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The Finnish Language Centre Network: The Finnish Virtual Language Centre

TNP Languages

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Background: The Finnish system of Language Centre instruction

In all universities and in all vocational training in Finland obligatory language studies are included in all degrees and diplomas. In university degrees the language studies, both mother tongue and second language, vary as to the number of languages and the amount of credit units according to the faculty and university. The faculty of natural sciences often has the lowest number of languages and credit units. At the university of Jyväskylä the faculty of natural sciences requires 6 ECTS: two in the mother tongue, two in the other national/domestic language (Finnish/Swedish) and two in a foreign language whereas the faculty of Business and economics requires 40 -56 ECTS in at least four languages. The fact that obligatory language studies are included in all degrees means that all universities have an established institution for language instruction for professional purposes, a language centre(LC).

Within Finnish universities the language centres have had more cooperation than other units starting with material production and staff development in the 70s and 80s. The directors' council and annual meetings of other staff members - e.g. Swedish teachers - have formed a loose informal network between the different language centres. Last year, however, a new form of cooperation was initiated: The Finnish Virtual Language Centre (VLC). The most important aim for the virtual language centre is to strengthen cooperation between language centres in the Finnish universities. The project has been jointly funded by the Ministry of Education and the Language Centres.

Virtual Language Centre aims to meet the challenges of the information society by combining the resources and expertise of the language centres in an effort to further develop teaching, opportunities for learning and assessment practices, as well as to ensure quality. This will be done with joint efforts of tailored staff development, learner training and methodology and materials development. During the spring of 2002 a survey has been made about the attitudes and skills of LC-teachers. This was followed by drawing up ICT teaching strategies in all language centres, and during the autumn of 2002 VLC will be funding subprojects central to the activities of the Finnish language centres. The first shared theme is learner training.

Next year VLC should have a common ICT strategy for the Language Centre Network and as a concrete outcome of the work a Virtual Language Centre Portal which will be in full use in 2005. The work with various sub-projects continues; there will be an application round every year. The aims for further developmental work include

- 👉 enabling alternative completion of courses
- 👉 increasing course supply in less widely taught languages in Finland (e.g. Slovak, Dutch) and in teaching small disciplines (e.g. theology, pharmacy)
- 👉 finding out best practices and enhancing expertise in LC teaching both nationally and internationally through ICT
- 👉 providing special training in ICT for LC teachers with attention to special features and needs of LC teaching

- 👉 developing a common materials database
- 👉 developing possibilities to use the net for publishing and distributing course materials and other publications
- 👉 participating in the European cooperation especially in assessment (ELP)

The activities within the project will be evaluated throughout the project. It is important to know how well the Language Centres have been able to create really new and dynamic ways of action and cooperation in developing LC teaching. Although there has been forms of cooperation between groups and individuals apt to collaboration, it is an enormous challenge to establish collaboration as an integral part of most of the work done at the Language Centres. Funding is one problem, but there are problems to solve that do not necessarily require any money but a collective change of attitudes. How can a shared state of mind be created for a network that in fact consists of hundreds of individual teachers, councellors and other support persons, who perhaps have worked alone most of their academic working life? What should be done to encourage the agents to be committed to shared goals and new working culture? How will the new culture be established when the project and the sub-projects lead to a growing amount of new services that the Language Centres will be responsible of? What kind of administration and legal position is needed for reaching the goals? How can a balance between national and international goals be found? And back to the funding: how will the developing areas and the new services be financed after 2005 when the support from the Ministry of Education ends? The time seems to be very short to enable any big changes. However, there are many factors at the same time directing the action towards networking and using ICT including but not restricted to *student needs* (e.g. national and international mobility, the students' new literacy and willingness to use the net), *economical situation*, and *the general change of the working life* towards networking: we cannot stay outside!