

“Kaikille okei?” Everyone All Right? Shifting Topics and Practices in Language Students’ Chats During the Global COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: We investigated practices and emerging themes in a Finnish-as-a-foreign-language course virtual chat that took place between two Finnish language classes in two North American universities. Because of the unforeseen 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in spring 2020, both universities were suddenly required to move all instruction online to prevent the spread of the virus through physical distancing. We describe and analyze differences in the class chat from before the pandemic to after the transition to remote learning. The main focus is on the COVID-19-related themes and topics the participants shared during the associated lockdown. In addition, we examine what kinds of collaborative activities are created while chatting outside the classroom.

Keywords: chatting, collaboration, foreign language learning, remote learning, blended learning.

In current higher education, students are—instead of solely accessing and sharing information—often learning in communities of inquiry where they actively engage in deep and meaningful learning (Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013). Many innovative social media tools continue to emerge and evolve. These applications (apps) offer language educators opportunities to create collaborative communities (Vaughan et al., 2013). Social media apps can bring together learners who share a common interest and task into communities where they can interact and collaborate on purposeful activities (Vaughan et al., 2013; see also Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018; Räsänen & Muhonen, 2020a, 2020b).

In this paper we introduce a pedagogical blended learning project where students of Finnish as a foreign language in two North American universities came together in a collaborative virtual chat as one of their course assignments. We discuss how this practice took new turns upon the emergence of the global 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. A blended learning methodology—involving virtual chatting, in our case—enabled students to study collaboratively. Chat apps are a two-way window (see also Blommaert, 2005) through which students broadcast their own lives but also glimpse other students’ worlds and experiences (see also Combe & Codreanu, 2016; Petersen, Divitini, & Chabert, 2009). Their use opens new views on life outside the classroom space, while offering a platform for communication and collaboration. In this paper we focus on language students’ encounters in a course chat.

Teaching a less commonly taught language in a large university places a lot of pressure on educators to provide opportunities for sustainable language studying and community building. It is important for students to meet other students with the same interest and to feel that they belong to a wider community; they need to find connections, community, and friendship (University of Toronto Student Life, n.d.). This has become even more important during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the transition to online instruction has meant a disconnect from peers and the communities that in-person tuition in the classroom offers.

Students need opportunities to practice language use with different language users in authentic communication settings (Aalto, Mustonen, & Tukia, 2009; Petersen et al., 2009). While classroom instruction offers students opportunities to practice communication, it can often be challenging to practice oral communication outside the classroom (Watkins, 2012). Because of the long distance to Finland and the often-small class sizes, students of Finnish as a foreign language in North American universities do not often get many opportunities to collaborate with other language learners. Because the students in this study have only a limited exposure to Finnish outside the classroom, they need authentic opportunities to put their language knowledge and skills into practice (see also Chen, 2011; Hsu, 2016).

To answer these pedagogical challenges, the course instructors of Finnish as a foreign language at the University of Toronto and Indiana University created a collaborative virtual chat project for students during the spring 2020 term as a course assignment. In this article we concentrate on the students' collaborative practices outside the classroom in a chat app. The collaboration involved a purposeful partnering of students and instructors to solve relevant and meaningful challenges—it also provided a space to test conceptions and validate personally constructed knowledge (Vaughan et al., 2013). The collaboration began in the beginning of spring semester, in January 2020; students at both universities were tasked to interact in the chat freely and to discuss their interests and everyday lives. This task was mandatory but only active participation in the chat was graded. The assignment introduced a component of informal learning that takes place outside the classroom through interactions with a community of peers; this kind of strong language-learning component can complement and reinforce the formal learning that takes place in classrooms (Petersen et al., 2009). In addition, collaboration promotes active participation and helps build communities (see also Petersen et al., 2009). Because of the unforeseen COVID-19 outbreak in spring 2020, both universities were suddenly required to move all instruction online to prevent the spread of the virus through physical distancing. While the transition to remote learning did not have a major impact on the students' ability to continue participating in the virtual chat, there seemed to be a shift in the topics and themes the students chatted about.

Chat conversations have been widely studied in the second and foreign language learning and teaching contexts from different viewpoints (e.g., Jin, 2018; Lai, 2016; Wigham, & Chanier, 2015). Previous studies have analyzed digital affordances in the WeChat app (Jin, 2018; Wang, Fang, Han, & Chen, 2016). Others have looked at, for example, students' oral vocabulary and writing skills development (Golonka, Tare, & Bonilla 2017; Lai, 2016; Reynolds & Anderson, 2015), the interaction between text and video (Hung & Higgins, 2016), and social and cognitive presence in chats (Wang et al., 2016). Expressions of empathy (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2007) and humor (Marone, 2015) have also been studied. Räsänen and Muhonen (2020b) focused on community building in Finnish language learners' Padlet chat: While students shared glimpses of their everyday lives and commented on each other's language productions, they also discussed belonging to a supportive community of learners. Räsänen and Muhonen (2020a) explored domestic spaces that appeared in Finnish language learners' chats during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bogdanoff, Vaarala, and Tammelin-Laine (2019) looked at an adult literacy learners' WhatsApp chat group, the objective of which was to share coursework; students also ended up engaging in informal conversation.

