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# “Hopefully nähdään”: North American Finnish language learners building community through virtual conversation hours

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**In the Finnish Studies Programs at two North-American universities, Finnish language students have collaborated online and participated in informal virtual conversational coffee hour meetings. These meetings are offered to complement students’ collaboration conducted during regular language classes. This article investigates what students talk about when they meet each other virtually and how they build a shared sense of community during these meetings.**

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Language pedagogy is currently experiencing a shift from accessing and sharing information to designing communities where participants are actively engaging in deep and meaningful learning (Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2013). Social media applications make use of the Internet in a way that capitalizes on its greatest asset: It can bring together learners, who share a common interest, in communities where participants can interact and collaborate on purposeful activities. (Vaughan et al., 2013: 98).

Students of Finnish as a foreign language at University of Toronto and Indiana University have met virtually and participated in informal virtual conversation coffee hour meetings. This was a regular part of the students’ extracurricular programs during the academic year 2018–2019. Students from all levels were invited to the virtual coffee hour meetings, which were led by a Finnish-speaking teaching assistant and visiting graduate students in both universities. The coffee hour meetings complement the students’ collaboration during regular language classes.

In this article we investigate what students, who only meet each other virtually, discuss and how they build a shared sense of community (see Anderson, 2006) during these encounters. Furthermore, we are interested in what kind of humor is created between the two groups.

Students participated in altogether seven virtual coffee hours. These coffee hours have been recorded. This article concentrates on analyzing selected excerpts from the very last virtual coffee hour meeting, which took place in the end of spring semester 2019. The participants in the meeting were the native-Finnish-speaking teaching assistant/visiting graduate students (Ella, Matti and Katja) and altogether six students from both participating universities. The data for this study consists of transcribed audio- and video-recorded discussions. Observations and field notes made by the instructors are also used in the analysis. The names of the participants and places have been changed. Participants in both ends gathered in conference rooms in front of a computer. The video calls took place via Zoom, which is a video conferencing tool, similar to Skype and widely used by Indiana University. The coffee hour meetings took place bi-weekly and each meeting was one hour long.

## Students build common ground through familiar themes

The coffee hour participants discuss topics that are mutual to the group in question. Common topics are related to studying and study life, summer plans, work and, for example, pets; these are interests that most of them seem to share. Students talk about Finland, their trips to different places or cities they know. All throughout the semester, the weather was also a popular shared topic. The topics during this last coffee hour were directly related to events taking place at the end of the semester: students discussed their plans for the summer.

During the coffee hour meetings, students were often drinking or eating something. The discussion was therefore often related to the actual social event of drinking coffee or tea together. The following excerpt also begins by talking about food and drinks. After students have settled into the space, one of the participants (Katja) starts the conversation by asking "Mitä te syötte" (What are you eating?):

### **Excerpt 1: Candy or Moomin tea?**

KATJA: Mitä te syötte < what are you eating>  
MARIE: on Moomi ((shows the tea bag wrapper)) <it's Moomin>  
MATTI: Muumi  
AUNE: aaaa karkki <ooooh candy>  
MATTI: karkki <candy>  
KATJA: se on Muumi-teetä <it is Moomin tea>  
MATTI: aaa Muumi-teetä joo <oh Moomin tea yes>  
KATJA: teetä <tea>  
AUNE: they got everything  
MATTI: joo ((laughing)) <yes>

After Katja asks what the students are eating, students in both universities show their tea bags to each other. The students in Toronto are drinking Finnish Moomin tea. The colourful Moomin tea bag is mistaken as candy wrapper at the other end, and this is followed by laughter and a friendly comment "they got everything", meaning that one can find all kinds of Moomin-labelled products in Finland and perhaps also indicating that drinking Moomin-labelled tea is something slightly extraordinary.

The context of the meeting, coffee hour, suggests that eating and drinking are an essential part of it. Food and drink offer a concrete discussion topic which relates to students' everyday life. The topic also activates vocabulary that is covered in the elementary language classes and frequently practiced. Additionally, food and drink display cultural information; the cultural knowledge connected to Tove Jansson's Moomin characters is something all participants seem to have in common.

## Shared experiences on bilingual repertoire

Discussion often circulates around the Finnish language. Commentaries based on linguistic knowledge occur regularly, as do observations about the similarities and differences between Finnish and English. Before the following conversation (Excerpt 2), students talk about the conferencing app Zoom and speculate whether they will be using it the next semester:

### Excerpt 2: It is like Skype

KATJA: se on niin kuin Skype ((imitates Finnish-like pronunciation)) <it is like Skype>

REINO: Skuup

MARIE: Skype ((English-like pronunciation))

MATTI: joo ja ensi syksynä <yeah and next fall>

TIINA: oh oh Skype ((Finnish-like pronunciation))

MANY STUDENTS: ((laughing))

MARIE: I was like Skype ((Finnish-like pronunciation)) @what the heck is that@

MANY STUDENTS: ((laughing))

MARIE: okay so Skype ((Finnish-like pronunciation)) oh it's like Skype ((English pronunciation))

When a native Finnish speaker (Katja) first utters the word "Skype", using the Finnish-like pronunciation, one of the students (Reino) has challenges understanding what has been said. The students mutually laugh at this confusion; they also continue playing with the two different ways of pronunciation. This discussion is based on bilingual knowledge of the two languages, Finnish and English, which all of the participants share.

