GOING PRO IN FINNISH - MAKING PROFESSIONAL FINNISH DIGITALLY AVAILABLE FOR ADVANCED ACADEMIC LEARNERS

Tapani Möttönen, Jepa Piirainen
Aalto University (FINLAND)

Abstract

The development of higher education in Finland faces two challenges that are particularly relevant for language learning. On the one hand, in many disciplines and educational institutions, the students struggle to find time for acquiring the linguistic competence required by the labour market: government-initiated changes to university curriculum, social support for students push students to graduate in reduced time, which, in turn, drive students to prioritize subject studies over other, generally work-related studies. On the other hand, Finland is becoming increasingly interested in recruiting students and workforce from abroad. This, in turn, places additional pressure on the educational system to provide the foreign students with skills sufficient for coping in the Finnish society and job market. These two challenges point to the need of flexible study paths and digital materials that allow the students to combine studying, working and language learning more freely. This need is directly addressed by DIGIJOUJOU, a Finnish, ministry-funded project that produces e-materials for learning Finnish and Swedish, the two national languages in Finland, by the collaboration between four Finnish universities and eight universities of applied sciences. DIGIJOUJOU comprises of multiple sub-projects, each with particular thematical foci and pedagogical approaches. In this paper, we introduce sub-project Työelämän suomi (‘Finnish for working life’), which develops e-learning materials for intermediate-to-advanced learners, who wish to improve their work-related Finnish skills. We outline the material and pedagogical development carried out in the project, discuss the methodological choices made within the project and present our observations and experiences of piloting of the material in Aalto University (Espoo, Finland).

Keywords: Innovation, technology, research projects.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Digitalisation has rapidly developed into one of the main drivers of change in higher education (HE) and language learning in Finland. Finnish government seeks to support this development by funding multiple development projects that focus on digital pedagogy and online materials. One of them is DIGIJOUJOU, the main aim of which is develop online materials for teaching Finnish and Swedish (both official national languages in Finland) both in universities and universities of applied sciences. More specifically, the project aims to make language learning more flexible for academic students: DIGIJOUJOU divides into multiple sub-projects that focus either on flexible study modules or additional digital tools to support independent learning or studying in institutional contexts. With Finnish as a foreign language, a particular challenge is to address advanced learners who often have already landed jobs and lack sufficient skills in Finnish for professional needs. In this paper, we report preliminary results of a particular DIGIJOUJOU subproject Työelämän Suomi (‘Finnish for working life’), which develops work-oriented materials for intermediate-to-advanced learners.

Työelämän suomi subproject is motivated by the needs of advanced learners who are in the last part of their studies and working at least part-time. These students often fail to find language teaching that suits their situation. For instance, in Aalto university, there is a broad selection of Finnish as a foreign language (henceforth F2) modules that also are popular among foreign students. Unfortunately, however, there is a significant negative correlation between the course level and the overall amount of attendants, all groups combined. This negative correlation points to a conclusion that is confirmed by anecdotal student feedback. Foreign students who wish to integrate in Finnish society and cope well in the job market are struggling to find enough time to continue their F2 studies. On the positive side, many students report that the lack of time is caused by combination of studies and working. However, many students also report that their lacking in sufficient linguistic skills is holding them back professionally, making their situation in the job market insecure and often forcing them to accept job opportunities that are marginal to their actual professional interests and/or education. Finally, many students are struggling to find a job in the first place and still cannot improve their skills in Finnish due
to other curricular pressures. This dire situation has been confirmed among foreign doctoral students in Finland, who often lack the necessary contacts to find jobs post-defence [1].

The amount of foreign graduate students in Finland has increased significantly in the last 20 years his has resulted from strategic, governmentally directed development to increase student mobility and increase the amount of competent workforce in the Finnish job market. The integration of foreign students in Finnish society and working life has been problematic, however, and, for example in 2015, only 38.8 percent of foreign university students, who hand graduated in 2014, were employed in Finland [2]. The strategic need for international student recruitment, on the one hand, and the problems faced by language learners in universities, on the other, underline the acute need for flexible study paths, modules, and materials that allow students integrate language studies with various, and most often hectic, life situations. DIGIJOUJOU project as a whole addresses this need directly, by establishing nation-wide collaboration of language centres in universities in Finland and producing a vast amount of e-materials and modules for independent learning of the two national languages in Finland.

