

English learning in an intercultural perspective: Russia and Norway

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Abstract

This paper describes a cross-border collaboration between a Russian and a Norwegian University in the English Language field, and how it is made possible by the universities' support – both in terms of strategic plans and funding. The paper shows the goals of the collaboration; to give the students an insight into how English is taught in Russia/Norway and intercultural learning, as well as how this is pursued through telecollaboration and physical mobility. The paper also explains how the physical mobility, as it is the core activity of the collaboration, has led to less telecollaborative activity.

Keywords: Cross-border collaboration, Russia and Norway, telecollaboration, physical mobility, intercultural learning, English language.

1. Introduction

UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, Campus Alta, is located in Finnmark, the northernmost county of Norway. It is Norway's largest county in area (slightly bigger than Denmark), but the smallest in population (only 75 000 people). It borders the Barents Sea in the north, the county of Troms to the west, Finland in the south and Russia in the east. Due to its geographic position many businesses and institutions in Finnmark county have close collaboration with Russian enterprises, especially in the Kola area of the north-west as that is located closest to the common border.

UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, is the northernmost university in Norway. It has a total of approx. 12 000 students divided between its four different campuses, and offers a wide variety of study programs. The strategic plan of the university is under revision, but central ideas in this work are the key drivers in the High North strategy which was launched by the previous government: climate change, *relationship with Russia* and resources in the high north [1]. As the draft to the university's future strategy explicitly names the relationship with Russia, it means that common projects and collaboration with Russian institutions of higher education are welcome. This is important to mention as it explains the frames for the collaboration that this paper presents. It also provides an understanding of why such projects receive economic funding which makes collaboration between universities on opposite sides of the Norway/Russia border easier.

2. Pre-project and main objectives

The collaboration between the faculty at the English Department of the Department of Education at UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, Campus Alta and MIBO, International Institute of Business Education in Murmansk began in the fall of 2010. It was initiated by independent faculty members based on personal interest for collaboration across the border and the want to learn about teacher training college, the role of the English

subject in school, and language didactics in general, in the neighbouring country. The first contact between the two institutions was made via e-mail and two members of faculty from Alta travelled to Murmansk for initial talks.

It was soon established that the interest for- and the aim of the collaboration were common for faculty on both sides, and the visit ended in an agreement to arrange a joint study module called *English Learning in an Intercultural Perspective: Russia and Norway*, as well as a draft for the module's study plan.

An excerpt from the (now finalized) study plan of the common module shows the "expected learning outcome for the module [2]". It states:

Knowledge	<p><i>At the end of the module the candidate is expected to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Understand the educational systems in Russia and in Norway. › Understand the principles and practices of second language acquisition in Russia and in Norway, in particular English teaching.
Skills	<p><i>At the end of the module the candidate is expected to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Plan and conduct a practice teaching project.
General competence	<p><i>At the end of the module the candidate is expected to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Show how cultural differences and differences in teaching and language learning are connected. › Be able to communicate and cooperate with students from the other side of the border.

(Highlighted in bold by the author.)

The main objectives of the study module are that students from the two countries should cooperate and communicate, that they should become aware of how culture is linked to language teaching and learning, and get an insight into whether English teaching is conducted differently in Russia and Norway.

3. Telecollaboration – initially an important part of the module

It was important to establish a good online "meeting-spot" for the participating students. Initially, the most important reason was that they were divided into groups consisting of Russian and Norwegian students who should collaborate throughout the module's work-period, as well as present a common oral group-exam at the end. Faculty at the two universities agreed on the importance of forming mixed groups so that ideas and experiences from the different perspectives and cultures were "forced" (in a positive way) to the surface during observations and assignments.

The cooperation and communication between students were planned to be organised via e-mail, Facebook and other online platforms if available to- and wanted by the individual students (examples are Skype, FaceTime, etc.). The means of communication via digital resources are vast, and secure easy access to a variety of ways to stay in contact. Besides, it is normally easy to motivate students to communicate online as they are frequent users of such internet sites anyway. Thus, they master using the tools very quickly and thoroughly enjoy it.

4. Telecollaboration – now a less important part of the module

A second excerpt from the study plan describes the organization of the module in a brief, but precise way. Under *Module content* it says:

The first week of the course is conducted at the International Institute of Business Education (MIBO) in Murmansk, where Norwegian and Russian students are matched to form study groups. There will be lectures about the

Russian education system as well as about English teaching methods. During the last days students observe English classes in a Russian school. Later Russian students come to Alta for an equivalent experience. The mixed student groups have common oral exams showing differences and/or similarities in terms of how English is taught in both countries. The course offers close cooperation between Russian and Norwegian students, which forms an element of intercultural learning. Active participation and appropriate demeanour are compulsory, and students who show disrespect to academic and cultural norms can be excluded from participation in any arrangements and will not receive a grade [3].

