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Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository

**Original citation:**

Smith, S & Keng, N 2017, 'A Business Writing OIL (Online International Learning): A Finland/UK Case Study' *International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching (IJCALLT)*, vol 7, no. 4, pp. 33-43

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4018/IJCALLT.2017100103>

DOI [10.4018/IJCALLT.2017100103](https://dx.doi.org/10.4018/IJCALLT.2017100103)

ISSN 2155-7098

ESSN 2155-7101

Publisher: IGI Global

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# A Business Writing OIL (Online International Learning): A Finland/UK Case Study Special Issue

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## ABSTRACT

Online International Learning (OIL) helps to integrate soft skills into the academic curriculum, as well as providing students with international interaction opportunities. In this article, we evaluate the extent to which telecollaborative writing tasks between UK-based (mostly Chinese) and Finnish students over an online platform can benefit academic writing learning experience and contribute to curriculum and materials design in EAP. In the article, there are two groups of learners from different geographical contexts, Finland and the UK. The Finland-based students are almost all Finnish, while those studying in the UK are mostly from China. In both cases, the target language is English. The students in Finland worked in pairs to create authentic case study materials, and the students in the UK, in what we characterize as “stimulus writing”, produced reports based on the case studies they had been given.

## KEYWORDS

Academic Writing, Chinese Students, Collaborative Writing, EAP, English, Finnish Students, OIL, Stimulus Writing, Telecollaboration

## INTRODUCTION

At the university level in the Nordic countries, the emphasis in English teaching is increasingly on academic skills. Although many university students are fluent and proficient users of English, their level of English is not as strong on the academic register as might be expected (Henriksen & Danelund, 2015). Previous studies have shown that Finnish students appear to be critical and analytical in writing rather than in speaking, and they are generally good at providing detailed feedback to peers in writing (Keng, 2016). The main aim of the academic writing course in Finnish universities (such as the University of Vaasa, one of the partners in this project) has been to assist students in writing their thesis by providing feedback from the teachers instead of training students how to create, adapt and fine-tune their own texts. As Keng (2016) pointed out, the need for academic writing courses is recognized by students, but the skills required are rarely specified and typical writing tasks assigned are not always popular.

DOI: 10.4018/IJCALLT.2017100103

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UK universities accepting large numbers of international students (such as the first author's, Coventry University) face different challenges. For example, the standard of English proficiency is often so low that it is difficult to devise academic writing tasks based on authentic discipline materials that students find manageable, so one is sometimes obliged to resort to simplified resources including readings from textbooks. This state of affairs led the authors to devise a case study and report writing task which offered a semi-authentic task in which students from both types of institution could be involved. Because the two cohorts were geographically distant from each other, an Online International Learning approach was decided upon.

Online International Learning (OIL) has been advocated at Coventry University as a form of "virtual mobility" (O'Brien, 2017; Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018) to embed soft skills into the academic curriculum and provide students and staff with an opportunity to interact with their counterparts internationally. This pilot study suggests that telecollaborative writing tasks between the UK and Finnish students may benefit both cohorts' learning experience in academic writing, support their writing process and contribute to EAP curriculum design.

### **Prior Work on Telecollaboration**

Much of the early online inter-cultural work described in the literature is based on the "tandem" model, where two groups of learners study each other's language (where the target language of each group is the L1 of the other). English, however, has the greatest global reach of all languages, as the language which is the most widely taught and studied, and through the medium of which the most content is delivered on internationalized learning programmes. In tandem programmes, the decision on which language—L1 or L2—learners should use is non-trivial, as an opportunity to practise L2 for one group is an opportunity denied the other group. O'Dowd (2007:9) also notes that interaction in L2 may cause learners to over-simplify or leave unstated their intended message. Where one of the L2s is English, it is very likely that learners will be more advanced in that language than their peers in the other L2. O'Dowd (2007:49) notes that this proficiency imbalance can give rise to a "lingua franca" effect (whereby the language that is less well-known of the pair is rarely used or practised). The MexCo project at Coventry University (Orsini-Jones et al., 2017) started out life in 2011 as a Spanish/English tandem project, but by 2014 had developed into an English lingua franca (ELF) project. The aim of the project was to impart intercultural awareness between UK students of English language and literature, and Mexican students from a wide range of disciplines; there was no special focus on foreign language skills.