In this paper we describe and analyze the changes we observed in the class chat conversations between the two North American Finnish language classes from before the transition to remote learning to after it. Exploratory and inclusive in nature, this paper contributes to research on blended learning and teaching, but it also explores how a sudden change in the teaching trajectories changes the topics students engage in. This paper shows how the use of virtual chat as a language-learning practice enables collaborative learning and information sharing (see also Vaughan et al., 2013) and

provides students with glimpses into their peers' lives and experiences (Combe & Codreanu, 2016), even during challenging times, when only virtual contact is available.

Research Questions, Data, and Methods

In this article we investigate the practices and emerging themes in a collaborative course chat during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is on the topics the participants shared during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the second half of the 2020 spring semester. In addition, we examine what kinds of collaborative activities are created while chatting outside the classroom. This article focuses on the following research questions:

- How did the pandemic and the switch to remote learning change or shift the focus of the chat discourse?
- How did participants express solicitude and support for other students' well-being?

We examine select excerpts that highlight the topical changes. We discuss how language learners addressed concern for their peers' well-being in the chat and expressed support and empathy.

We utilized the Kik mobile chat app for ethical, practical, and pedagogical reasons. The Kik app is free, and users can join anonymously without providing a private phone number or email address; that is, students could participate with a pseudonym. The app is available on smartphones, laptops, tablets, and desktop computers. Because all our participants had at least one device available for their daily use, chatting was a democratic practice. Kik offers participants a platform for synchronous, semisynchronous, and asynchronous collaboration and interaction. It allows for many-to-many, one-to-many, and one-to-one messages to be exchanged. Altogether, seven students, one teaching assistant, and two instructors participated in the project. All the names and place names have been changed. In the English translations, we have imitated learner language. We do not evaluate or validate students' language productions.

This paper has a data-driven focus. The primary data set consists of the complete Kik-chat chain produced between January and April 2020, in all, 517 chat entries. An "entry" denotes any content that a student has submitted on the chat. Table 1 shows the popularity of different types of content.

Table 1. Multimedia Chat Data.

Format	Total number
Text comments	418
Photos	
Taken by students	67
Taken from the internet	1
Screenshots	2
Memes	8
Gifs	12

Format	Total number
Videos	5
Drawn images	4
Emojis	226

Students made use of a wide variety of multimodal means. Most of the memes had writing in Finnish or English on them. Students also posted photos they had found online or captured themselves; screenshots have been categorized as photos. All the videos were filmed by the students. Students also included emojis and drew pictures in the app while playing Pictionary.

We use discourse as a “a window” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 66) to examine and analyze the collaborative chat practices and interactions. Androutsopoulos (2008) suggested a “discourse-centered online ethnography” (p. 2) to refer to the practice where methods are combined and systematic observation of selected online discourse with direct contact with its social actors takes place, such as here. This approach makes use of ethnographic knowledge and observation to guide the selection, analysis, and interpretation of online discourse data; thus one can aim to illuminate relations between digital texts and their production and reception practices among the participants within the online community (Androutsopoulos, 2008).

In addition to the chat discourse data, this study makes use of ethnographically informed data. Linguistic (online) ethnography is applied both in the data collection and as a method. We apply online ethnography, also referred to as “virtual ethnography” (Hine, 2000), “netnography” (Kozinets, 2002, 2010), and “webnography” (Puri, 2007), as a virtual research method that adapts ethnographic methods to the study of the communities and discourse created through computer-mediated social interaction. Linguistic ethnography means that language and social life are intertwined; a close analysis of situated language use can provide fundamental and distinctive insights into mechanisms and dynamics of spatial and cultural production in everyday activity. (Creese, 2008).

As teacher-researchers, we had the opportunity to observe the students' discourse in the class chat, which enabled us to develop a “feel” for their discourses, emblems, and language styles. We also at times participated in the discussion threads to demonstrate collaboration and sometimes even to initiate discourse. These practices allowed us to collect data regarding participants' sources for bringing in external material, participation activity, and patterns. We also wrote ethnographically informed observations, which we present in addition to the primary chat data as short vignettes. The data excerpts are presented in the original with our English translation.

In the following sections, we analyze the themes of selected student chat posts during the COVID-19 lockdown. We begin with an exploration of the kinds of topics related to their language studies students shared. We then discuss chat entries that deal with physical distancing. We analyze the manner in which the students communicated support during the COVID-19 lockdown and exchanged greetings and expressions of solicitude and concern for each other. Last, we discuss how students engaged in addressing global COVID-19-related discussion topics, themes, and activities.

Studying Finnish Remotely During COVID-19

The chat project was initiated so that students could meet with other like-minded students outside of their own classroom, collaborate, and learn Finnish. This particular group, the chat participants, was formed in a specific situational context. The virtual study group consisted of students who had a

mutual goal: to study Finnish language. Study-related posts therefore appeared frequently throughout the semester. Before COVID-19, when chatting about their studies, students talked about, for example, their favorite Finnish words or Finnish literature. Students regularly shared their daily agendas and itineraries, discussed their course work, and shared posts about Finnish grammar and homework. Stress caused by work or studies was also a recurring topic. When COVID-19 gained wider media attention, and particularly during local lockdowns, new topics connected to teaching and learning emerged in the chat. In the following we analyze a selection of them.

