

Chapter 45

A Business Writing OIL (Online International Learning): A Finland/UK Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Online International Learning (OIL) helps to integrate soft skills into the academic curriculum, as well as providing students with international interaction opportunities. In this article, we evaluate the extent to which telecollaborative writing tasks between UK-based (mostly Chinese) and Finnish students over an online platform can benefit academic writing learning experience and contribute to curriculum and materials design in EAP. In the article, there are two groups of learners from different geographical contexts, Finland and the UK. The Finland-based students are almost all Finnish, while those studying in the UK are mostly from China. In both cases, the target language is English. The students in Finland worked in pairs to create authentic case study materials, and the students in the UK, in what we characterize as “stimulus writing”, produced reports based on the case studies they had been given.

INTRODUCTION

At the university level in the Nordic countries, the emphasis in English teaching is increasingly on academic skills. Although many university students are fluent and proficient users of English, their level of English is not as strong on the academic register as might be expected (Henriksen & Danelund, 2015). Previous studies have shown that Finnish students appear to be critical and analytical in writing rather than in speaking, and they are generally good at providing detailed feedback to peers in writing (Keng, 2016). The main aim of the academic writing course in Finnish universities (such as the University of Vaasa, one of the partners in this project) has been to assist students in writing their thesis by providing feedback from the teachers instead of training students how to create, adapt and fine-tune their own texts.

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As Keng (2016) pointed out, the need for academic writing courses is recognized by students, but the skills required are rarely specified and typical writing tasks assigned are not always popular.

UK universities accepting large numbers of international students (such as the first author's, Coventry University) face different challenges. For example, the standard of English proficiency is often so low that it is difficult to devise academic writing tasks based on authentic discipline materials that students find manageable, so one is sometimes obliged to resort to simplified resources including readings from textbooks. This state of affairs led the authors to devise a case study and report writing task which offered a semi-authentic task in which students from both types of institution could be involved. Because the two cohorts were geographically distant from each other, an Online International Learning approach was decided upon.

Online International Learning (OIL) has been advocated at Coventry University as a form of “virtual mobility” (O'Brien, 2017; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018) to embed soft skills into the academic curriculum and provide students and staff with an opportunity to interact with their counterparts internationally. This pilot study suggests that telecollaborative writing tasks between the UK and Finnish students may benefit both cohorts' learning experience in academic writing, support their writing process and contribute to EAP curriculum design.

Prior Work on Telecollaboration

Much of the early online inter-cultural work described in the literature is based on the “tandem” model, where two groups of learners study each other's language (where the target language of each group is the L1 of the other). English, however, has the greatest global reach of all languages, as the language which is the most widely taught and studied, and through the medium of which the most content is delivered on internationalized learning programmes. In tandem programmes, the decision on which language—L1 or L2—learners should use is non-trivial, as an opportunity to practise L2 for one group is an opportunity denied the other group. O'Dowd (2007:9) also notes that interaction in L2 may cause learners to oversimplify or leave unstated their intended message. Where one of the L2s is English, it is very likely that learners will be more advanced in that language than their peers in the other L2. O'Dowd (2007:49) notes that this proficiency imbalance can give rise to a “lingua franca” effect (whereby the language that is less well-known of the pair is rarely used or practised). The MexCo project at Coventry University (Orsini-Jones et al., 2017) started out life in 2011 as a Spanish/English tandem project, but by 2014 had developed into an English lingua franca (ELF) project. The aim of the project was to impart intercultural awareness between UK students of English language and literature, and Mexican students from a wide range of disciplines; there was no special focus on foreign language skills.

Chase and Alexander (2007) describe their “Japan-Korea cultural exchange project” (JKCE), which has been very successful in giving students from those two countries a platform to interact, in English, with peers from another culture, which is in many ways similar to their own, and in other ways rather different.

Preshous, Ostyn and Keng (forthcoming) describe a telecollaborative project with students of business in three countries—the UK, Belgium and Finland. Most of the participants from the latter two were natives of their respective countries; those from the UK were of Malaysian, Chinese and Indonesian origin. The project aimed to develop intercultural competence and business communication skills, which participants practised both synchronously and asynchronously. As an introductory task, they asked and answered questions about each other's cultures. In the main phase of the project, participants selected a

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