Chase and Alexander (2007) describe their "Japan-Korea cultural exchange project" (JKCE), which has been very successful in giving students from those two countries a platform to interact, in English, with peers from another culture, which is in many ways similar to their own, and in other ways rather different.

Preshous, Ostin and Keng (forthcoming) describe a telecollaborative project with students of business in three countries—the UK, Belgium and Finland. Most of the participants from the latter two were natives of their respective countries; those from the UK were of Malaysian, Chinese and Indonesian origin. The project aimed to develop intercultural competence and business communication skills, which participants practised both synchronously and asynchronously. As an introductory task, they asked and answered questions about each other's cultures. In the main phase of the project, participants selected a product from their home country, and developed a business pitch to try to launch the product in a global market. An interesting feature of Preshous et al.'s research was that feedback was offered on the business pitches by three tutors with three different specialisms: culture, business and language.

Another ELF study, Castro and Derivry-Plard (2016), also focused on both language and intercultural dimensions. Students (from France and Spain) commented that on the language dimension, the experience was "not only good to improve the language, but also to feel comfortable speaking it", while on the intercultural dimension, a student mentioned "learning strategies that I

have learnt such as patience, to be able to empathise, to adapt myself to other demands, to make agreements and negotiate with others” (p. 80).

If Preshous et al.’s project—a collaboration among three countries—is ambitious, that of Abruquah, Dosa, and Duda (2016) seems doubly so. Abruquah et al.’s participants were students in Finland, Hungary, Poland, Estonia and Spain, studying a variety of different majors, but all seeking to improve their English through telecollaboration. The exact tasks assigned are not described by Abruquah et al. in great detail, and nor are the student interactions. What is worthy of note here, though, is that no actual collaborative platform was supplied: the participants worked on shared files or documents, and communicated when necessary by email. Of the different national groups, the Hungarians gave the most positive feedback, closely followed by the Finns.

Various studies have examined the learning styles and approach to online collaboration of different cultural groups, often noting that students of Asian contexts or origins may be more reserved in their interactions, less likely to experiment, and more reliant on teachers than (for example) their American counterparts. Iivonen et al. (1998), in a study of Finnish and American collaboration, found that the Americans contributed more to online discussion forums, confirming a cultural expectation that Finnish people are generally quieter.

Kim and Bonk (2002) investigated Korean, Finnish and American university students, and their use of an asynchronous tool called COW (“Conferencing on the Web”). The authors used the tool to analyse and discuss cases in their specialism, psychology. They conclude that the Koreans are more socially motivated in their online interactions, whilst the Finns were more “group-focused and reflective”. American students were more likely to be “action-oriented and pragmatic in seeking results or giving solutions”.

Prior research has shown that the extent to which collaborative work can be incorporated into the curriculum depends on the degree of flexibility allowed locally. O’Rourke (2007: 51) holds that variables such as language proficiency of students, their motivation as well as that of their teachers, and the importance and weighting given for example to assessments, should all be matched to the extent that “institutional constraints” allow it. As we will see shortly, in the work described here the two partners did not have this degree of reciprocity in all respects; we were fortunate that this did not impact adversely on the study, and in fact we were able to turn the mismatch to our advantage.

Domínguez-Miguela (2007:89) describes the use of the TwinSpace tool on her Tandem learning project. This tool provides a cloud-like work and storage space for files and communications between project partners. Although, with the advent of the cloud, shared storage has become more readily available in recent years, institutional constraints in this respect have again proved a challenge to collaboration, and this, it will be demonstrated, was certainly an issue in our own work.

Ware and Pérez Cañado (2007: 116) discuss peer feedback in telecollaboration, noting that there is surprising little extant work in this area. One paper, cited by them, reports that online feedback tends to focus more on surface level corrections, while face-to-face interaction is more likely to include discussions about meaning and structure. This finding is corroborated by our own study (Smith & Smith, 2015), which indicates that holistic rather than surface feedback from teachers is more likely to be acted on if it is given face to face. Peers may miss errors or give feedback which is incorrect, and clearly the recipients of the feedback are aware of these possibilities. Ware and Pérez Cañado find (perhaps rather unsurprisingly) that students do place a greater value on feedback from teachers than from peers. Hyland and Hyland (2006) pointed out that teachers aim to provide feedback targeting the learner, whereas peers may lack the experience to comment sensitively, focusing more on the writing than the human being behind it. In the MexCo project mentioned above, Orsini-Jones et al. (2017: 25), the authors refer to the rules of “online engagement”, warning of the risks of “using English as a lingua franca with speakers/writers who might not be fully aware of how their intended intercultural meaning is going to be “read”.

