



Nottingham 2011



*The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution*

## Students as Doers: Examples of successful e-learning activities

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### Abstract

This paper discusses learning language and communication activities that focus on students' concrete involvement in their learning process. The activities first deal with student-produced blogs and digital videos in business Spanish. They then present student-produced podcasts for Swedish business communication learners that are meant for speakers of Finnish. Finally, the activities introduce language karaoke for individual pronunciation practice in Swedish. These successful "learning by doing" activities have shown to enhanced the students' motivation and interest in learning.

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*Keywords:* student feedback; learning by doing; authentic language use; real life contexts

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### 1. Introduction

Efforts to apply the concept of "learning by doing" to language teaching activities are not likely to succeed if the students and the teachers do not have a clear idea of the activity's learning goals, outcomes and their relevance. This presentation by teachers from two different Finnish universities dealt with e-learning activities that are based on "doing", in other words, the students' own concrete involvement in the learning process. The emphasis on the practical relevance of the learning activities draws on the mandatory foreign language requirements in the Finnish higher education system. These requirements are related to the students' own fields of study and they aim to meet the needs of working life. They also seek to contribute to the development of the university graduates' lifelong and life-wide learning skills. When designing e-learning activities we therefore focus on the authentic use of the language and real life situations. The current trend in Finnish universities to cut teaching hours in language courses for financial reasons has also prompted us to introduce e-learning activities that extend learning outside the classroom.

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## 2. Method and Discussion

### 2.1. Student-produced blogs and digital videos

The basic Business Spanish course at the Aalto University Business School integrates student-produced blogs and digital videos in its course curriculum (Puranen, 2011). Regular classroom hours in the course are used for explaining and learning grammatical structures and practicing oral production, but some classroom hours have been replaced by these e-learning activities that are carried out outside regular classroom.

The purpose of the student-produced blogs is to examine some “phenomenon” in a Spanish-speaking country (e.g. the Cuban economy) and to construct a blog to be processed throughout the course. Writing a blog gives the students an opportunity to familiarize them with some aspect of society, history, culture, the economy or the corporate world of the Spanish-speaking countries. During the course, peer reviews of the blogs are published on the course website. During the final classroom session the students give short presentations of their projects and discuss the experience.

With the help of authentic materials, writing a blog has turned out to be a very good way to familiarize students with some aspect of the Spanish-speaking world. In some cases the students managed to integrate even their personal experiences into their blogs. The downside of the project included the language comprehension problems with understanding materials in Spanish and the students’ difficulty with assessing the credibility of information and sources they used. Consequently, some students were shy about giving reading access to the blogs to other readers.

The basic Business Spanish course also integrated a second e-learning activity into the course in which students were divided into small groups that established their own companies and created websites for them (e.g. Hotel, Tequila Marketing Company, Consulting Business). The students then wrote screenplays for making digital videos based on everyday business communication situations. The teacher commented on the screenplays and gave guidance to the students, after which the students filmed the videos, edited them and linked them to their company’s website. Peer reviews of the videos were published on the course website in addition to showing the videos in class.

According to the teacher’s observations and student feedback, the biggest advantage of the activity was the strong sense of learner autonomy that arose from this project in which the students truly acted as doers. The project also offered the possibility to combine written and oral production and the practice of pronunciation. This in turn strengthened the adoption of useful vocabulary and lowered the threshold for oral production in the classroom, which was shown by better results in the course oral exam. The joy of learning was apparent while producing the videos despite the occurring the technical problems and the students’ demanding challenge of coping with their limited Spanish

### 2.2 Student-produced podcast interviews

The student-produced podcast project “Röster från arbetslivet – Voices from Working Life” started as a pilot project in 2008, conducted by the University of Helsinki and the Aalto University Business School. Since then the project has become a regular component of the Swedish courses at both universities (Auvinen & Peltonen, 2011).

This voluntary activity gives the Finnish-speaking students studying Swedish an opportunity to conduct authentic interviews in Swedish with representatives of working life whose mother tongue is Finnish but who need to use Swedish in their work. These podcasts are placed on the course website and are used as study materials by the fellow students. In most cases the teachers have initially contacted the persons to be interviewed, but it is also possible for the students themselves to do it. The students make a plan for the interview and prepare the questions they want to ask. They can also utilize the question package of ready-made questions prepared by the teacher. The main purpose of the interview is to outline the interviewees’ language background, their professional development, current work tasks and their oral and written use of Swedish at work. The interviewees are also asked what should be emphasized in the teaching of Swedish in the university courses. The fellow students can choose which interviews they want to listen to and report on the content of the interview. So far there are 20 interviews available on the course website (e.g. interviews with Aalto University President, Business Leader, Politicians, Export Secretary, Lawyer, Sales Manager, Editor in Chief, Funding Manager, etc.).

Producing podcasts does not necessarily require sophisticated technical equipment (see e.g. Richardson, 2009; Salmon & Edirisingha, 2009; Salmon et al., 2010). However, in order to assure uniform sound quality the interviewers participating in this specific project were asked to borrow the

university's Olympus WS-110 Digital Voice Recorder, which recorded the interviews as Windows sound files (.WMA). The university's media centre edited the files by e.g. removing empty spots and by using Adobe's Soundbooth software converted the files into mp3 files that are stored on the media server at the University of Helsinki (<http://ok.helsinki.fi/podcast/>.)

### 2.3 Language karaoke for individual pronunciation practice

The language karaoke activity was developed for the purpose of giving students individual pronunciation practice. This activity helps the students to make a company presentation that contains words and expressions with which Finnish learners of Swedish typically have pronunciation difficulties. The background of Finnish-speaking students' skills in Swedish reflects what they have learnt in secondary schools, often in large groups. This means that their motivation and oral skills in particular can be deficient.

Because of large group sizes it often is not possible to give the time and help needed for individual students to correct their mispronunciation of some of the necessary key words e.g. when making a company presentation. By using the free software available at <http://av-video-karaoke-maker.en.softonic.com/> and with the technical help provided by the university's IT centre it was possible for the teacher (whose mother tongue is Swedish) to produce video clips in which the teacher gave a model company presentation on the screen accompanied by the karaoke style subtitles for the audio text. The video clip also included the written script. It is thus possible for the student to read the text and listen to the video before trying to produce one's own presentation. This voluntary exercise has been useful for many students who can practice the problematic words and expressions at home by themselves in the context of a real presentation.

## 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, student-produced blogs, videos and podcasts in addition to the language karaoke activity seem to personalize students' learning process and enhance commitment to their own learning. Because of the student-centered focus of these activities the teacher's role moves automatically towards that of a facilitator who offers guidance and help for students when needed (Tammelin, Peltonen & Puranen, 2011). Learner autonomy is thereby considerably strengthened. The relevance and authenticity of these activities bring them close to the learners' current and future real life needs.

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