

## **Strengths and developmental needs in language education in universities of applied sciences**

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The objective of language studies in Finnish universities of applied sciences is to provide students with language skills which meet the needs of working life as well as their professional development. The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences has established a Language Team to help control the quality and uniformity of foreign language education in universities of applied sciences. As members of the Language Team, the writers of this article describe one sector in the Team's work towards stable and high quality language studies: a survey about the strengths and developmental needs of language education at universities of applied sciences as seen by language teachers. In the survey, both strengths and developmental needs were found in the following areas: professional orientation of language education, appreciation of language education, co-operation and networking, external setting for language education and professional know-how. The results of the survey are used to focus on and support the developmental work initiated by the Language Team.

**Keywords:** universities of applied sciences, language education, languages for specific purposes, vocationally/professionally oriented language learning

## 1 Finnish universities of applied sciences

Universities of applied sciences in Finland (in Finnish *ammattikorkeakoulu*, abbreviated AMK; the term *polytechnic* is also used) are multi-sector institutes of higher education formed in the 1990s by merging the specialized institutions that offered vocational education. As a result of the reform process, the Finnish higher education system now consists of two parallel sectors: universities and universities of applied sciences. Universities of applied sciences are mainly multidisciplinary and regional institutions which focus on working life and interact with regional development. They provide education predominantly for students seeking professionally oriented Bachelor's degrees and, on a smaller scale, Master's degrees. In the beginning of 2008, a network of 28 universities of applied sciences operating under the Ministry of Education provided practically oriented higher education in the following eight fields: natural resources and environment, technology, communication and transport, social sciences, business and administration, tourism, catering and domestic services, social services, health and sports, culture, humanities and education, and natural sciences. (See ARENE ry.)

The basic entry requirement for studies at universities of applied sciences is a certificate from an upper-secondary school or the matriculation certificate, a vocational qualification or corresponding foreign studies. Each university of applied sciences can determine its own entry requirements; the selection is usually based on the student's

academic achievement, work experience and eventually an entrance test (see Ministry of Education). Autonomy is in general typical for all studies at universities of applied sciences. Each institution can independently decide how to implement and develop its education, including language education. Because of this, many practices concerning language studies, for example the required number of ECTS credits in languages and even the number of foreign languages required and/or offered, vary at different universities of applied sciences and even in different degree programmes within the same university (e.g. Sajavaara 1999; Löfström 2001; Kantelinen & Heiskanen 2004).

## 2 Language studies for professional purposes

Concerning language studies at Finnish universities of applied sciences, three starting points can be named: (1) the Government Decree on Polytechnics 352/2003, (2) needs of globalized working life and (3) the framework of LSP/VOLL (Languages for Specific Purposes / Vocationally Oriented Language Learning).

### 2.1 Decree on Polytechnics

From the beginning of the short history of the Finnish universities of applied sciences, professional-level language proficiency has been required for the degree, as described in the Government Decree on Polytechnics (*Valtioneuvoston asetus ammattikorkeakouluista* 352/2003, §8):

## §8 Language proficiency

The student must show either in his/her polytechnic studies or by other means to have acquired 1) proficiency of Finnish and Swedish that is required of state officials functioning in a position requiring higher education in a bilingual office according to the Act (424/2003) and that is necessary for practising the profession and for further professional development, and 2) written and oral proficiency of one or two foreign language(s) necessary for practising the profession and for further professional development.

The above mentioned decree (352/2003) determines the official national aim of proficiency for language education at Finnish universities of applied sciences: students must obtain sufficient written and oral communication skills in the second domestic language (Swedish or Finnish) and in one or two foreign languages. The requirements for language proficiency are in accordance with the language policy of the European Union: each European should have competence in at least two European languages in addition to his or her mother tongue (European Commission 1996; European Indicator of Language Competence 2005).