Müller-Hartmann (2007: 174) recommends that the collaborating students should get to know each other by writing short introduction pieces, or having synchronous introductory conversations.

Where students are going to be working together on a project and/or offering each other feedback, this makes a great deal of sense. In our telecollaboration, we departed from this model. We did not arrange for the partnering students to meet, nor actively work together, nor offer feedback. Instead, we used a model of stimulus writing, where an output from one set of students is sent to the other set, and is expected to trigger or inspire a piece in a somewhat different genre from the second set. We will return to this in the Methodology.

## Research Questions

We aim to find out whether such telecollaborative writing tasks can benefit both cohorts of students in the two countries. More specifically, we would like to find out whether the merits of the project will influence students' writing experience in these aspects:

1. Did the writing tasks raise the awareness of different genres of writing?
2. Did the type of writing tasks related to their subject areas help in their writing/learning?
3. Can such collaborative writing tasks motivate students?

## METHODOLOGY

In our own study, there are two groups of learners in different geographical contexts, Finland and the UK. The Finland-based students are mostly Finnish, while those studying in the UK are almost all from China. In both cases, the target language is English.

As noted earlier, we decided to use a stimulus writing approach because we were wary of asking students to provide peer feedback, which might have contained erroneous corrections and possibly presented in a less than sensitive way. We were keenly aware of the cultural differences between our two cohorts, but were unsure how these might play out in a feedback context. Although our findings suggest that our students would have enjoyed the opportunity to interact, perhaps even synchronously, constraints of timetabling and syllabus in any case militated against this, as did the unequal size of the two cohorts.

Furthermore, we were well aware that there was a fair difference between the cohorts in terms of English proficiency. The Finnish students, on the whole, are C1 or C2 users of English, at least in terms of speaking skills. The Chinese students in the UK often have IELTS scores of 6 or above, so in principle are B2 users; in practice, though, they often struggle to articulate the simplest structures, and seem to have little idea of basic grammar rules of English (such as the need for a verb in most sentences).

In the study, we exploit the proficiency difference by differentiating tasks. The Finns were given a relatively difficult task, namely composing (from scratch) a case study about a Finnish or Scandinavian business. They were asked to work in pairs, drawing on their own knowledge, as well as academic or business sources, to construct a case study of 1200-1500 words based on a Finnish or Nordic company. They were told that the case studies were for the students in the UK who would be acting as consultants to write a report with suggestions based on the case studies given. Thus, it is the sort of document that a consultant might be commissioned to write for an organization in the real world. The UK cohort students are motivated to practise writing such reports, and this is something they have to do in their end-of-module exam. Students are invited to structure the report as a SWOT analysis, followed by recommendations, or in some other appropriate format.

There were 22 participants in the Finnish cohort. They worked in pairs to produce 11 case studies. The case studies were then presented in a reasonably attractive Padlet format to the UK cohort, who looked at some of them in a 2-hour class. They were asked to browse the 11 case studies, and determine basic facts about the company concerned, such as the company name, where it was headquartered, and the product/service and sector involved.

The students in the UK cohort were divided into groups of four or five, and each of the 11 case studies was to be read by at least one group member. The groups were then asked to choose one case study, print off a copy for each member, and read it carefully again. In the following class, the groups held an informal seminar discussion activity based on their chosen case study. A role-play activity was run, where some of the group members moved to other groups and pretended to be bank managers, while the students remaining in-group were the board/management of the company which was the subject of the case study, and had to seek finance from those playing the role of bank managers.

The following week, students were asked to individually write a “report” on the case study. This report is a genre that had been taught in previous weeks, where essentially the writer analyses documents or resources to determine how matters in a company could be improved (for example, revenue increased). Thus it may be seen that the case studies from Finland truly act as a stimulus and inspiration for the reports.

Feedback on the case studies was provided by the teachers of the UK cohort, thus availing the students of constructive comment from someone other than their usual teacher, and lending the proceedings a somewhat international or collaborative flavour. As well as the feedback to the Finnish cohort, the reports were marked as a formative assessment. Furthermore, a copy of two relatively high quality reports were returned to the authors of the case study that inspired it. These were uploaded and displayed, again in Padlet format, for the Finnish students to read. They were asked to write comments on the reports in the questionnaire they were given, which is described in the next section.

