



The Future is Now – UAS Language Education in Transition

The current article discusses how the increasing student diversity and transformation of work challenge language education at the Finnish universities of applied sciences (UAS). The article highlights some administrative and pedagogical solutions that have been developed at Karelia UAS to enable the progress of diverse students towards professional competence in foreign languages necessitated by the changes in the labour market. The aim of this article is to evoke discussion on the future directions of language education in vocational higher education.

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UAS students as language learners

Annually around 126,000 students apply to Finnish universities of applied sciences (UAS). The number of students coming from vocational schools and institutes has grown over the past years being almost 50% in 2018 (Vipunen). Currently, it is also possible to start studies in Open UAS and apply for degree studies through the Open Path when the student has accumulated the minimum of 60 credits. Apart from Finnish citizens, there were around 9,700 foreign UAS students in 2017 (Tilastokeskus). The number has declined a little since the introduction of study fees.

At Karelia UAS, the accepted students are requested to take a diagnostic test in English and Swedish before their compulsory language courses. The test results show that, in general, students' English skills have improved, but simultaneously student groups have become more heterogeneous. Especially young men may gain C-level scores in the entrance tests, while there are others, both male and female students, with the language competence lower than B1. Among the learners with weak English skills are students with immigrant background, more mature students who have not studied or used English for years and those with learning difficulties. Even some foreign students enrolled in English-mediated programmes struggle with their insufficient English language skills. The skills in the Swedish language have notably decreased over the past years, also among students who have completed upper secondary education. Those entering

through the vocational track face even a gloomier scenario due to the lack of sufficient language learning opportunities in vocational education. The challenges of language teaching and learning in Finnish vocational education have been recently brought up, for example, by Granö (2019).

Measures to support and speed up language studies

Karelia UAS, among others, offers remedial English and Swedish courses to those who do not reach the required entry-level, which should be B1 for Swedish and B2 for the English language skills. During the past years, the demand for and popularity of online and summer courses has grown because students look for different ways to complete compulsory and elective courses. Karelia has also responded to students' requests and offers blended and online courses in several languages including a popular remedial course in Swedish called 'Rautalankaruotsia'. The compulsory language courses are often taught at the beginning of studies, and students may not be able to take remedial language courses before them, even when there is obvious need. Many UAS students also work during the semesters and do not attend classes regularly, which causes delay in studies or even dropping out. Unfortunately, there are students whose language competence or academic skills are so much below the required level that a three-credit remedial course is not enough. Karelia students with diagnosed learning difficulties can apply for special support and individual study arrangements, such as alternative means of completing courses or additional time to take tests. Annually, some 40 students are entitled to special arrangements in their degree studies. Moreover, there are other service providers, such as the regional association for learners with special needs, JOSE ry., which can support students with learning difficulties or disabilities. In very rare cases, a student has the right to apply for exemption from language studies.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are students who already have the sufficient command of the languages that are required in the degree. If their skills meet the course requirements, they may apply for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). If the competence has been acquired non- or informally, the applicants must provide proof of their spoken and written language competence. Each year, there are over 1000 approved RPL applications in Karelia. As for language studies, most of the RPL applications are for basic courses in German and Russian and they will be only approved with evidence of appropriate written and oral skills. Decisions regarding recognition of prior learning are made case-by-case. Previous language studies in higher education (HE) do not automatically entitle a student to accreditation due to field and degree specific requirements. If students are employed in jobs where they use foreign languages in their professional practice, they can apply for studification of work (Fi: opinnollistaminen). Studification of work, however, requires that the tasks at work correspond with the contents and objectives of language courses. This also necessitates that the language syllabi include very detailed descriptions of the required competences. Students who want to study further have also a possibility to take language courses in the CampusOnline.fi environment provided by the Finnish universities of applied sciences or as cross-institutional studies in other higher education institutions.