In this paper, we focus on the DIGIJOUJOU subproject Työelämän Suomi as particular example of how the goals of the main project manifest in actual material production and pedagogical development. The subproject has developed online study modules (totaling 8 ECTS) for independent learning that focus on linguistic and communicative skills specific to work-related situations and job seeking. The beta-versions of the modules have been finalized in the beginning of 2019 and have been piloted during the spring 2019. In Aalto University, we have piloted the material in 3 ECTS online course Finnish for professional needs. We will outline the pedagogical development process in the larger Työelämän Suomi sub-project and then analyze the experiences from the pilot course in Aalto vis-à-vis our pedagogical aims. We will discuss the development and selection of online materials in the subproject and pilot course. In particular, we will focus on how the selected digital solutions and our aim to provide flexibility by the means of material surplus worked in the light of the pilot course. Finally, we will discuss the received student feedback as well as the observed learning results.

2 METHODOLOGY

In this section, we will briefly describe the motivation for the pedagogical approach selected in the subproject, as well as outline the process of material production therein.

Our first-hand experience with foreign students in is that their linguistic competence particularly in Finnish makes a crucial correlate to their success with job-seeking or, more generally, integration. At the same time, language competence is still a hindrance even for many advanced learners. A common problem is the lack of professional and job-specific vocabulary and communicative skills, which affects both the students’ ability to promote themselves in the job market and their ability to cope in, and integrate to, the organizations they work in. Understandably, highly educated professionals feel frustrated for missing job opportunities due to lack of linguistic skills that they, at the same time, are too busy to acquire. Similarly, in the actual workplace, insufficient linguistic skills may subtly – but demoralizingly nonetheless – prevent non-native from fully participating in many informal interactions or grasping subtle linguistic messages that are significant for one’s professional development and integration.

Everyday language skills do not seem to suffice in professional contexts [3]. For example, the practices of email correspondence vary notably along the dimension of formality when one moves from interaction with friends to professional communication. In a similar vein, customer service situations (from the employee’s perspective) often represent an extent of formality, that would stand out as highly unnatural in most informal everyday interactions. Many pragmatic contexts at the work place require application of multiple communicative skills virtually at the same time. For example, in team meetings, the employee should be able to express one’s opinion, agreement/disagreement and to make suggestions. These skills are evidently familiar to everyday life as well, but in formal, professional situations the phrases and the language register differ significantly from those used with family and friends.

With the vast spectrum of different work specific communicative skills and contexts, the challenge for Työelämän Suomi subproject was to pinpoint various genres of professional interaction that simultaneously suit to extend the learners’ competence beyond non-professional situations and still are general enough to suit learners with varying educational and professional orientations. The participants of the sub-project agreed upon the idea that the starting (CEFR) level for the material
should be at least A2/B1. This level can realistically be described as minimum proficiency one has to achieve to be able to cope in Finnish speaking professional environment, particularly in high-expertise tasks. Although some professional contexts (such as more formal meetings) seems to require more advanced competence, it is justified to establish the starting point in the rudimentary work-specific linguistic skills before moving on to more advanced level. In addition, the different target groups of the different universities involved in the subproject need to be considered. Although the difficulty level of the modules and materials needs to be coordinated and assessed vis-à-vis CEFR, the students who are to study with the materials inevitably represent a heterogeneous group with remarkable variety of different educational backgrounds, professional aims and everyday linguistic practices – many of which relate to the degree program a student happens to study in. Establishing the starting point in A2/B1 allows us to keep the themes of distinct activities general enough to allow for various target groups from one university to another.

Student’s autonomy and the differentiation of the teaching and pedagogical materials according to students’ different needs have been recognized as factors that correlate significantly with learning outcomes in language education [4]. This finding is only emphasized in the context of DIGIJOUJOU, where the aim is to allow flexible study paths for university-level learners nationwide. The general objective of DIGIJOUJOU to promote flexibility was reflected by the material and pedagogical development in Työelämän suomi in two interrelated ways. On one hand, the subproject has been aimed toward producing digital material that could be used both independently in an online-course or as a part of a blended learning course, which of course brings notable flexibility to course design. The challenge was to develop and store the materials in a format that allows them to be uploaded to different learning management systems of different universities. The pragmatic solution was to develop and build e-materials up by relying on freely available online tools: GoogleSites was used as the platform for materials demonstrations and task designs involved (suggestions for) students using various freeware tools according to requirements of the task.