## 2.2 Requirements of globalized working life

Increasing globalisation underlines the role of language skills. Owing to this, vocationally/professionally oriented language teaching and learning have been rapidly growing sectors in language education during the last few decades. Many fields require interactive communication skills, and the need for international experience and the significance of language skills are emphasized even in

fields that previously had no need for them. Employees are required to communicate in at least one or two foreign languages already now, but especially in the future. According to Services 2020, the same languages will be important for Finns in 2020 as those needed today: aside from Finnish, knowledge of Swedish, English and Russian will all be significant assets. Knowledge of Chinese will become increasingly important, for instance in IT-services. (CFI 2007.)

In addition to language proficiency, multicultural skills are simultaneously highlighted in effective interaction. Effective interaction refers to the ability to work in a multicultural environment and to interact with colleagues representing different cultural and ethnic roots (CFI 2007). Therefore, companies and other work communities have to gain greater insight into various cultural factors. Sensitivity to differences between cultures and an understanding of one's own and others' values are necessary in multilingual working environments. The demand for professional language competence as part of the degrees at universities of applied sciences is therefore in real demand and not only a requirement of the decree (see e.g. Huhta 1999; Penttinen 2002; Sjöberg 2002; Airola & Piironen 2005).

### 2.3 Framework of LSP and VOLL

Language studies at universities of applied sciences represent a typical example of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) and/or Vocationally Oriented Language Learning (VOLL). Language education refers to the

teaching of foreign languages for some clearly utilitarian and pragmatic purpose. The purpose may be an occupational requirement, vocational training or professional studies. (See e.g. Egloff & Fitzpatrick 1997; Dudley-Evans & St John 2004.) In a nutshell, the content, themes and terminology of language studies are connected to the students' professional field. The students' language skills and professional know-how are to be developed as a multidimensional whole and thus, languages cannot be separated from professional contents (see e.g. Robinson 2000; Jaatinen 2007).

Research on LSP and VOLL has changed the role of languages at work: the aim of LSP and VOLL is not only to teach specialised job-related vocabulary. Instead, in creating new learning environments the learner's needs are seen within a wider occupational and educational intercultural context (Egloff & Fitzpatrick 1997: 5). In professionally oriented foreign language teaching the foundation of language education is to understand language knowledge as a professional skill and to scaffold personal and professional growth (see ARENE ry. 2007; Jaatinen 2007).

## 2.4 Development work in language education at the national level

A national working group, Development Team for Polytechnic Language Teaching ('Language Team' in short), was appointed by ARENE, the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences in 2003. The tasks set for the Language Team were, on the one hand,

to examine developmental needs of language education and, on the other hand, to focus on the developmental work at universities of applied sciences by supporting strategy work and by building up uniform practices and policies for language education. (ARENEN kielityöryhmä). There had been active developmental work in the field of language education already before the work of the Language Team started. Language teachers at universities of applied sciences had been active in local and national language projects (e.g. Huhta 1999; Airola 2001; Löfström 2001; Juurakko & Airola 2002; Löfström, Kantelinen, Johnson, Huhta, Luoma, Nikko, Korhonen, Penttilä, Jakobsson & Miikkulainen 2002) as well as in carrying out individual doctoral studies (e.g. Airola 2000; Korhonen 2002; Aho 2003; Jaatinen 2003). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education had funded several projects related to the development of language education (e.g. Jaatinen, Lehtovaara & Kohonen 2001; Juurakko 2001; Juurakko-Paavola 2005; Elsinen & Juurakko-Paavola 2006). It became evident in these projects and studies that a lot of undesirable diversity existed in language education at universities of applied sciences. The Language Team felt that a certain amount of uniformity and equality of practices are needed to ensure high quality in language studies as well as to facilitate the comparability, recognition and accreditation of degrees, as recommended in the objectives of the Bologna process.

The Language Team started its work in autumn 2003 by organizing a national survey for all universities of applied sciences to examine and identify the developmental needs of language education. Based on the results of the

survey, the Rectors' Conference (ARENE) approved the recommendations for language education practices to be applied from August 2005 (Suositukset kieltenopetuksen käytännöiksi ammattikorkeakouluissa). The practical steps that ARENE recommended to be generally applied involved e.g. drawing up a strategy for language education, organising a wide range of languages as compulsory and/or optional and arranging preparatory courses in English and Swedish for students with a low entry level.