## "It's on my playlist": references to the language classes

Students frequently make references to other discourses and topics that connect to language classes and studying Finnish. In the following excerpt, student Aune initiates a conversation about the use of music in Finnish language classes, which leads to a longer conversation about Finnish music. During the discussion, students also start playing Finnish music from YouTube:

### Excerpt 3: "Joo hyvä": Singing songs in the language class

AUNE: laulatko lauluja kurssille <do you sing songs in the class>  
 MARIE: joo <yeah>  
 REINO: joo vähän < yeah a little.>  
 MATTI: joo onko teillä suomenkielistä musiikkia <yes do you have Finnish music>  
 MARIE: mhm  
 MATTI: joo mitä sä laulat kurssilla <yes what do you sing in class>  
 ((mutual laughter, students begin showing their heads, shoulders etc.))  
 MATTI: aa joo tämä <oh yes this>  
 AUNE: jooo hyvä <yees good>

When the students start imitating the well-known song “head, shoulders, knees and toes”, other participants recognize it and mutual laughter follows. The reaction is most likely caused by the familiarity of the song, as well as its playfulness and the bodily gestures it includes. The discourse on music continues for a while and students also share different songs on Spotify:

#### Excerpt 4: Spotify and sutsi satsi

MARIE: I have some of it on my Spotify I can find it  
 AUNE: Antti Antti  
 MATTI: Tuisku  
 AUNE: Tuisku  
 KATJA: uu Antti Tuisku Makkeralaulu <ooo Antti Tuisku sausage song>  
 MARIE: kuu- kuukaudet joo Sutsi satsi sasta <mont- months yes sutsi satsi song>  
 MATTI: ((laughing)) aa joo <ooo yes>  
 MARIE: it is on my playlist ((laughing and making dancing movements))  
 MANY STUDENTS: ((laughing))  
 MATTI: sutsisatsi joo se on hyvä ((dancing movements)) <sutsi satsi it is good>  
 MARIE: sutsisatsi ((dancing movements))

Because the song "Sutsi satsi" also includes a set of dance moves, both Marie and Matti start dancing to the song. This leads to the whole group laughing together, and there seems to be a moment of shared enjoyment. Students demonstrate mutual understanding of the practices and laugh at them. As can be seen in the excerpt, humor and shared laughter was an essential part of the coffee hour discussions.

## "We'll miss you": finishing the conversation

Towards the end of the virtual coffee hour, participants wish each other good luck in their exams. At the end of the meeting students say goodbyes while also sharing their summer plans. This is followed by saying farewell to Matti who will return to Finland after the semester ends. Before the following dialogue (Excerpt 5), a student asks if Aune will continue studying Finnish the upcoming fall. Students also discuss whether the shared coffee hour meetings will continue next year. Thereafter Matti continues the conversation: "I think so joo joo mutta ensi syksynä [...] me olemme Suomessa" (yes yes but this fall [...] we (the teaching assistant/visiting graduate students) will be in Finland) and after that the following discourse occurs:

### Excerpt 5: We will miss you

MARIE: we'll miss you

AUNE: tiedätkö sun < do you know you >

MATTI: tiedätkö oo <do I know >

AUNE: do you know what you're doing next year

MATTI: mä en tiedä mä olen töissä mutta mä en tiedä ehkä töissä ((laughingly)) <I don't know. I will be working but I don't know maybe working >

Student Marie, who is located in a different university than Matti, says "we'll miss you", which conveys a message: During these casual virtual coffee moments together, the group has connected, bonded and formed friendly relationships. Students tell each other goodbye, recognizing that the teaching assistants and visiting graduate students will not be returning after the summer. The community that has been created will thus change after the break. In the end Marie utters "hopefully nähdään" (hopefully we will see each other again).

## Conclusions and discussion

Media applications' greatest asset in pedagogy is to bring students together in communities where they can interact and collaborate. Communication through video conferencing shifts students' language learning to sharing information within a community of inquiry where they

can actively engage in meaningful collaboration and more importantly, language learning (see also Vaughan et al., 2013).

Because of the long distance to Finland, as well as other student groups studying Finnish, students in North America have a limited exposure to Finnish speakers outside the classroom. Encountering authentic language environments is, however, crucial for learning. Watkins (2012: 196) writes, "while foreign language students can converse and be communicative with each other inside the classroom, finding ways to practice oral communication outside the classroom is often a significant challenge." This project has been an attempt to provide students with these opportunities.

The purpose of the coffee hour meetings was to provide students with an opportunity to engage in an informal conversation in Finnish and practice using the language outside of class in an encouraging low-stakes environment. The main language of the meetings was Finnish, but as all of the participants are also fluent speakers of English, the conversation was conducted bilingually at times.

In the virtual coffee hour meetings that were organized regularly during the academic year, students got to know Finnish language learners from outside of their university; they also got to know other students in their own university better. In the meeting covered in this article, they got together for the last time before the end of the semester and said goodbye to their teaching assistant/visiting graduate students who would return back to Finland.

While some personal information was shared in the conversations, many of the topics, as shown in this article, were based on mutual shared knowledge about topics that connect North-American learners of Finnish. Students laugh at mutually interesting issues. Many topics during the coffee hours, as demonstrated here, are based on mutually known themes and mutual interests these students of Finnish as a foreign language have. The fact that the students have learned to know each other during these discussions also provides a meaningful context for discourse. Through virtual collaboration, communities are created and sustained over time and place.

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## Artikkeliin viittaaminen

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