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FAST-FORWARDING TOWARD THE FUTURE OF EAP TEACHING IN "THE HAPPIEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD"

Lessons learned in turbulent times

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Introduction

Friday, March 13, 2020, was an ominous day. What had been expected for some time had arrived: notification that all teaching at our university in south-west Finland was to be carried out remotely from the following Monday, March 15. The Covid-19 pandemic that had seemed so far away on the news had reached the "happiest country in the world" (Helliwell et al., 2020). Little did we know at the time that "remote teaching" would become the norm, not only for the remainder of the 2020 spring semester but also for the entire 2020–2021 academic year and is likely to impact teaching and learning for years to come.

While this was disruptive and required us to adapt to a fully virtual learning environment, the transition was eased due to the foundations of remote learning, which already existed as a part of some courses, and an overall course structure which allowed for flexibility. By maintaining a focus on Backward Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, please see Section 2.3) and considering the learning outcomes of courses, changes could be made to course modes and the nature of interactions without compromising course learning outcomes. Reflection over the summer of 2020 and beyond allowed for refinement of the emergency measures taken at short notice, to develop courses which consider the student experience holistically and are robust enough to deal with changing circumstances in these turbulent times. This is important because despite Finland being given the title of "The Happiest Country in the World" for the fourth time in 2021, by the United Nations Happiness Report (Helliwell et al., 2020), it also has amongst the highest suicide rates in Europe for young people aged 15 to 24 years (Official Statistics of Finland, n.d).

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Language learning in Finland and the University of Turku

Background: education in Finland

The general level of English language competence is relatively high among tertiary-level students, with most operating at CEFR B2 level and above, with the majority of Finnish pupils learning English from the age of 9 (YLE, 2020). With a population of 5.5 million, Finland has 13 universities and 22 universities of applied science. According to the Universities Act, undergraduate students must complete language studies in Finnish and Swedish, the two official languages, and one other foreign language, most typically English (Tuomi & Rontu, 2011). Finland has a well-respected education system, consistently placing high in the[1] PISA rankings (ThisisFINLAND staff, 2019), which looks to equip students with 21st-century skills (Lavonen, 2020) and embraces technology enhanced learning. Educators have a high level of academic freedom, with autonomy regarding course design and content.

University students study both Academic Finnish and Academic English, which support them in developing awareness of the conventions of academic discourse in the different languages. This is especially important because Academic Finnish tends to be a more reader-responsible language, while English is more writer-responsible, requiring more than direct translation to produce appropriate scholarly work in each of the languages, for example English texts require more metalanguage than Finnish ones (Mauranen, 1993). As such, the teaching of academic discourse, in both Finnish and English, is valued in higher education in Finland and is available for all students. This differs considerably from the more "peripheral role" Academic English courses are sometimes seen to have in inner-circle countries (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p. 107).

Teaching context

The University of Turku (UTU) celebrated its centenary in 2020, albeit in a much more muted style than expected. The CeLCS, an independent unit in UTU, is responsible for language, communication, and intercultural skills courses. The mandatory language courses taught by the centre are Finnish and Swedish, and students must also choose a third mandatory language course, with English being by far the most popular choice. There are a range of other languages also taught as electives, with most language classes having a maximum of 24 students.

Students across faculties are required to take compulsory, credit-bearing English language courses, although the number of credits varies from faculty to

[1] "PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges". – www.oecd.org/pisa/

faculty. For example, in the Faculty of Social Sciences, students are required to take two three-credit courses (English: Academic & Professional Skills I (EAPS I) and English: Academic & Professional Skills II (EAPS II)). In contrast, some of the departments in the Faculty of Technology require students to take one or two two-credit courses (English for STEM A and/or English for STEM B), while others require one three-credit course (English for STEM C). The mandatory courses are discipline specific and targeted towards particular cohorts of students, for example first- or second-year undergraduates. While the global pandemic changed the modality of courses, as will be discussed later, there were no substantial curricular level changes.

Approach to course design

Both authors have a history of course design and curriculum development with an approach which encourages flexibility, adaptation, and localisation. As early as 2013, Levrai (2013, p. 6) was advocating for materials which stepped away from "pre-determined linearity" to materials, while Bolster (2015) explored the feasibility of "gapped" textbooks, which would provide space for teachers to bring in materials or activities tailored to their students' needs. Describing the development of a previous EAP course, Bolster and Levrai (2017, p. 147) emphasised that:

> A course is not a fixed artefact, but rather an ongoing process, involving the identification of strengths, weaknesses and emergent outcomes that can be incorporated into later iterations of the course. This adaptive approach has . . . flexibility and longevity.