On the other hand, the modules and activities developed in the subproject needed to be flexible in multiple ways. The task designs themselves would at least allow for some differentiation according to whatever professional orientations the students may have. This kind of flexibility, however, has its natural limits in that a significant amount of the tasks would need to be more formal and rely on automatic correction – otherwise the monitoring and marking of students’ activities would require unrealistic amount of resources from the teacher and her institution. Therefore, the design of each module needed to be based on the principle of flexibility-through-surplus: a student could choose the content from several options depending on one’s own needs. What this solution requires, obviously, is that there has to be more content than a student needs to complete to achieve the needed workload for the ECTS of the course. Finally, an online study module that aims for maximal flexibility should also be flexible relative to the workload of the student. Thus, all the materials created in the project was divided in modules of 1 ECTS, with each module built around one work-related communicative theme or context theme such as self-promotion, introduction to new work position or communication on the phone. The teacher may build a selection of her own by choosing the modules or parts of them to the course according to the curriculum of the course and import them to the learning platform. Overall workload for a particular student may very well be negotiated between the student and the teacher, if needed.

3 RESULTS
As with other DIGIJOUJOU subprojects, the materials developed in sub-project Työelämän Suomi was piloted in spring 2019. In Aalto University, this took place in the form of an elective 3 ECTS course that we offer as a part of our curriculum as an online version of a pre-existing work-life oriented language course. In this section, we will outline the main characteristics of the course.

The pilot course is entirely located online and will involve independent studying as well as small group tasks by the participants. The materials produced and stored in GoogleSites are exported to Aalto Open University’s platform. As has been the guiding principle with the material production, the materials uploaded to Aalto platform are organized thematically into modules. The student will choose activities within the limits of materials provided, but the selection is somewhat different from the overall idea described above.

First of all, the course divides into three modules, only one of which is mandatory. The modules are:
1. Self-promotion: how promote one’s professional skills and capabilities in the job market and in the work place
2. Organization: how to discuss and describe the organization one works for or wants to work for
3. Formal and informal communication at the work place

Each module offers a surplus of materials and tasks to choose from. In addition, the workload for each module can be adjusted by the student within certain limits. Both numbers are gathered in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Activities selection equivalent to</th>
<th>Actual workload</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-promotion</td>
<td>1,5 ECTS</td>
<td>0–1 ECTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Organization</td>
<td>1,5 ECTS</td>
<td>0–1 ECTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Formal and informal comm.</td>
<td>3 ECTS</td>
<td>2 ECTS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall workload of three credits thus consists of two credits from the module 3 and one credit that can be distributed between modules 1 and 2 however the student wishes – the only limit is that the workload can only be distributed in 0,5 credit portions.

The themes of the topics have been chosen by two criteria, directly derived from the practical needs described in section 2 above. First, they should be distinct enough to account for somewhat diverse needs of the students. For instance, the obligatory module 2 can be relevant for a student that has just started in a new job, where as a student who already has been working for a specific company for a while, may very well have acquired some substantial vocabulary and communicative skills vis-à-vis this particular theme. Second, these themes are general enough to allow the students to scale the difficulty level up or down based on their own competence. Obviously, in practice, this means that each theme should enable task designs that take diverse linguistic competencies into account. Finally, the themes selected should help to constitute rudimentary work-life communicative skills that more advanced and profession-specific skills can be built on. This requirement obviously points to the contexts present in the modules listed above.

Each module involves a variety of task types, some of which are formal or semi-formal exercises that are based on online tools and focus on specific grammatical or lexical themes. The main focus, however, is in communicative exercises either in text or video format. Some of these may be labelled as “authentic”: they involve working with authentic working life -specific genres such as CVs, video-CVs, applications and presentations, or they may involve authentic employers, e.g. if the student is able to incorporate the assignments into his/her job and actual professional assignments. Some of the tasks are “less authentic” in that they involve seeking for information about different organizations or building meta-awareness of the requirements of different working life -specific texts or communicative situations. Even in this latter case, however, the tasks are meant to emulate activities that are very much recommendable for anyone willing to broaden her possibilities in the job market or in the work place.

The assessment of formal tasks is automatized as far as possible by using tools that enable automatic feedback (e.g. H5P-based linguistic tasks). The main emphasis, however, is on free-form assignments that the student may choose in each separate module. These assignments themselves are gathered in a course portfolio that each student develops throughout the course. The course teacher will assess the portfolio assignments, gives individualized feedback to the student and grades the course based on the finalized course portfolio. During the course, there will also be small group meetings (online) where they work on their portfolio assignments, carry out communicative tasks and give peer feedback on each others’ assignments.

Whereas the portfolio assignments themselves are carried out by specified digital tools (most importantly, to allow systematic tracking and assessment of the students’ progress), the course portfolio itself may be produced by using any tools the student may prefer as long as the end result allows presentation of different media. The relative liberty of portfolio design is meant to encourage students’ own initiative in constructing knowledge and structuring it into meaningful wholes. At the same time, the feedback received about the individual portfolio assignments, as well as the very process of compiling the portfolio, is likely to improve the students’ awareness of her strengths and
weaknesses relative to work-related linguistic competency. This awareness, in turn, is conjoined with active work on the portfolio as the feedback given by the teacher is, hopefully, put in use.