Switching to Remote Learning

As was probably the case on many social media platforms in spring 2020, a common topic in the Finnish learners' chat especially at the beginning of the pandemic was the sudden change to remote learning from home. Students shared glimpses of their online learning experiences, focusing on their participation in their Finnish classes online.

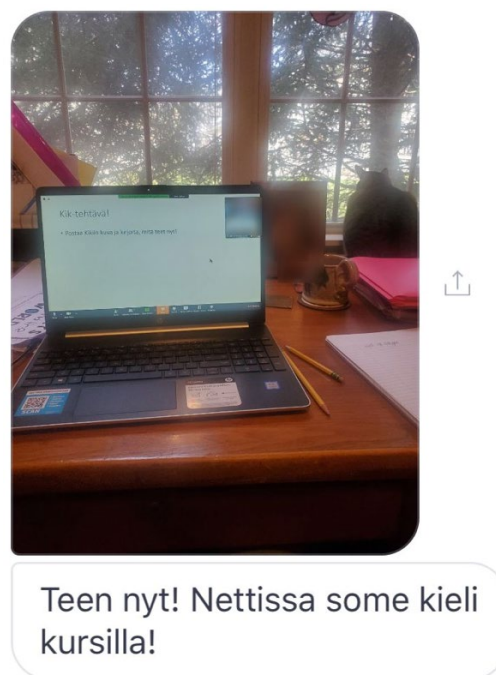


Figure 1. In Finnish class online.

In Figure 1, a student has submitted a photo of her desk with a laptop during an ongoing online class and has commented with a status update “Doing right now! Online in Finnish language course!” This demonstrates the instantaneous quality of chatting: Students can send location updates conveniently from outside of class and even from the classroom, which blurs the line between in and outside of class (see, e.g., Benson, 2011). These early COVID-19-related entries in the chat express students' realization that studying remotely not only was possible but also functioned as a means of keeping in touch. Earlier studies on the benefits of using social media in education suggested that the use of social media can result in greater student engagement and interest and improved communication and self-regulation (Blankenship, 2011). In the class chat, studying online and sharing images of home offices became a mutually shared and arguably somewhat new experience for these language learners. The chat collaboration made continuous contact possible even outside the in-person class setting.

Both students and instructors participated in the chat. In Figure 2, an instructor has shared a meme with the text “that feeling when you have stared at the computer all day.”



Figure 2. Staring at the computer all day.

The meme displays a person who is staring at the screen, eyes wide open, looking slightly distraught and a written comment, “here (are) my feelings today.” The text implies that after a long day in front of the screen, she is not feeling well. As instruction moved online, also the whole life sphere for many was suddenly taking place virtually, which led to a shared experience of constantly being in front of a screen. This was mentioned in the class chat but also, according to our observations, during the synchronous class meetings. Because everyone was in the same situation, these entries validated the group’s mutual online learning experience and possibly even strengthened the feeling of belonging to this community (see also Miceli, Visocnik, Murray, & Kennedy, 2010). The interplay between the meme and the text can be interpreted as a critical commentary on excessive screen time but the message is softened by the somewhat humorous image. As seen in Figures 1 and 2, class discussions about the transfer to remote learning addressed both the advantages and challenges of the experience.

New Teaching and Learning Practices

New kinds of language learning and teaching practices emerged in the remote learning setting in class and particularly in the class chat. Online learning inspired the participants to play Pictionary together, as shown in Figure 3.





Figure 3. Playing Pictionary online.

Pictionary is a common collaborative language-learning in-class activity and even online, the game was played as usual: One participant drew an image by using the drawing function of the chat app and the others guessed what it was. The difference here from in-person activity is that the players were making use of the colors that are available in the app and the answers were given in writing. Answering by writing makes it somewhat easier for language students to play the game because all the answers are available to players visually. The online learning setting allows the participants to play Pictionary in a new and innovative manner.

While playing Pictionary is a familiar collaborative language-learning activity, the group also applied new teaching and learning practices in the online setting. The chat app allowed the participants to create and share memes. Memes, as a genre, often include language play and puns and frequently feature the interplay of a well-known image and text.; creating memes in Finnish further gave students an opportunity to practice Finnish. The design of memes in the chat began when an instructor shared examples of “that feeling—se tunne” memes with the students; then students were asked to follow the models provided and create their own “that feeling” memes. Whereas the instructors' memes dealt with COVID-19-related topics, such as the one in Figure 2, students' memes interestingly concentrated on topics related to studying Finnish, as can be seen in the following two examples (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4. When you remember to use the partitive case.

The student posted “success kid,” a well-known meme, which shows a young child looking confident while making a fist as a sign of accomplishment. The meme text says: “When you remember to use the partitive case.” This example makes a joke about Finnish grammar. Finnish has 15 different case endings and partitive is commonly considered a challenging one to learn as it has no direct equivalent in many other languages. The meme captures feelings of accomplishment and offers a humorous take on a shared challenge: It implies that when a Finnish language learner manages to use the partitive case correctly, it can be viewed as a small victory. Highlighting mutual experiences with humor can lighten the atmosphere; humor can also create a feeling of community and add to the shared story (see also Räsänen & Muhonen 2020b). The meme functions as an inside joke among students of Finnish about a topic that many will recognize.