### 3 Survey about strengths and developmental needs of language education

The aim of the follow-up study conducted in 2006 concerning the previously mentioned recommendations by ARENE was to find out whether greater unity had been achieved in language studies among the universities of applied sciences (Kantelinen & Airola 2008). As part of the study, the strengths and developmental needs of language teaching practices were under consideration. The present article describes the results of that study.

#### 3.1 Method

Strengths and developmental needs in language teaching practices were studied in this survey in order to focus developmental work on areas where there is actual current need. The University of Joensuu and North Karelia University of Applied Sciences conducted the survey in 2006. The data collection was carried out by sending an online questionnaire in Finnish and in English to all language teachers (N=616) at all of the universities of ap-

plied sciences. About one third, 36.4%, of the language teachers (N=224) returned the questionnaire. The questionnaire was returned by 200 female teachers (89.3%) and by 21 male teachers (9.4%), while three respondents (1.3%) did not note their gender. A Finnish questionnaire was answered by 212 teachers and an English questionnaire by 12 teachers. (Kantelinen & Airola 2008.)

Teachers were asked to describe the topical strengths and developmental needs of language teaching practices at their own institution in spring 2006. The questions were formulated as follows: “In your opinion, which language teaching practices work well at your Polytechnic at the moment? Describe the situation in your own words.” and “In your opinion, which language teaching practices should be next developed at your Polytechnic? Which are the most important and demanding needs for development?” (see the questionnaire used in Kantelinen & Airola 2008: 213–214).

The data, i.e. individual teachers’ descriptions about strengths and developmental needs in language teaching practices, were analyzed by methods of content analysis as two separate data of strengths and developmental needs. Teachers’ descriptions about the strengths and developmental needs were categorised under the main themes found in the data (Neuendorf 2002). Finding out the main themes and coding individual teachers’ answers according to these themes were carried out by the writers of the article and a research assistant to assure the accuracy of the interpretations and coding. The agreement percentages between the two researchers and the research

assistant were high both concerning the strengths (86%) and the developmental needs (91%). (See Kantelinen & Airola 2008: 96–99.) It became evident that both the strengths and developmental needs were connected to the same main themes: (1) professional orientation of language education, (2) appreciation of language education, (3) collaboration and networking, (4) external setting for language education and (5) language teachers' professional know-how.

Some language teachers described only either strengths or developmental needs in language education at their own institution, whereas others described both strengths and developmental needs. Concerning the strengths of language education, the questionnaire was answered by 132 language teachers, whereas 150 language teachers filled in the questionnaire regarding developmental needs. In the context of presenting the results in this article, the quotations by teachers have been taken from the original data and the Finnish answers have been translated into English by the writers of the article. The names of institutions have been omitted from the translations.

### 3.2 Results

The following strengths and developmental needs in language education are addressed in this section: professional orientation of language education, appreciation of language education, collaboration and networking, external setting for language education and language teachers' professional know-how.

### 3.2.1 Professional orientation of language education

As stated above, the aim of universities of applied sciences is to offer degrees specifically designed to be responsive to the demands and developmental needs of working life. Professionally oriented language studies offer interesting pedagogical challenges to language teachers as well as to teachers of profession-related subjects. For example, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) involves planning the contents of a professional language curriculum together with professional teachers to integrate language development with content learning. Thus, the advantage of CLIL is that it allows language teachers to become more involved with content and content teachers to become more involved with language. (Sjöholm 1999.) Besides integrating language studies with professional content, various pedagogical approaches can be used in language teaching, e.g. web-based courses and language portfolios. Hence, in intercultural foreign language learning the emphasis is on communication that transcends the borders of countries; the learning environment should support interaction with people from different countries and cultures. Authentic and current material as well as hypermedia-based learning environments could provide various approaches to foreign language studies with respect to pedagogical solutions. (Forsblom 2002.)

The teachers mainly experienced and described professionally oriented language education as a strength in their own institution. The following quotations show that integrating professional content more closely with language

instruction is a motivating pedagogical solution for students.

Language teaching is professionally oriented and field-specific.

