heterogeneity of the group, one of the main concerns was that in my experience, the students' threshold for speaking to others tends to be higher in online meetings than in face-to-face situations, which can potentially make group exercises something to avoid for some students. Fatigue caused by continuous online meetings and extended screen time was another concern; as all courses were taking place online due to corona, students could be facing 6–10 hours of consecutive video conferencing sessions in a day, 4–5 days a week. In the long run, this could lead to students becoming overwhelmed and confused, feeling uncomfortable, disconnected, and unwilling to participate or communicate in the virtual classroom, or in the worst case, losing interest and dropping out (The Reason Zoom Calls Drain Your Energy 2020).

Observations

The course was ultimately successful, and the students gave valuable feedback both during and after the course. Based on the feedback and my personal observations, the factors leading to the positive outcome could be outlined as follows:

Tutoring by experienced teachers had a very beneficial impact on the initial stages of the course. When the students began work, they were already familiar with each other which made it less difficult for them to do group assignments together. They had also been informed about how studies and teaching are conducted in TAMK, which arguably lessened the inevitable initial confusion and the need for explanations on the course considerably.

Providing a secondary, asynchronous connection to the online classroom lessened the effect of bad live connections and supported learning. Power outages and bandwidth loss were a regular nuisance for participants living in areas where the infrastructure is underdeveloped. This was countered by recording all class sessions and making them available in Moodle, and allowing students to create and share a video recording when failing connections disrupted their live group presentation. Video recordings of class sessions were also requested by students because they wanted to have the opportunity to review the sessions at their own pace when doing homework, and because of the time differences – the farthest location was 6 hours ahead of Finnish time.

Taking breaks and keeping the students active helps them maintain attention and stay alert (Avoiding Zoom and Screen Fatigue n.d.). The majority of classroom time was dedicated to activities involving student participation, such as group discussions, oral presentations, and role-play involving work life situations. Course materials that could be studied independently (lecture videos, articles, etc.) were

placed in a Moodle homework section. Time was also allocated for short breaks and small 'coffee break activities' intended for fun to reduce fatigue during classes. For example, each classroom session began with a few minutes of 'how are yous' and light-hearted chat on topics such as what everybody has been doing lately (including me), the current weather everywhere, and so on.

Leaving room for flexibility and improvisation contributed to positive outcomes. Many students expected the course to follow a strict one-direction path without exception, and when they hit a bump on the path, they became very worried about whether they could complete the required tasks and the course successfully. Discussing and offering alternative ways to complete tasks reduced student anxiety in these situations significantly.

Reserving time for answering questions in class and providing detailed instructions can reduce the teacher's workload. Unsurprisingly, the amount of questions increases along with the number of students. To compensate for the large group size and in hopes to avoid a potential flood of e-mails, extra time was reserved for questions during classes, and instructions were given both in spoken and written form. Learning goals were reviewed at the beginning and at end of each online session. When tackling more extensive topics, instructions, materials and preparatory homework tasks were given to students in advance. In addition to the 'how', the 'why' was also discussed whenever new exercise types were introduced to ensure everybody understood the purpose. Talking about the 'why' was also intended to motivate the students and promote self-analysis of their own progress and development.

Establishing a positive, supportive, and proactive learning atmosphere reduced anxiety and promoted student participation. The fear of making a mistake in public (e.g., failing to understand instructions, giving a wrong answer, or not knowing the answer to a question) was an obstacle to open participation initially. Moreover, even though the students had been introduced to how learning is done in Finland, some of them felt that they were not entitled to ask for help, present questions, voice their opinion or otherwise 'disturb the teacher' as they had spent their previous school years in learning environments that emphasize hierarchy, teacher authority and one-directional, lecture-based methods strongly.

In order to make it easier for the students to open up and participate actively, it was a first priority to dismantle the perceived role of a passive student and encourage everybody to think of the classroom as a safe, shared workspace where everybody is most welcome and also expected to contribute and openly ask for assistance when needed. To achieve this, a major part of the first online meeting with the group was dedicated to discussion on the subject in conjunction with general information about the course programme, exercise types, and tools used throughout the course. However, the power of preconception was strong – it took a few more class sessions and additional encouragement before everybody believed that I won't be offended at all if somebody needs help, makes a mistake, or wants to ask a question during class.

Showing personal interest increased student engagement. While it may come as no surprise here, it is still worth mentioning that showing a positive attitude towards both the course topics and the students' contributions, questions, problems, and feelings throughout the duration of any course is important. In this case, the students reported the teacher's positive attitude as a positive motivational factor.

Making the course a personal development project where the participants themselves have a major responsibility for their own progress was found motivating by many students. The facilitative role of the teacher, ownership of learning, and reflection/self-assessment skills were addressed at the beginning and occasionally also in later stages of the course. I made it explicitly clear to the students that 1) my main goal as a teacher is to 'be there' for the students, to guide and assist everybody to make as much progress in their learning quest as possible to my best ability, 2) they were going to actually work for their own benefit and personal professional development, not 'just because we have to do this course', 3) they need to take responsibility and commit to the course in order to be successful, and 4) learning to reflect on their own progress and making personal development plans can be both useful and a valuable asset in the future. Discussing these points was also helpful in dismantling the abovementioned fears and strong preconceptions related to the learning process.

Final thoughts

It should be mentioned here that on this particular course there appeared to be no participants with special needs, which is why the issue of how to provide additional support to students with disabilities, e.g., dyslexia, panic disorder, or other serious obstacles to learning has not been discussed here so far. In short, differentiation is the answer in terms of course design and implementation, which of course also connects to flexibility and room for improvisation (Distance Learning: Supporting Students with Disabilities 2020). The main difficulty is perhaps that especially in the online environment, it is more difficult to see if someone is struggling, and students do not always feel comfortable about informing the teacher of their special needs.

In general, providing support and making a course a positive and motivating experience for all kinds of students requires time and effort. This is especially true of online courses (Dumford & Miller 2018). As the group sizes continue to grow, the amount of time the teacher can allocate to catering for the needs and questions of individual students diminishes. If a critical point is reached where it becomes impossible to offer sufficient guidance and support, it can create great frustration and stress for both the students and the teacher. This is especially true in the case of students with special needs, where lack of support and alternatives can lead to disillusionment, demotivation, and inability to complete the course. On the other hand, with enough resources and support, it is possible to make all students feel they 'own' the course and have the chance to show what they can do, which tends to increase student engagement and motivation.

References

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