## Findings

A combination of 5-point Likert Scale questions (see Table 1) and open-ended questions was constructed in a questionnaire, which was distributed in class to the Finnish students. Completed questionnaires were collected anonymously.

We found a positive result (5 = Strongly Agree; 4= Mostly Agree) in response to all Likert scale questions (28.7% and 43.52%), as shown in Table 2.

**Table 1. Likert scale questions**

Question	The task.....
A	... raised my awareness of different genres of academic English writing
B	... improved my writing skills.
C	... developed my teamwork skills.
D	... improved my research skills.
E	... helped me in my English learning/writing related to my subject area.
F	... motivated me in writing when knowing the students in England will write reports based on my case study

**Table 2 Responses to Likert scale questions (aggregated)**

Question A-F		
Score	No.	Percentage
5	31	28.7%
4	47	43.52%
3	25	23.15%
2	3	2.78%
1	2	1.85%

Figure 1 shows the key findings from the distribution of students' response in Question A, E and F. These three sets of responses directly address the research questions of the present study. In terms of the awareness of different genres in academic writing (Question A: This task raised my awareness of different genres of academic English writing), the majority of students agreed that the case study writing task raised their awareness (27.8% of the scores in Strongly Agree and 50% in Mostly Agree). None of the students disagreed. This result responds to our research question 1.

Over 75% of the students agree that the task helped them with their subject knowledge and English learning/writing (Question E: This task helped me in my English learning/writing related to my subject area). In terms of motivation in writing (Question F: This task motivated me in writing when knowing the students in England will write reports based on my case study), Figure 1 shows that students were motivated by the fact that their case studies were sent to the students in the UK (27.78% of the scores in Strongly Agree and 55.56% in Mostly Agree).

As the number of the respondents is small, we calculated the median and Inter-Quartile Range (IQR) to show the measure of central tendency and the measure of dispersion. Table 3 shows that all the questions reveal an indication of consensus with relatively small IQR.

Figure 1. Finnish students' response to questions addressing RQs

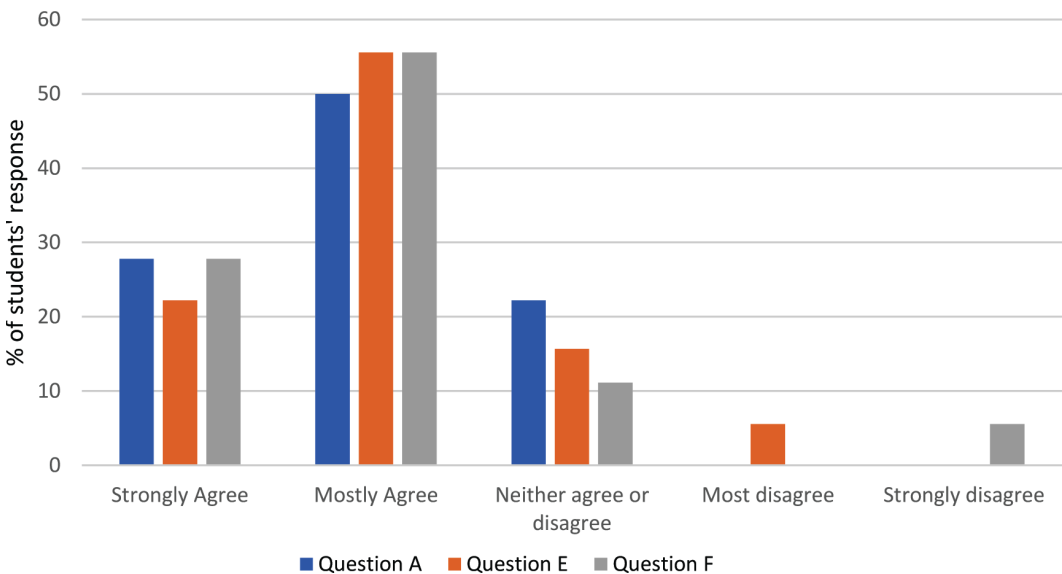


Table 3. Median and inter-quartile range in the responses

Question	The task.....	Median	IQR
a	... raised my awareness of different genres of academic English writing	4	2
b	... improved my writing skills.	4	2
c	... developed my teamwork skills.	4	0.5
d	... improved my research skills.	4	1.75
e	... helped me in my English learning/writing related to my subject area.	4	0.5
f	... motivated me in writing when knowing the students in England will write reports based on my case study	4	0.5

In relation to Figure 1, Table 3 confirms that most respondents indicated a significant agreement (with IQR 0.5) with the idea that this task motivated them in writing when knowing their writing were used as resources for their counterparts in England. There is also a similarly significant agreement (IQR 0.5) to the positive learning experience in subject-related writing.