The favoured approach to course development was Backward Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), which begins by setting the course objectives, moves through determining how success will be measured and assessed, before moving onto the last stage, that of material development. The benefit of this approach is that it allows for potentially greater flexibility than Forward or Central Design approaches (Richards, 2013). Forward Design begins with materials and moves through to objectives, which means, from the outset, the course is to some extent set by the materials initially selected. Central Design begins by looking at processes, which might favour a particular approach, for example Task-Based Learning, which again serves as a fixed point around which the rest of the course develops (Richards, 2013). With Backward Design, it is the learning outcomes that are fixed and the means by which they can be reached are myriad, allowing for personalisation and tailoring of materials to particular classes or cohorts. Since EAP is goal driven, tending to have clearly defined and focused aims (Alexander et al., 2008), the outcomes-driven Backward Design approach is a good match.

English: academic and professional skills course structure

The EAPS I course is 28 hours, typically delivered in one two-hour lesson per week over 14 weeks. The course is assessed through a portfolio of work, including an initial letter of self-assessment, a glossary, a summary of an academic article, lecture notes, and a critical response and a final learner reflection. This course serves as a prerequisite for the more challenging EAPS II course, which includes essay writing and academic presentations, as well as job application documents. Students are given freedom to source their own articles and lectures for the assignments, after practising the required skills with teacher selected input texts and being given guidance on effective search strategies and suitable repositories.

Prior to 2020, there was some useful grounding already in place for when courses moved fully online. Two main platforms were in use to support the EAPS courses, Moodle and Office365, both operating within the UTU network. Moodle provided an active learning space, operating as an extension of the classroom for asynchronous discussion or to provide input to be reviewed before class or later consolidation. It was also the main repository for course materials, as no textbook was used, but the intention was very much that it was an active learning space rather than a digital filing cabinet. Students also had Office365 accounts linked to their UTU credentials, so Word online and PowerPoint online could also be used as collaborative workspaces when students were working together (e.g. developing a presentation). One or two lessons per course were set up as asynchronous, self-access lessons to allow the students to experience learning, which was not classroom centred or teacher led.

Implementing change

The pandemic pivot

By the middle of March 2020, the remaining five weeks of the English language courses had to be navigated remotely since access to offices and classrooms was prohibited. When the announcement was made on March 13, 2020, that all teaching was to be online, the reaction by our unit, CeLCS, was immediate.

Since much of CeLCS's communication was already conducted via our internal Microsoft Teams platform, this proved an effective space to continue communicating when online lessons suddenly began. There were established Teams channels for all staff, different language teams, and special topics (e.g. research and the "coffee room" channel), but new channels were created to facilitate "Remote Work" and "Well-being". The creation of these new channels provided a means for teachers to provide and gain support.

For the rest of the semester, daily support meetings for all members of the unit were held on Teams to address issues with technology and to share tips about successes, in addition to the features and pitfalls of various platforms.

This immediate implementation of support by the CeLCS Director recognised that some teachers were more comfortable utilising e-tools and technology and established a meeting point so colleagues could benefit from one another's ideas and experiences.

Within the English team, particular attention was given to checking in on each other, providing moral support and highlighting what activities proved effective (or not) online. With the sudden move to remote teaching, holding lessons synchronously or asynchronously was a major talking point. The high levels of trust in Finnish teachers (Schleicher, 2019) meant how to hold lessons was left to the teachers' discretion. Due to an often unfavourable teaching environment at home, an asynchronous approach was preferred by some teachers, but in other cases, a synchronous approach was adopted.

Support for teachers at this time of flux comes not only from staff at CeLCS but also from university management. Although public healthcare in Finland is accessible and comprehensive, some employers provide occupational healthcare. Through the UTU occupational healthcare plan, several services were made available to university teachers to better cope with the physical demands of "The Pandemic Pivot":

- remote ergonomic consultations could provide advice on home workspaces
- funds could be provided for special reading glasses to deal with the increased screen time from online teaching
- up to three appointments could be made with an occupational psychologist for those experiencing anxiety or loneliness due to working in a more isolated context.