Social media has been found to inspire creativity (Blankenship, 2011). The purpose of memes is to create humor that is often part of a broader discourse and can include social commentary. When our language learners created memes, they were participating in authentic language practice. The remote learning context encouraged us to implement creative and innovative language learning exercises; sharing the creations on the Kik chat made it collaborative.

No Plans—A Different Kind of Spring Break

Students regularly chatted about student life. The COVID-19 lockdowns began when students were about to leave for their spring break. In 2020, students made spring plans with the knowledge that they would not be able to travel. They would have to stay at home and spend time indoors, due to physical distancing regulations and travel restrictions. Whereas typically spring break is a time of relaxation and traveling, now students were faced with a new kind of reality and a change of plans. This is reflected in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Spring break.

A student shared a meme featuring a picture of a hedgehog floating on its back; the text says, “My plans for spring break.” Another participant replied in Finnish “Same here,” and “good plan,” along with emojis implying a positive tone. Another participant agreed with the message, stating “I have the same plans.” The accompanying emoji symbols nervous laughter and relief. The discourse, emphasized by emojis, demonstrates how the participants relate to the situation. During the unprecedented lockdown, having no plans also meant that people were not able to do much due to the physical distancing regulations. In an online community, empathy can be expressed by demonstrating understanding and similarity among participants (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2007). Participants’ comments could also function as a way to comfort each other, offer support, and express that the students were all in the same situation.

Emergency Evacuation and a Change of Location

A shared reality for many students in North American universities at the beginning of the pandemic and the mandatory lockdowns was that students were ordered to evacuate; students were asked to leave their student residences on short notice. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, many nations also invited their citizens to return home. For many participants, this meant a change of town, state, or even country. The emergency relocation became an unusual and unprecedented shared student experience that was also reflected in many of the class chat discussions. In Figure 6, a student texted that she had just left her current location and traveled to her family in another country.

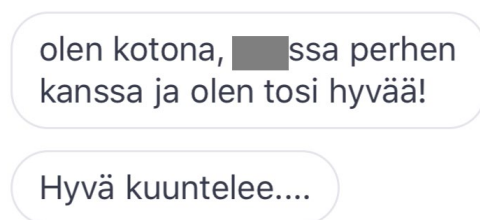


Figure 6: I am at home with family.

She wrote in the chat: “I am home with family and I am really good!” to which another student replied, “Sounds good.” These kinds of quick updates serve several purposes: They ensure that students are all right and have not gotten sick, and they offer an update about the (re)location. Remarkable in this data is that even amid the rapid and changing situations, participants managed to keep their Finnish class peers updated on their situation.

A feature of COVID-19 times is that situations change rapidly. Another participant needed to return to their home country in the middle of the semester. Because the relocation happened suddenly, other participants were informed about it only after the fact when she sent greetings from the country (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Back at home country because of coronavirus.

The chat thread begins with the participant acknowledging that the chat collaboration would cease soon because the final week of the assignment was approaching. In the same entry, she further added that she had returned to her home country: “Hi all! Now it is the last Kik week. I am now again in [country name] due to coronavirus. I am still teaching students online!” She then asked the other participants how they were and informed them about time difference. A student replied, asking in surprise, “Maria, in [country name]? Ok there?” to which the participant replied that she was home at her parents’ house and everything was well. This conversation functioned as a location update after a less active period in the chat but also offered the participants a forum to check on each other’s well-being.

These chat discourses show that the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the lives of the students. Social media offered them a platform for authentic communication, strengthening the feeling of belonging to this community of students (Miceli et al., 2010). Participants exchanged genuine information and showed concern for the well-being of the others. Although the discussions were conducted in Finnish, participants were focused on authentic information sharing.

Broadcasting From Home: Chatting About Physical Distancing

The unprecedented global pandemic also prompted many discourses that were not directly related to studying Finnish. Here we focus on a particularly common theme: isolation and physical distancing. In the class chat, students began broadcasting activities in which they were the sole participants and in isolation (see also Räsänen & Muhonen, 2020a). This a major thematic and topical change we observed in the chat discourse.

The chat activities we present in this section depict an isolation from social life, which contrasts with the many activities students discussed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Before the pandemic, the chat included, for example, topics related to students’ weekly hobbies, free time, and cultural activities, such as going to the movies, art galleries, or on weekend trips. Students shared posts

about the places they went to or were spending time in. These posts mentioned family members and public venues where other people also gather. After the transition to remote learning during the lockdowns, students' posts implied less movement; more chat entries were shared from static and domestic locations, such as home.

One prepandemic chat topic remained popular after the transition to remote learning: updates on the weather, especially comments on the approach—or not—of spring in the different places where the participants were then located. This can be seen in Figure 8, where a participant initiates discussion by posting a snowy scene.