The role of language studies in vocational higher education

Attitudes and motivation are essential in all types of learning. Motivation for language learning in the universities of applied sciences stems from the fact that languages are needed at work. According to Lantta (2017), employers consider language, communication and interaction skills valuable when they recruit new personnel. Globally, more than half (56%) of employers say that

written and verbal communication skills are their most valued human strengths followed by collaboration and problem-solving skills (Manpower Group 2018). Despite such results, language courses are sometimes regarded as general studies and, thus, might be seen as less important than other courses. Moreover, competence in the first language is sometimes taken for granted as all “master” their mother tongue. Such perceptions prevail among both staff and students, which unfortunately influences learners’ attitudes and motivation. There seems to be, at least to some extent, lack of understanding of what language for specific purposes (LSP) means and what the overall objective of UAS language education is. This can also inhibit collaboration between teachers and integration of language courses with other field-specific subjects that would make learning more authentic and meaningful for students. However, there are good examples of collaboration and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in various study programmes. Students have reacted positively to such experiments, but they require careful planning and additional resources.

CLIL, LSP and the development of professional identity

Language education at universities of applied sciences aims at meeting the needs of the local and global labour market. Moreover, students’ future careers, continual education and life-long learning are essential focal points. The contents of LSP and CLIL at Finnish UAS go beyond knowledge of language structures and professional vocabulary. The aim is to provide good communicative ability, which entails integration of different professional competences, interpersonal skills and cultural awareness. Furthermore, emotional intelligence is an essential work life competence, which facilitates interaction with other people in the work community. Vocationally oriented language education is about cooperating between different individuals in various communicative situations and it entails respect for both personal and cultural diversity. In collaborative language learning, such matters as time management skills, accountability, politeness and professional conduct can be developed. Effective communication requires ability to give and receive feedback, ask for help or clarification, solve problems and negotiate. Higher education should also respond to students’ individual needs and contribute to the construction of students’ self-awareness and professional identity. (For further information on professional identity, see e.g. Kukkonen, 2016.)

Will artificial intelligence (AI) and automation change UAS language learning?

Disruption is one of the current buzzwords first introduced by Christensen and Bower (1995). It refers to the drastic changes in society due to digital transformation. AI and automation truly change the way our world functions. As for languages and communication, we are already enjoying the benefits of digitalisation. Automation enables communicators to use their first language when a pocket device translates our text or speech to the desired target languages. Jobs that can be automated will disappear, but this will not mean that there are no jobs left. Yet, nobody knows if more jobs will be created than cease to exist. According to Harari (2018), the mere idea that a profession can be learned for life is outdated. Moreover, we can only guess what skills are useful in the future. Ropo et al. (2015) state that the age of globalization, medialization and fast technological advancement requires information and media literacy. Ulbrich (2017) adds that it is not just digital skills that are needed but also empathy and social intelligence.

Which direction should UAS language education take?

Since nobody knows for sure what skills are important in the future, the best investment is to develop learning skills. Resilience, mental balance and self-knowledge are crucial for one's ability to learn and adapt to changes. UAS language education should support the learning of important meta-skills, such as entrepreneurial mindset and problem-solving skills. Because of the tumultuous changes, language teaching and learning need to change, too. The need for change manifests itself, for example, in the increasing number of online courses offered by education providers. While online courses give students the freedom of time and place, studying requires advanced skills in self-directed and collaborative learning. When taking a digital leap, educators should ask themselves if the current trend of using online courses as a panacea for everything will solve or create more problems. In fact, digital transformation can create kind of an illusion that in digital learning environments both teaching and learning become easier and less time-consuming. Online education also changes the student-teacher relationships and social processes in learning communities, which are not minor factors to consider when we develop UAS language education.

Concluding remarks

Today there are more and more students with individual needs and with strengths of their own. Their future employability does not only depend on the degree they earn but also on their distinctive set of competences gained. Universities of applied sciences have enabled individual learning paths and choices between different study modes. Cross-institutional and multi-disciplinary courses provide more options for specialisation. However, differentiated instruction and special arrangements in studies come with a price as they increase the workload for teaching and counselling staff, as well as for UAS administration. Language education has also its own preconditions. Language and communication skills are multidimensional, situated and variable and need to be developed in human interaction. Therefore, language studies cannot be offered as individually tailored self-study courses. On the other hand, they can hardly be fully automated online courses or MOOCs to reduce costs. The changing contexts and unexpected professional demands require visionary thinking when the former patterns and ways of work do not apply. There is need for innovative pedagogical approaches that facilitate more authentic learning in contexts and assignments that involve real-life problems, and which are relevant to students when they develop their professional competences for the future.

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