The pilot course took place in Aalto in March–April 2019. From 19 students, who had enrolled to the course, 10 students started to study and complete tasks. Finally, five students returned the amount of portfolio assignments required for passing the course. The dropout rate was in line with reported findings of retention in online courses [5], but there are at least three factors that we consider as possible ways to improve the success rate in the future instalments. First of all, the teacher’s (or teachers’) presence is likely to affect the students’ motivation and commitment to online learning. In this pilot, various practical factors caused the teachers’ communication towards students to be reactive rather than proactive and encouraging, which may have contributed to the 50% dropout after the course-initial, informal activities. Second, the modular structure of the course was somewhat at odds with the used e-learning platform, which may have caused the overall architecture of the course space to be confusing to some students. Thirdly, the intensive material development based on the e-learning platform concretized the time-consuming character of developing genuinely diverse array of activities that are simultaneously engaging and unambiguous enough to allow independent learning of subtle linguistic variation from a professional context to another.

Despite these considerations, the pilot course has produced a significant amount of e-materials suitable for independent learning and a notable addition to the curriculum of the Language Centre of Aalto University. The authors gather the student feedback in May 2019 and pilot course will be followed by another online instalment during the upcoming academic year 2019–2020. The future instalments of the course will provide an important opportunity to put the experiences from the pilot in use.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In this section, we will briefly reflect how the project has contributed to the development of our digital competence as teacher and understanding of digital literacy in language learning.

DIGIJOUJOU project benefitted our pedagogical thinking in multiple ways. So far, the main channel in which digital pedagogy has entered the majority of Finnish courses in Aalto is the different digital tools that are meant to support regular classroom-based teaching. With these courses being well-constructed and working, there is no urgent need to rethink the pedagogy they are based on. The situation is different with advanced students for whom the classroom-based courses are simply unavailable.

As our personal main objective has been to develop a new online course to be offered to our students, we have been forced to focus on helping a student to manage on his/her own. When building up a course that takes place only online without contact teaching, the structure and schedule of the course has to be simple and easy to follow. A student needs to feel (s)he is not alone. Facilitator must guide what to do, how and by when, but the learner needs to take the responsibility of his/her own learning.

When creating any course, the target group should be evident to the teacher. From thematical perspective, the target group of our pilot is significantly more specific than with general language courses; thus, it has been relatively unproblematic to select the content and focus on the themes we have described. At the same time, we have needed to keep in mind what the students of the course should learn but also the demand of flexibility and optional contents and assignment types. It has been illuminating to discover how many distinct aspects there are to flexibility.

One central aspect of flexibility is to account for learners with different learning styles. In our course, we use both visual and audio materials, but in many assignments the learner produces the content by himself/herself. This requires careful planning of what digital tools to use or offer as alternatives for the students to use. On one hand, we want the end result to offer more than just relative ease and independence from classroom setting; the activities should be exciting and fun too. On the other hand, the end result needs to be manageable for the teacher. This practical need sets considerable limits to what one’s imagination may produce. The extending of one’s digital literacy can be frustrating too. There are so many tools and applications to learn and try that quite often it seems to be too time-consuming compared the benefits it might bring to learning. Even if the digital skills can be improved only by trying, failing and succeeding, sometimes it can make a language teacher wonder if (s)he is a teacher or should (s)he be some kind of IT-specialist too. When developing digital pedagogy and digital materials there should always be enough resources for technical help and consulting. The focus of teachers should be the substance, not the technical solutions.
In more general level, we have found the co-operation with other teachers from all around HEA extremely beneficial. It is illuminating to learn how Finnish is taught in different universities and degree programs and how much the practises vary. Although there are a lot of differences, there is also a vast amount of shared goals and needs, the recognition of which allows us to eliminate overlapping work and develop a substantial volume of materials to be utilised in all the HEA. After piloting the online course in Aalto University, we wish to offer it to other universities in Finland. Thus, we will have not only an organized repository of materials but also a very practical example of how this repository may be used to start up new study modules. This, we believe, is one substantial way of developing language teaching across university boundaries, now that geographical distances or location is no longer an issue.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the other members of Työelämän Suomi subproject for fruitful collaboration, as well as DIGIJOUJOU coordinators and steering group for encouraging feedback on our work both in the subproject and on this paper.

REFERENCES