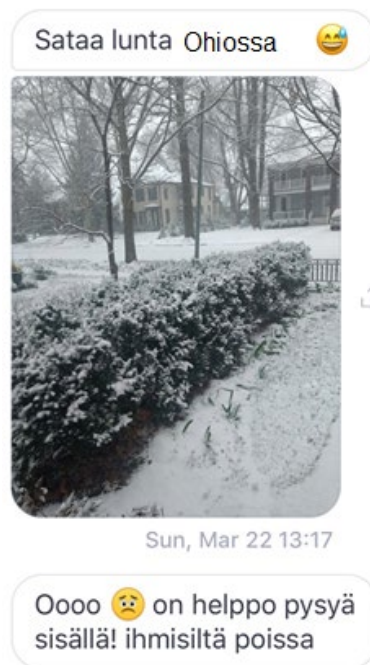


Figure 8. Away from people

The photo shows a residential street in the student's hometown. The scene is snowy and wintry, but it is already late March. There are no people or cars in the photo. The comment says "snowing in Ohio" and is highlighted by an emoji that has a drop of sweat on the forehead, perhaps as a sign of frustration. A surprised "oooo" from a peer is followed by a sad emoji, which validates the message—the weather is not inviting for going outside. At the same time, the follow-up comment creates a positive tone on the situation: "It is easy to stay indoors! Away from people." When the weather is not cooperating, one can stay indoors, and the mandatory social distancing practices are not compromised. Wang et al. (2016) reported that emojis can be used as indicators of social presence; they can also promote affective expressions and group cohesion. Also, here the use of emojis makes the communication more effective. It adds a layer of emotional response and validation to the comments. This photo demonstrates that during the COVID-19 lockdown, students broadcast their live worlds from the safety of their homes.

As seen in Figure 8, weather updates occurred regularly, as well as photos taken in close proximity to the participants' homes, even captured from their home windows or backyards. This reflects the ongoing situation; after the lockdown, students were suddenly located in different geographically distant places where the weather was also different. Later in the same chat thread, another student shared the following photo from her location. The photo was taken in a private backyard and it demonstrates the joy of spring weather (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Spring is here.

This post also depicts a weather update but instead of a wintery scene, the picture shows sun and early spring flowers. The caption reads “We are staying home in Kentucky now. Spring is here and it is nice.” A peer added, “Sunny here today, I will try to take pictures. Busy at work.” The original post thus prompted further discussion and intentions to share more. The two entries broadcast different locations and weather conditions in different parts of the North American continent.

Figure 10 relates to a theme particular to pandemic-induced isolation. The photo shows an empty street in an isolated town center.

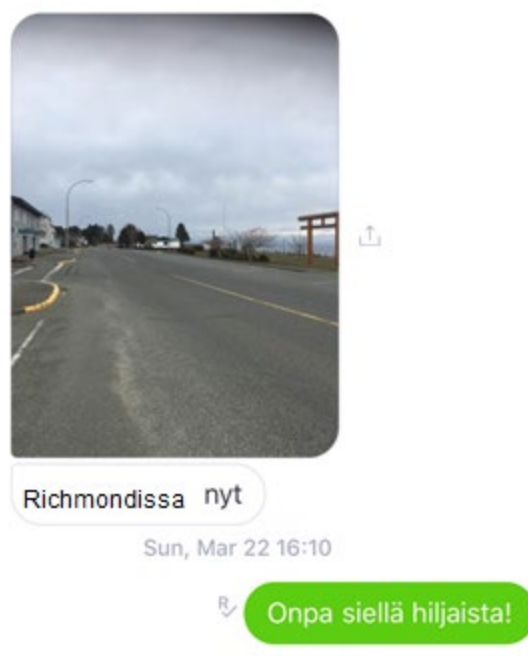


Figure 10. Quiet town

No people are to be seen on this public street. The student comments, “In Richmond now” and then, another student comments: “How quiet it is.” No additional words are added to describe

the situation: This is a snapshot framing the current location of the student and the absence of other people during the lockdown.

In all the above figures, students shared images from their current domestic locations (see also Räsänen & Muhonen, 2020a). The photos functioned as location updates—the students shared their location with their peers. Simultaneously and indirectly, the photos also described students' activities during the COVID-19 lockdown. People were staying close to home and sometimes the world was viewed through a window. Even when students went out, they shared photos and comments from empty, isolated places. Students shared pictures and videos of the places they visited even before the transition to remote learning. The notable difference is that during the time of social distancing, there were fewer participants in the activities, and there were only a few photos captured in public spaces.

Peer Support and Wishing Each Other Well

Peer support through showing solicitude and wishing each other well was a regularly occurring theme in the course chat. Even before the pandemic, students shared chat entries in which they reported if they had been ill or feeling stressed, and peers responded by offering empathy and support and wished each other well. One significant difference in the way students communicated after the COVID-19 lockdown began is the number of these exchanges; during the lockdown, participants continually checked on each other. In this section we demonstrate how students expressed their feelings and showed interest in their peers' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Figure 11, the participants described their daily activities, but the discussion highlights that they were living in exceptional times.