Possibilities to integrate language studies with professional subjects are very good.

On the other hand, some teachers had experienced the professional orientation of language studies as a current developmental need in the language education in their own institution: teachers underlined that professionally oriented language studies should be guaranteed for all students, regardless of the field or study programme.

All students should have the same possibilities to study professionally oriented languages. Now students study only general language in some fields, in some fields there are several professionally oriented courses.

I think integrating language teaching with students' professional subjects would be highly desirable; it would increase motivation and interest.

The results suggest that professionally oriented language teaching based on the framework of LSP and VOLL is not emphasised enough in some universities of applied sciences and/or in some degree programmes. This is especially problematic in universities of applied sciences where students of different degree programmes study in the same language groups, making field-specific language studies impossible to implement (see OAMK 2007).

### 3.2.2 Appreciation of language education

Considering language teaching and learning in institutions of higher education, it is obvious that a lot changed during the 1990s. Teachers have had to plan new teaching material, find new teaching methods and above all, collaborate more frequently and intensively with students and colleagues. Collaboration between teachers and students is essential in planning the teaching and learning process. This kind of dialogue is a continuous negotiation and listening process and, moreover, is very human-centred. Both parties are present “as knowing, feeling and acting persons” (Kaikkonen 1998: 14). Close communication with colleagues and students increases the appreciation of language education, the positive attitude and equality with teachers of profession-related subjects at the institutional level.

The results show that the attitudes and appreciation of students and the work community towards language studies were regarded as strengths as well as developmental needs.

Good possibilities to influence, a positive atmosphere in degree programmes towards languages.

Languages are equal with other subjects in business studies.

Arranging language studies depends on the faculty, in all faculties language teaching is not appreciated.

Language teaching should be appreciated and its role should be accepted.

Respondents considered positive attitudes, appreciation and equality with teachers of professionally-related subjects important factors as far as developmental work in language studies, practical arrangements and resources are concerned. Furthermore, students' positive attitudes and appreciation were thought to increase their motivation and interest towards language studies. In an open and confidential atmosphere, it is easy to discuss new ideas and carry out planning and developmental work (Juurakko & Airola 2002).

### 3.2.3 Co-operation and networking

New professionalism in teaching involves a new collegial culture of institutions where teachers collaborate with each other, their students and the institution's stakeholders. In doing so, they develop a commitment for their own and others' learning, and they become researchers of their own work. The teacher should be able to cooperate with and feel close and related to other individuals, and solve conflicts in constructive ways, working towards a collegial community and autonomous language learning (Kohonen 1997).

Close co-operation with other language teachers in one's own degree programme and/or institution was emphasised in the survey as the most crucial form of co-operation. Co-operation makes it possible to create common practices for language teaching by sharing and processing further information and know-how. Colleagues' support in positive as well as in negative situations was appreciated.

Collaboration with different language teachers works in an excellent way; we exchange materials, tests and ideas. We plan together, although we teach in different campuses.

An active language teachers' team. As a result, we have common pedagogical approaches and practices as well as continuous internal training.

As to developmental needs, the language teachers wished to have more co-operation with teachers of professional subjects in order to develop integrated teaching and to create innovative and varying pedagogical approaches. Moreover, more contacts with representatives of the working life would be an asset in planning professionally oriented language courses. Collaboration with universities and institutes of vocational education was also experienced as a developmental need by the language teachers.

More co-operation with teachers of professional subjects, i.e. integration of courses, new teaching methods to be implemented.

More co-operation with vocational education and university.

### 3.2.4 External setting for language education

The data concerning the external setting for language education could be divided into three themes: (1) the organisational and employment composition, (2) common principles in language teaching and (3) resources for language teaching.

Concerning the organisational and employment composition, the language teachers regarded efficient organisation of language studies as a strength and also a developmental need. In other words, some group, working team or person should have total responsibility for organising language education. Permanent jobs instead of temporary employment were considered a developmental need as well.

The operations of the language centre have started well and we have more and more common practices.

Vacancies: from part-time teaching to full-time jobs.