Getting on the same page

Colleagues in CeLCS discussed at length the use of a common language around online learning. Terms like "blended" and "hybrid" can be used to talk about quite different course types but can also be conflated and confused so there was a proposal to agree on a nomenclature for the different course options which the virtual environment makes possible. The key variables are modality (*where* the student has to be) and time (*when* the student has to be there). The different course types are outlined in Table 1.1, and Figure 1.1 visualises where course types lie on a matrix of those two variables.

There is no judgement as to which type of course is superior, but it is important to acknowledge how fractured the different course delivery types have become and seek a shared clarity. One challenge is that significantly different courses, for example mixed delivery and hybrid, could occupy the same space on the matrix, despite being significantly different. However, without an attempt to generate a shared language and taxonomy, there can be no meaningful discussion of best practice.

TABLE 1.1 A taxonomy of course types

Course Type	*Delivery Method*	*Delivery Schedule*	*Defining Characteristics*
Contact	Physical	Synchronous	Majority contact lessons, majority synchronous
Hybrid	Simultaneously physical and virtual	Synchronous	Majority synchronous
Mixed delivery	Physical/virtual	Synchronous	Balance between physical and virtual lessons, majority synchronous
Contact blended	Physical/virtual	Synchronous and asynchronous	Balance between synchronous and asynchronous lessons, balance between physical and virtual lessons
Online	Virtual	Synchronous	No contact lessons, majority synchronous
Online blended	Virtual	Synchronous and asynchronous	Balance between synchronous and asynchronous lessons
Fully independent	Virtual	Asynchronous	No synchronous lessons
Guided independent	Virtual (and possibly physical)	Asynchronous (and possibly physical)	Most materials self-access asynchronously, with limited teacher input (e.g. feedback)

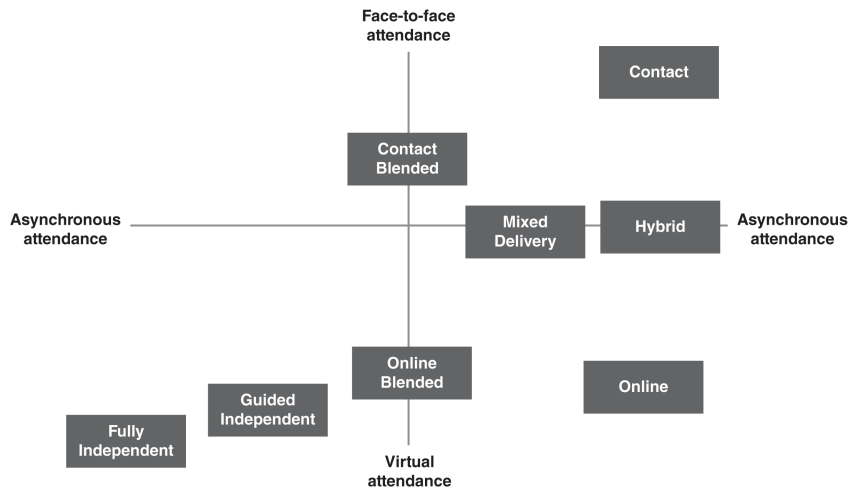

FIGURE 1.1 Course types in time and space

Challenges and solutions in the use of technology

The initial response to the sudden change involved a steep learning curve for all teachers. In some ways, it was a great fast forward, forcing technological innovation to become a core activity, where teachers necessarily taught online. The teaching delivery mode may have fundamentally changed, but the nature of teaching remained unchanged. Student-centred learning is still student-centred learning, albeit with the student having become pixels on the screen. Communication and collaboration are still central, whichever mode and channel they take place. The classroom environment can be mimicked or, better yet, surpassed. For this to happen though we need to expand our view beyond the classroom to the student, taking holistic considerations into account and addressing the digital, mental, and physical aspects of online learning.

One of the challenges in the move to fully digital learning was the competing tools, which offered new ways of doing things or ways of doing new things. There is a plethora of online collaborative spaces (e.g. Google Docs, Word Online, Dropbox Paper, Padlet) survey tools (e.g. Survey Monkey, Webropol, Microsoft Forms), and personal response systems (e.g. Answergarden, Mentimeter, Quizlet, Kahoot). While these all have their uses and can be part of a successful course, there can be an over-elaboration in the use of tools, for example having a lesson where students are following links or QR codes to an endless parade of different tools or requiring them to create accounts across various workplaces. Any use of a tool is a potential point of technical breakdown with teachers and students being unable to access the tool, students (and teachers) needing to learn to use new software effectively. Limiting the variety of e-tools in use helped to mitigate this.