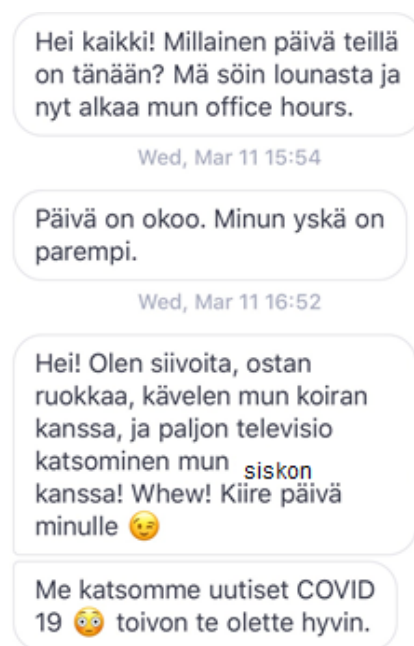


Figure 11. The day is ok.

Participant 1 began the discussion by asking others how their day has been and then continued by describing her own agenda for the day: eating and working. Participant 2 answered quite literally, “the day is ok” but also mentioned “my cough is better.” This comment implies that the topic has been discussed before. Another peer joined and wrote a longer response, describing the activities of her day, such as cleaning the house, walking the dog, and grocery shopping. This was the first instance

in the chat where the COVID-19 context was explicitly mentioned, as the student said that there had been “a lot of TV watching,” specifically that she had watched COVID-19-related news; the accompanying emoji 😬 demonstrates her feelings about the news. The discussion ends with the student wishing everyone well. There was an increase in the number of well wishes in the chat from before the pandemic, reflecting the overall situation.

Occasionally there were silent periods in the chat. In Figure 12, an instructor breaks a longer silence and prompts discussion by asking the students to share what they are doing during the pandemic: “Hi! How are you spending time at home during corona time? Let’s share ideas!”



Figure 12. Kaikille okei? Everyone All Right?

One student replied that she did not have time to think about corona activities as she was busy and stressed about work: “Work! So busy! Really stressed!” The answer was reinforced by a concerned-looking emoji 😬. She nevertheless ended the response by saying “but okay” and adding a smiling emoji 😊, which softens the message and is perhaps less concerning to other participants.

A peer responded by showing support and empathy. Empathy means knowing and feeling the same kind of feelings that another person is experiencing and being able to compassionately respond to another person’s distress (Levenson & Ruef, 1992). When a participant posted a spontaneous reaction, “Oh no!!” she validated the concern; the comment was followed by a friendly recommendation, “Remember also to relax!!” which functioned as a wish for well-being. To this the student responded “yeah,” which is followed by a counter-question of whether everything was well at the other end, to which the student responded “yes.” When students chatted about feelings of distress, other participants could respond by validating the feeling, offering emotional support, expressing empathy, or offering help or guidance (see Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2007). While the student talked about her stress, she also checked on the other students. What is significant about the chat after the COVID-19 outbreak is that many chat conversations ended in these well-wishing greetings. Students also often

asked each other how they were coping. This was not happening as systematically in the chat before the wider outbreak.

Social media connections can foster relationships and allow unfamiliar peers to form a cohesive and collaborative community (Räsänen & Muhonen, 2020b). In Figure 12, one can see the reciprocity that was prevalent throughout the chat. Thoughts on new requirements and feelings of being overwhelmed and stressed during the change were additional mutually shared experiences. In this online community, students expressed empathy and offered support in various ways, for example, by expressing mutual understanding or worry (see Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2007). This is significant, as this was a group of students who did not necessarily meet outside the classroom and course context: They lived in different countries and interacted only in the virtual group. Yet there are signs of genuine connections being made and support being offered as a community.

Discourse on Global Pandemic Activities

The student chat shows that during the lockdowns, students engaged in different ways to spend time at home. They performed many activities that were further shared in the chat, some commonly and widely discussed globally and in the media. In this section we reflect on some typical corona-time activities that were broadcast in the class chat.

One of these activities was a “quarantine workout,” an exercise routine that is done indoors at home without any special equipment. Figure 13 shows the continuation of a conversation that began during a class discussion in which participants shared their lockdown activities. An exercise video created by one of the participants was viewed in class, and another participant then shared her own video presenting a similar workout.

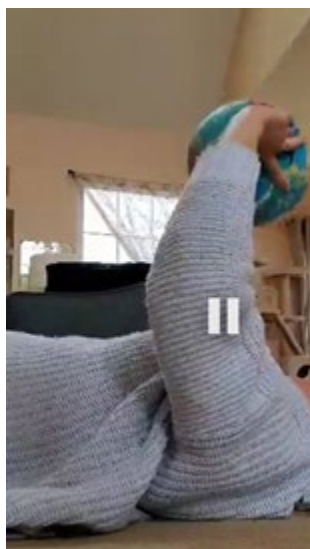


Figure 13. Lockdown workout.

In the second video, the student is lying on the ground. She first looks at the camera, waves, and says, “Moi Laura (hi, Laura),” directly addressing her greeting to the student whose lockdown workout video had been viewed in class earlier. She turns, lies on her back, points a ball toward the ceiling, and then repeatedly throws the ball in the air and catches it. In the end she turns back to the camera, waves again and says “Moi moi (bye bye).” This example shows the link between class activities and students' free-time activities; one shared video created a classroom conversation and

further became part of a free-time discourse, blurring the line between in and outside of class (see also Räsänen & Muhonen, 2020a). The video created a strong social presence with its simulation of a face-to-face interaction, building a connection in a way that texts or still photos cannot (regarding images, see Yamada, 2009). A lockdown workout was part of a wider global discourse: Media were broadcasting similar home videos from around the world. This video created a personal take on this global discourse, as the conversation continued (Figure 14).

