

Vlogging in Toronto: learning Finnish through collaborative encounters

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Abstract. This case study is excerpted from a larger study where we explore collaborative encounters, i.e. practices and discourses, within a blended learning project where vlogging, i.e. video blogging, is used in Finnish language learning. The data has been collected in 2017-2018 during an intermediate Finnish course at the University of Toronto. In this paper, we investigate one student assignment and analyse what kind of collaborative encounters the use of vlogging creates outside the classroom. We analyse the discourse within the vlog with the support from ethnographically collected data (semi-structured interviews and written reflections). This study shows that vlogging implements the adoption of different collaborative encounters; a free time activity with friends creates a space for authentic and collaborative language learning.

Keywords: vlogging, collaboration, discourse, language learning, ethnography.

1. Introduction

Education is experiencing a shift from accessing and sharing information to designing communities where participants are actively engaging in deep and meaningful learning (Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013). In the *Finnish Studies Program* at the University of Toronto, vlogging is used as a language learning practice in an attempt to create meaningful and authentic opportunities for language use and to create spaces to learn collaboratively. Because of the long distance to Finland and only a few opportunities to meet Finnish speakers in Toronto, students have a limited exposure to Finnish outside the classroom. Encountering authentic language environments is, however, crucial for learning.

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Earlier studies have explored blogging as a tool for building communities between students (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Petersen, Divitini, & Chabert, 2008). Vlogging is reported to increase student talk time (Huang, 2015; Watkins, 2012). In this paper, we take a close look at one vlog produced by a student, Lisa, for a course task, where she talks about “Finnish things in Toronto”. This paper analyses what kind of collaborative encounters the creation of this vlog creates outside the classroom. This is excerpted from a study where we explore altogether 31 vlogs within an intermediate Finnish language course in 2017-2018.

2. Aims, method, and data

In addition to the broadcasted and transcribed discourse in Lisa’s vlog, the data consists of two sets of written reflections by Lisa based on the assignment. Further, we also conducted two semi-structured interviews based on the reflections. By analysis of the discourse (Blommaert, 2005) and the ethnographic data, we explore the following:

- What kind of collaborative encounters took place while Lisa was creating the vlog?
- How do they connect to Lisa’s language learning?

3. Results: layers of collaborative encounters in vlogging in Finnish

When Lisa was given the assignment, she chose to vlog about her visit to a Finnish sauna in her friend’s house. She says that selecting the topic “was very spontaneous”, and continues: “they had a sauna in their basement, I just thought oh that’s Finnish”. A casual free-time activity created a setting to vlog, practise, and learn.

3.1. Layers of discourse in the sauna

Lisa engages her friends Anna and Jeff in her learning practice, and they are featured in the sauna vlog (see Table 1). The discourse begins, when Lisa describes the setting in Finnish (“olemmme saunassa”) and says that she loves the sauna. By referring to the participants as “we”, she demonstrates that vlogging is a collaborative practice. She further says that she is in her friend Anna’s sauna. Anna

records the video and moves the camera to feature her face, when her name is mentioned (line 4). When Lisa suddenly (line 4) forgets what she was planning to utter, Anna (line 6) helps her by whispering “ystävien kanssa” (with friends). Lisa repeats the sentence “minä ystäväiden kanssa saunassa” and the vlog ends when Jeff throws water on the hot stones and utters “heitän löylyä”.

Table 1. Sauna vlog

1	Lisa	olemme saunassa <we are in the sauna>
2		minä rakastan sauna <I love sauna>
3		koska se on hauskaa <because it is fun>
4		ja tämä on Annan sauna <and this is Anna’s sauna>
5		((the camera turns to Anna and back to Lisa))
6	Anna	((whispering)) ystäväiden kanssa <with friends>
7	Lisa	minä ystäväiden kanssa saunassa <I with friends in the sauna>
8	Jeff	heitän löylyä <I am throwing water on the hot stones>
9		((sound of water touching the hot stones))

3.2. Layers of collaboration in language learning

Lisa engages her friends in her learning throughout the task. She reflects: “I wrote the script myself first and then Anna checked it over to make sure it made sense, then we rehearsed it a lot”. Lisa revised and practised the content with Anna, who speaks Finnish. She practised the pronunciation of the discourse and repeated it to memorise it. Earlier research has shown that vlogging is beneficial for practising vocabulary and oral communication skills (Huang, 2015; Watkins, 2012; Yeh, 2018), the same can be witnessed here.