In the open-ended questions, all students showed appreciation of the feedback they received from the teachers in the UK:

*The comments are very useful. They point out some mistakes that I normally wouldn't notice. (S1)*

*Now I know I have to concentrate on my use of articles more. (S2)*

*It is very useful and good to know what we should improve in the future. (S3)*

There are some comments about their counterparts' English level; however, according to the Finnish students, the most valuable part of the collaboration is that they were more motivated in completing the written task when knowing their writing was serving an authentic pedagogical purpose:

*The most interesting thing was that someone actually wanted to write a review based on our case study. (S2)*

*It is really interesting to read report that has been written from outsiders' perspective. (S1)  
Their grammar and writing aren't good, but we observe that we don't all learn English the same way. (S6)*

*It is interesting to find that students searched a lot of information about our case company and Finland. (S7)*

*The most interesting thing is that they as readers can find problems that I as an author easily neglect. (S9)*

All the students indicated that they would be interested in participating in interaction with the students in the UK if such an activity had been offered, and this will be taken into account in the next iteration of our study.

## **Limitations**

For logistical (ethics procedure) reasons, we were unable to obtain formal feedback from the UK cohort students; this is a clear limitation of the study, which will be addressed in the next iteration. Still, anecdotal and informal feedback indicates that the UK cohort were pleased that case studies had been prepared especially for them, and that this was very motivating for them. Many of them acknowledged in their reports that these were based on case studies from Finland, sometimes mentioning the case study authors' names (although this had not been required of them).

In the next iteration, we will also map the students' survey responses to the standard of their writing, to establish whether (for example) their declared motivation results in a higher quality product.

Ideally, we would hope to pair up the Finnish students and the Chinese students, so that Finnish students can provide peer feedback on the reports the Chinese students wrote. However, because of the disparity of the group size, as well as the other logistical problems alluded to in the Methodology it was not possible on this occasion.



## CONCLUSION

As noted earlier, this study investigated the affordances and pedagogical benefits of a stimulus writing telecollaboration. Most telecollaboration studies and OIL projects emphasise cultural exchange and intercultural competence (O’Dowd, 2015). In our study, the emphasis is on developing academic writing skills, and through the collaboration providing both groups with a “real” readership, making the writing task more motivating and meaningful.

For the Finnish students, this task was seen as a refreshing change to the traditional Academic Writing course design, which served to raise their awareness of different writing genres in English. They also had the opportunity to engage in pair-writing, as well as developing research skills in the topics related to their own specialist subject. Earlier cohorts of the Chinese students in the UK had been required to write a report based on an assigned case study, typically from a textbook. In the present study, however, they were free to choose their preferred case study from the range of materials created—as part of a bona fide task—by their counterparts.

Nearly all the students showed interest in further interaction with the students in the UK. As noted above, we plan to integrate some online communication in the next iteration of the study. Skype discussion meetings are one possibility, although given the time difference and timetabling concerns, we may realistically need to focus on asynchronous communication, such as video presentations or communication via online forums.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire Given to Finnish Students

Please take a few minutes to complete this short survey asking for your reflections on this case study task. All data collected in this survey will be held anonymously and securely. Many thanks for taking the time to complete this questionnaire - your feedback and co-operation in this project is appreciated.

1. Consider the following statements in terms of the case study task.

For each statement, mark ✓ in one box only.

The task .....	Select One Response per Question				
	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree
..... raised my awareness of different genres of academic English writing.					
..... improved my writing skills.					
..... developed my teamwork skills.					
..... improved my research skills.					
..... helped me in my English learning/writing related to my subject area.					
..... motivated me in writing when knowing the students in England will write reports based on my case study.					

2. How is the case study task different from other types of English writing tasks you have done before?
3. What writing skills have you developed when the topic of case study is related to your subject area?
4. To what extent did you find the comments and feedback from a UK teacher useful? How did it help you in your writing?
5. Did you find the reports written by the UK students of interest? What did you find most interesting?
6. What did you find most challenging about writing a case study? What did you do to deal with this challenge?
7. If this task had included interaction with the students in the UK, would you have been interested in participating?

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