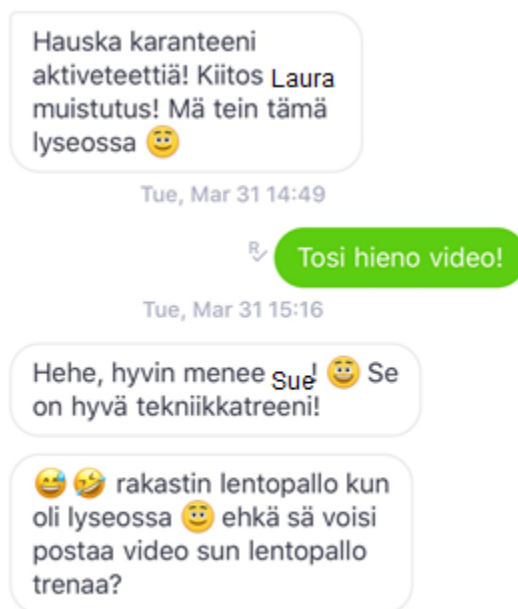


Figure 14. Lockdown exercise.

After showing the video, the student commented, “A fun quarantine activity” and thanked the other participant for inspiring her to perform an activity she remembered doing in high school: “Thanks Laura (for) the reminder! I did this in high school.” Another peer commented, “very nice video!” and Laura, the participant who had created the original classroom video, also responded with a compliment, “Haha, doing great Sue! It is a good workout for technique.” The latter video replicated the original video made for the class discussion. Laura’s comment reinforced a group dynamic: They had both been doing a similar lockdown activity and now they could compare experiences. Sue then suggested that Laura share a volleyball workout and the discussion proceeded.

This figure demonstrates that the chat enabled classroom discourse to continue outside the class; topics did not need to end when the virtual classroom went offline. The topic of the discourse not only engaged this community but was also part of the wider pandemic-time discourse. These kinds of workouts done at home were the reality for many during the lockdowns, as gyms and other sports facilities were closed. In the video and following discussion, the students were speaking solely in Finnish and that way they were also able to practice the language, although language here functions more as the medium rather than the target.

Similarly, as in many global news outlets, other shared pandemic experiences were also present in the chat. A typical theme in the news and social media outlets especially at the beginning of the pandemic was that many people were stocking items in their anticipation of a lockdown. The participants in our class chat both joked about the phenomenon and shared their own lockdown preparations with a touch of humor. Figure 15 shows a popular meme at the time.



Figure 15. Hoarding toilet paper.

The meme says “that feeling when people hoard toilet paper” and in it Captain Jean-Luc Picard from Star Trek displays a “facepalm,” a sign of frustration or embarrassment—a common meme that has been modified with different texts. As is typical of memes, this one creates irony through the interplay of text and image—the text refers to toilet paper, but the image displays a frustrated Star Trek character. This creates an ironic social commentary about hoarding toilet paper, which was a popular issue covered by many news media outlets: In stores all over the world, the toilet paper shelves were empty. Through visual information, the messages are conveyed effectively (see Katz & Thomas Crocker, 2015); here the meme reveals the participant’s opinion on the issue.

In Figure 16, in contrast, a participant shares a video of her own preparations: She is showing all the things she has gotten from the grocery store. She has stocked items and organized them in her pantry, which she refers to as “my little store.” In the video, she demonstrates her lockdown preparations and shows her peers what she has in her stock, as the screenshots emphasize.

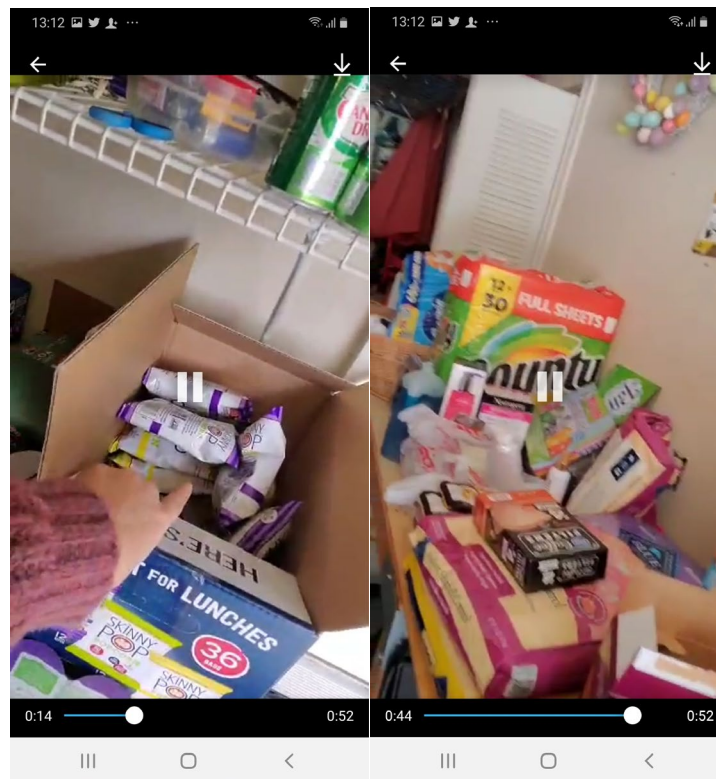


Figure 16. Stocking up at home.