Lisa’s learning practice involves collaboration in different layers. She reflects: “I think I learned, well, it was fun because we had three levels going on”, and continues, “Anna was helping me and then I was helping Jeff so there is like this chain happening”. While Lisa teaches Finnish to non-Finnish-speaking Jeff and engages him in the discourse, Anna mentors Lisa, even by assisting her to remember the lines in the sauna (line 5). Lisa continues: “Having Jeff there was interesting because I would translate what it was to Jeff so for me it was very educational having him there”. In her reflections, she also writes positively about the support she received from Anna’s family:

“I learned a lot from Anna and her parents, and they taught me new words. For example, ‘heitän löylyä’ is what you say in the sauna, but I had no idea until Anna and her family taught me that”.

The casual free time interaction with Anna and her family, and their genuine interest towards Lisa's vlogging assignment, enabled this collaborative learning practice to happen.

3.3. Layers of community support and feedback

Activating friends in the process created a positive learning experience. Lisa says that having Anna in the vlogs "was always very fun for me", and continues, it was "fun for her too so she kinda wanted to help or be featured". Collaborating with a friend who is "really interested" created a supportive learning space and made Lisa even more inspired to learn and practise Finnish. Lisa considers the feedback positive and describes that Anna is "not judgmental so I can do whatever and she just laughs".

Lisa reflects: "The most fun was seeing the final product, as well as filming with friends". When creating the vlog at her friend's house, an authentic audience was created, as Lisa says "Anna's parents loved [it so much] that they showed the whole family, they thought that was great". Anna's family considered vlogging an innovative learning activity and expressed a genuine interest both in the process and in the final outcome.

Collaboration involves a purposeful partnering of students to solve and accomplish relevant and meaningful tasks. It provides a space to test and validate personally constructed knowledge. (Vaughan et al., 2013, pp. 119-120). By creating the vlog outside of the classroom and including her friends in the process, Lisa expanded her learning community, which also offered her supportive feedback. This made the assignment meaningful and authentic.

Earlier studies report that blogging has a positive impact on student interaction, self-expression, and self-evaluation (Trajtemberg & Yiakoumetti, 2011), and most importantly, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008). As Lisa reflects, "speaking Finnish outside of the classroom was very beneficial to me and the most educational part"; vlogging implements the adoption of different layers of collaborative encounters outside the classroom.

4. Conclusions

Social media applications' greatest asset in pedagogy is to bring students together in communities where they can interact and collaborate. The use of social media

– in our case vlogging – shifts learning from accessing and sharing information to designing communities of inquiry where participants can actively engage in meaningful collaborative learning (see Vaughan et al., 2013).

In this paper, we have analysed the different layers of how Lisa engages her friends in her vlogging, and how her friends participate in these by supporting and giving feedback. We have shown that a casual free-time activity with friends actually enables the creation of an encounter where authentic discourse in Finnish helps Lisa to learn Finnish in a genuine collaboration. Through vlogging, communities are created (Vaughan et al., 2013, pp. 119-120). Collaborative encounters outside the classroom take place in many layers: Lisa learns together with her friends; she also teaches her friend Jeff.

The vlog was, as part of the course assignment, published for peers to explore, and was further used as material by the teacher in the classroom. We explore these encounters elsewhere. This paper demonstrates, however, that Lisa's vlogging practice involved more layers than interacting and sharing information with peers and the teacher.

Vlogging has not been used in our field, and our project is on the frontier of a new Finnish as a foreign language pedagogy.

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