The module description clarifies that the collaboration includes a physical mobility as well. The two universities have run the module once per year since the fall semester of 2011, and since then it has shown that the physical mobility is the most important element of the module. First and foremost because that is what motivates the students to participate in the module, secondly because the students seem to communicate better face-to-face and do not use the means for telecollaboration as much, neither before the physical mobility nor after.

The physical mobility consists of a one week visit to each of the universities/cities. To elaborate on the module-description above; the weeks contain lectures at the universities, observations of English language classrooms at all levels (year 1 through 13), as well as group work and assignments about the similarities and differences that the students experience, learn about and observe during the visits to their neighbouring country. The second, and last, week they meet ends with an oral exam. If passed, the students are awarded 5 ECTS at UiT, The Arctic University of Norway; this also includes the students from Murmansk, Russia. This is important to point out as it partly explains the university administration's support for the module, owing to how universities are financed.

It is possible to arrange the physical mobility because it is partly financed by a program called Barentsplus [4], a scholarship program for higher education institutions in the Barents region. The program supports student and teacher exchanges, as well as joint course development (barentsplus.no) and the module *English Learning in an Intercultural Perspective: Russia and Norway* has been granted scholarships every year. This is vital in order to organise the physical mobility that has proven to be the most successful aspect of the study module. However, it is negative for the telecollaboration part of the module, as students seem to "postpone" communication until they meet face-to-face.

5. Telecollaboration – the future

The collaboration between the two universities in northern Norway and north-west Russia will continue, due to the relevance in content of the study module, mutual interest among faculty of the two institutions, and because it receives funding which makes the physical mobility possible.

However, it is necessary to re-ignite the role of telecollaboration in the module. How may this be done? First, by focusing on the importance of telecollaboration in education in general and the responsibility this creates for all higher education institutions. The general part of the study plan of the English Year Course at UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, Campus Alta is on teaching forms and the use of ICT. It states that:

Teaching is organized as lectures (in class and on the Internet), seminars, group work, and as work in international teams using electronic platforms. In between the class meetings students have to work individually or in groups on their tasks (written assignments, films, reports, and websites). The university uses the electronic platform Class Fronter. Some modules may use additional electronic

platforms for teamwork and assignments, and students need to become acquainted with the technology [5].

This again is based on the general ideas of the universities where webinars, streaming of lectures, and other internet/computer based modes of education are stressed. Secondly, the faculty who arrange the module and are responsible for its content must focus on tasks and assignments that make it necessary for the participating students to communicate and cooperate via different telecollaboration tools. This is easily done by for example making the tasks compulsory and part of the final grade.

Still, the two universities are very fortunate. The opportunity for physical mobility that the scholarship grants is valuable. Unanimous reactions from students are that they learn more from visiting the neighbour country and by "living" it for one week, than they would from any other type of instruction lasting a whole semester. The learning environment, both for language practice and cultural awareness, is most effective and lasting when they visit each other's cities.

6. Conclusion

The success for the joint study module *English Learning in an Intercultural Perspective: Russia and Norway* arranged by UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, Campus Alta and MIBO, International Institute of Business Education in Murmansk, is due to personal initiative and engagement by faculty at the two institutions. However, it is extremely important that such initiatives for direct collaboration are anchored in the universities' administration, among the directors, and match the ideas of the institutions' strategic documents. With the support of the university administration, the faculty will have a much better chance of succeeding when initiating any collaboration across borders. Any funding, in this case the scholarship program aimed at projects in the Barents region, is key.

The study module's relevance is also of great importance when deciding on cross-border collaboration. In this case a study of the similarities and differences in teacher training college, the role of the English language, and methods and language didactics in the English language classrooms in Murmansk and Alta, are of significance in this region. Teachers in northern Norway will most likely meet some pupils with Russian background; who have immigrated with their parents and received part of their education in Russia, and/or are born in Norway from Russian immigrants and receive help with homework etc. from parents who are accustomed to Russian standards. When teaching these pupils it is very useful to have the insight that this study module provides; both when it comes to knowledge about the educational system, the role of the English language, as well as the cultural dimension that this collaboration provides.

References

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http://en.uit.no/om/art?p_document_id=356184&dim=179033. Last accessed: March 11, 2015.

Notes

[1] UiT2020: Towards a new strategic plan for UiT.
http://en.uit.no/om/art?p_document_id=356184&dim=179033. Last accessed: March 11, 2015. Highlighted in italics by the author.

[2] For full overview of the module go to:
<http://uit.no/Content/401037/Study%20plan.English%20year%20course%202015-2016.pdf>, p. 20.

[3] <http://uit.no/Content/401037/Study%20plan.English%20year%20course%202015-2016.pdf>, p. 20.

[4] For more information about the program, its objectives, application requirements, etc., see <http://barentsplus.no>.

[5] <http://uit.no/Content/401037/Study%20plan.English%20year%20course%202015-2016.pdf>, p. 1.