The decision was made to try to keep things as straightforward as possible. The concept of "digital natives" has been challenged in the literature (Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017), and while students may be competent social media users, they can still struggle to effectively employ technologies for their learning. The focus was only on those tools that could operate through students' existing UTU credentials or through anonymous guest accounts. This kept student work in the UTU environment and added a layer of security against privacy concerns. Students had access to Zoom through their UTU credentials and it was the preferred location for synchronous teaching to take place. The university purchased a secure Zoom Client package, and this allowed for lessons to remain secure and avoid "Zoombombing" (Lorenz, 2020) and maintain a safe environment for the students. This provided a sense of having "our own" online class environment.

The best way for the tools to work together was also considered. Zoom was set up as a recurring meeting, so each class had its own unique link, valid for the whole course. A folder was shared with each class in OneDrive, where any collaborative documents would be stored. The links to the Zoom meeting and a shared OneDrive folder were in the course information section in Moodle, so access was always clear to students, ease of access being a primary concern.

The learning curve for Zoom for students is relatively easy, and, once students are made aware of reactions, simple personal response systems can be emulated within the Zoom environment, for example. thumbs up for "Yes", crying face for "No", shocked face for "Maybe". However, one of the drawbacks found with Zoom was the monitoring of breakout rooms. A teacher could move from room to room, but discussion was missed. A solution was using Zoom in conjunction with Word Online. A shared Word document (part of the internal OneDrive system) had the task instructions, and members of each breakout room could note their responses in the document, using a different font colour for each group. This enabled the teacher to see what was happening in each room and also served as motivation and inspiration to other groups who could see what the other groups were discussing. Alternatively, each breakout room sometimes had its own Word document it could work on and then share with the whole group after the closure of breakout rooms.

Through this combination of technologies, tasks common to the EAP classroom (e.g. a listening, note-making, and summarising activity or a K-W-L (Know-Want to know-Learned) reading activity) could be followed without major change. Perhaps the greatest challenge came during speaking activities. At first, some students were reluctant to turn on their cameras, negatively impacting oral communication tasks. However, students could be persuaded to use cameras, if the rationale for doing so was given (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021), which greatly facilitated academic speaking tasks like group discussions and presentations. However, nothing can quite replicate the spontaneity of discussions in the physical classroom.

Considering the whole student: mental and physical

The paradox of being a "happy" country with a high rate of youth suicide is recognised in the attention paid to the anxiety and well-being of university undergraduates (McGhie, 2017), and the University and CeLCS had a number of initiatives to continue to address this when going through the massive changes necessitated by the pandemic, as shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4.

From 2014, the University had a "Pylly ylös!" policy, which translates as the "Bottoms Up!" initiative (University of Turku, 2016), encouraging physical movement during lessons and lectures to stimulate mind and body (please see Figure 1.2). This continued into online lessons, with breaks from screen time and stretching. Soothing pictures of natural landscapes were also shared during breaks, and students were encouraged to get up and look out of their windows.

Whenever new students were introduced to CeLCS courses, teachers shared the "Et ole Yksin" or "You are not alone" information (please see Figure 1.3). This was a way of directing students to services which could be of help, be that courses designed to support students who find presenting too stressful or consulting with the Head of Academic and Student Affairs in the Centre or

FIGURE 1.2 A poster for classroom movement from the "Pylly ylös!" Facebook page (Pylly ylös!, 2015)

FIGURE 1.3 Cover slide for the "Et ole yksin" initiative (Nelson, 2019, slide 29)

the University learning psychologists, accessibility officer or student healthcare psychologists.

CeLCS also had a reading dog ("lukukoira") initiative prior to the pandemic (please see Figure 1.4), where students who experienced anxiety could practice reading aloud, speaking, or presenting with a trained service dog, providing a safe and encouraging environment. While this could not continue during the pandemic, pets were welcome during lessons and the unexpected appearance of a cat or large dog helped forge relationships.