Ida: hei kaikki.... Öö, mun pieni kauppa. [moves camera, shows products on the shelf] popkornia, öö, hah. these things hah. Ää. Ää. [looks up] Paljon jutut. [taps a can] teetä. uuh. [grabs a box of tea; box falls on the ground; points the camera at the ground]. Ensimmäinen teetä. [waves camera around the room...shows more products] Okei, toivon sä hyvin. Moi moi.

The video begins when Ida waves and says, “Hi everybody. My little shop,” after which she points the camera at the products on the shelf. Then she describes the contents of the pantry: “popcorn,” she says, laughing, and continues in English “these things hah”. Then she laughs, grabs a box of tea that has fallen to the ground from the tall pile of products and says: “first tea.” She then grabs the box and shows that she also has more tea. She moves the camera around to show the shelves filled with food. The video demonstrates that the student’s pantry is full of products. She continues to move the camera around and shows more products. The video ends “Okay, I hope you are well, bye bye” while she waves at the audience. The video seems spontaneous and unrehearsed; it has been posted without editing, which makes it a momentary sharing of her home interior. This video is personal, and it invites other students into her home: She shows her own face in the video. This chat entry is again tied to the wider pandemic discourse and to the “hoarding toilet paper discourse” shown in Figure 14; purchasing many things from the store at the beginning of the lockdowns was a typical survival strategy: Preparedness for the situation was considered important during unpredictable times. This video broadcast an ironic story about her preparations, because it is titled “My little store,” indicating that she almost has a small grocery store at home now.

The last figure (Figure 17) of the students’ lockdown activities and common practices during the lockdown is a discussion about going to the library; many public services including libraries were closed. This became evident even in the class chat when a student wrote that she was preparing for COVID-19 by getting books from the library through a curbside pick-up window.

Hei! Tänään, mä tilaan paljon kirjat (noin 20) kirjastolle. Me ottaisimme (? can get) kirjat kirjasto "ajaa-thru." 😊

Pysymme kotona paljon koska me olemme vähän sairas ja Covid-19. Vähemmän televisio tänään!

Figure 17. Library curbside pick-up.

In the chat the student wrote, “Hi! Today, I ordered a lot of books (about 20) from the library. We can get the books from the library ‘drive-thru.’” The student continued, “I stay at home a lot because we are a little sick and [then there is] Covid-19. Less television today!” This message functions as a status update of what she is currently doing. As the library is not offering in-person services, the books need to be acquired from the curbside pick-up. The post demonstrates something extraordinary about the situation: Getting books from a drive-through was a new experience for many during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This figure also touches on other common COVID-19-related discourses. The student shared that her family was staying home because someone in the family was showing symptoms of illness.

She also tells that COVID-19 regulations keep people at home. Watching less television was also related to the global phenomenon: During the pandemic, many have been watching a great deal of television and news in particular.

Conclusion

In this article we have described and analyzed students' collaborative practices in a virtual chat that connected Finnish language learners at two North American universities. The chat took place during the spring 2020 semester when the unprecedented COVID-19 outbreak moved university courses online. Because all participants had use of a mobile device, the class was able to smoothly continue the chat activity even after the outbreak. We have looked at what kind of COVID-19-related discourse emerged in the chat. We have demonstrated that there was a COVID-19-related thematic shift in the student chat. Students shared chat entries related to their remote language studies, such as studying at home. We also identified chat entries that discussed physical distancing and broadcast domestic spaces—staying indoors or close to home, or not seeing people in public places. Students communicated support for each other and exchanged greetings and expressions of solicitude and concern about one another. They also engaged in addressing general global COVID-19-related discussion topics, themes, and activities, such as “hoarding” things from the grocery store or doing a lockdown workout.

In the chat entries students shared their general COVID-19-related experiences. Mutual to all was the shared goal of communicating in Finnish, and it is significant that all of this relevant and authentic sharing was conducted in the Finnish language. It seems that students were less in their student roles. The extension of this course assignment was not central to their course workload or learning: The task was graded only on participation, and fewer entries would have qualified for participation points in the assignment. Despite this, students regularly communicated in the class chat and shared genuine interest and concern about the other students' lives and well-being. Blended learning can conveniently take place in many different spaces; mobile apps are further broadening the spectrum of possible spaces for learning (see Neumeier, 2005), as they did here where the use of mobile devices allowed the capturing of many different life events and spaces. The use of mobile phones increased the students' opportunities to communicate and keep in touch with their peers, especially during the physical isolation caused by the COVID-19 lockdowns.

We have demonstrated how the use of technology can significantly enhance students' learning experience. The authentic and genuine connections were created through the class chat via a social media app that was applied primarily to provide foreign-language-learning practice and help strengthen students' sense of belonging to a larger peer community. During challenging times, it enabled authentic sharing and language use about current activities, and as we have demonstrated, sometimes even about troubling and uncomfortable topics.

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