Common principles in language studies, particularly the recommendations for language education by ARENE (Kieltenopetuksen käytäntösuositukset 2005), and committing to them was regarded as a strength and a developmental need. Some of the language teachers stated that the recommendations for language education of ARENE had clearly developed common practices in language studies, whereas according to some teachers, the recommendations of ARENE had not yet been recognised or implemented in language education.

The recommendations for language education have been translated into action and thus, we have more consistency in language teaching.

Co-operation between degree programmes and uniform practices are the most important goals for us.

Practices in language education are miscellaneous and incoherent.

In my opinion our development need is to unify the practices between different degree programmes in our university of applied sciences.

According to all language teachers, students should be in an equal position concerning arrangements in language studies. Common practices should be created to be implemented in language studies in all degree programmes, e.g. in testing students' entry level, preparatory studies in English and Swedish, the number of languages and exemptions from language studies.

As to resources in language education, teachers emphasised the importance of practical arrangements related to everyday work: the sizes of student groups, the amount of optional languages, the number of contact lessons and the materials and premises for language studies. More resources should be allocated for preparatory courses in English and Swedish for students with a low entry level. This is in light of the fact that the responsibility of universities of applied sciences is to ensure that each student accepted as a degree-student – irrespective of his or her educational background – is provided with an opportunity to obtain language skills described in the decree 352/2003.

There are optional courses available. Most of the courses have been placed just right. We have new and modern teaching premises.

There should be more contact lessons.

Smaller study groups, now there are 40 students.

### 3.2.4 Language teachers' professional know-how

Besides maintaining their language proficiency, language teachers have to know the professional requirements and the related language proficiency, which presupposes continuous education. Professionally oriented language education is to be field-specific, i.e. language teachers need to have field-specific expertise and information about the needs of workplace communication. Professional know-how can be developed by further training or by self-studies. The precondition is, however, the teacher's own initiative and a reflective attitude toward one's own learning. The teacher has to become conscious of his or her own developmental needs and furthermore, he/she has to have the willingness and ability to develop. (Juurakko & Airola 2002.)

Teachers considered keeping up with educational trends and the training level of teachers as strengths. Respondents also emphasised good possibilities for further training.

Language teachers are experts and they keep up with new trends.

Teachers have been offered possibilities for postgraduate studies.

According to some teachers, there should be more opportunities for language teachers to develop their professional know-how. Supplementary training should be supported and financed by the employer. Teachers complained of insufficient funding for continuous training.

Less teaching/teachers and more resources for research and keeping up and developing one's know-how.

## 4 Discussion

The results concerning the strengths and developmental needs in language education in Finnish universities of applied sciences indicate that there are institutions with the aim to systematically implement and develop language studies according to the framework of LSP and VOLL. Despite the short history of universities of applied sciences, various good practices shared by several institutions and applied by most teachers have been developed in language studies, thus increasing the stability and quality of language studies, which is regarded as a central objective in an intercultural approach. This, in turn, facilitates the comparability, recognition and accreditation of degrees according to the objectives of the Bologna Process. However, in some universities of applied sciences the practices in language teaching appeared to be incoherent and unequal. They, therefore, do not fulfil the principles of language studies of higher education in some respects. By identifying strengths and developmental needs it is possible to improve developmental work in language education within each university of applied sciences as well as in the national context.

All of the main themes related to the strengths and developmental needs of language education in universities of applied sciences seem to be interconnected, interdependent and supportive of each other in numerous ways and directions. For example, collaboration with colleagues,

students and the institution's stakeholders refers to a new collegial culture of institutions. On the one hand, collaboration demands time and other resources, but on the other hand, it strengthens and supports the quality of language teaching, positive attitudes, appreciation and develops teachers' professional know-how.

The fact that the same topics and themes of language teaching appeared in some answers as strengths and in others as developmental needs shows that there is still a need for unifying principles and practices between institutions. Because of the wide autonomy of the universities of applied sciences, it still has to be remembered that education, language education included, cannot be developed or unified from the outside. This means that recommendations of the Language Team or another external group will bear no fruit if the individual universities of applied sciences themselves do not actively and purposefully strive to develop and to work towards advancing language education.

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