A very useful workshop titled "Working from home – viewpoints and tools for motivation and well-being" was run by an occupational health psychologist early in the 2020–21 academic year for all university staff in Finland (Grandell, 2020). It included strategies that were also transferable and relevant to students, including the importance of the rituals we follow to go to work and to leave work behind. This could involve something as simple as going for a short walk to "leave home" and "go to work" or having a dedicated workspace (corner of a table at home) that you leave at the end of work (move to another corner of the table). Another useful tip relevant to students was having a dedicated digital workspace, meaning a browser specifically for university-related work that could be opened when needed and closed when studying was done, for example Google Chrome for study and Firefox for surfing the web. To support them in remote learning, discussion increased with students about *how* they work, and more attention was

FIGURE 1.4 This very good girl is Kaisla, the reading dog (lukukoira) (Nelson, 2019, slide 31)

paid to time management strategies, which students reported as difficult. While some of these issues may not seem immediately relevant to an EAP classroom, it is vital to ensure that the students can derive more benefit from classes through effective learning practices.

It was also important, in an attempt to mitigate the social isolation students could feel, to make use of collaborative assignments. While the authors would typically advocate for collaboration in relation to Sociocultural Theory and the added learning gains and affordances from collaborative tasks (Levrai & Bolster, 2019), there is also an important social aspect to collaboration. For some students, working with peers in their groups could be the only social interaction they had during study periods. Collaboration provides more opportunity for communication and the social care this provided was invaluable. In feedback at the end of courses, this opportunity to work with and talk to other students was highlighted as a strongly positive feature of the course.

Future strategies and applications

A positive take-away from the pandemic is that a number of useful lessons were learnt, and we discovered that fruitful learning can take place in fully online environments. The conjunction of a collaborative document (or documents) with Zoom breakout room discussions was a very effective combination, resulting in a record of discussions that would otherwise be lost in the face-to-face environment, as well as providing motivation and prompts for groups. Presentation rehearsal was also facilitated more effectively and productively through Zoom. Rather than students having to scatter around a building in presentation groups or doing simultaneous reads, two presentation groups could be put into a Zoom room for rehearsal and peer feedback. When this was recorded asynchronously, it was noticeable how students spent more time discussing and acting on feedback than was available in class.

As we emerge from the pandemic and into a future of different challenges, technologies are already developing to provide new opportunities. For example, online gathering tools like Wonder and Gather offer an alternative experience to a static Zoom-like meeting space. Students can control an avatar that moves around to mingle with other students. When their avatars are close to each other, video communication can start. Input texts and videos can be put in the environments, and it can become a more classroom-like experience of students gathering in groups to work on something and a teacher physically moving around and monitoring. As exciting as that may sound, the prime considerations for any new tools will revolve around the following key questions.

Key questions for adopting new technologies

- What affordances does this provide that we do not have already?
- How steep is the learning curve for teachers and students?

- How does this integrate with the tools we already use?
- How much would we have to change the way we do things?
- How does this make the learning experience better for students?
- Do we need it?

Knowing the answer to those questions means that we can ensure technology is being utilised for the benefit of learning rather than just being novel.

Due to the pandemic, we have moved further down the path education was already going, but the journey is not over. The next major foreseeable challenge is how to best facilitate a hybrid classroom, with some students attending virtually while others simultaneously attend in person. There is a clear appetite in the student body for remote learning and the flexibility it gives the students in terms of where they need to be to attend classes. Hybrid learning will require careful thought about interaction patterns and how to be fully inclusive of students, whichever mode the course is utilising. This shows that whatever challenges arrive next, a robust course can respond and adapt, rising to meet the challenge. For us, the key takeaways from the experience of the last year are as follows:

- Any challenge, however unexpected, can be met through dialogue with and support from colleagues
- Using a Backward Design approach to courses provides flexibility so that content and modality can be adapted as needed, while keeping the central integrity of the course stable
- When dealing with a challenge, it is vital to keep the students' and teachers' well-being front and centre, rather than getting lost in the detail of working on a solution
- Less is more in terms of keeping things simple and directly useful
- Education has changed, but does not make former ways of doing things obsolete. We need to marry the best elements of different approaches and ways of doing things together
- Language education is built on the opportunity for communication, whatever the modality
- Collaborative learning can help scaffold students through new ways of doing things.

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the world, but the world constantly changes. There will always be new challenges and new opportunities. This requires agility and flexibility on behalf of teachers to address the current needs of students according to the situation, while maintaining a standard of education. We have learned that change can be positive, bringing with it new options, affordances, and opportunities.

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