

**Research Article****NORDIC COOPERATION FOR LEARNING LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: INTERNATIONAL INTENSIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING WEEKS IN ESTONIA, SWEDEN AND FINLAND****\*Kristina Mullamaa**

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**Abstract**

When learning a language, no extra opportunities for getting in contact with the language and culture that we learn can be superfluous. Also, some variety in the teaching process is needed to make learning and understanding easy and enjoyable. Thus, in order to make our language studies more rewarding for our students, we have decided to participate in a project that involves a study week abroad almost each study year. Such an arrangement has been taking place for about for 9 years, since 2015, with the exception of the Corona years (2020-2021). During that week we rotate annually the host role of a Nordic university (Estonia-Sweden-Finland), enabling students to delve in the intricacies of Business Swedish during it. We hope that using different formats in university learning, including a format like this, can be seen to have several traits of innovative learning and thus we wish to share our experience with the wider audience. The article sums up some advantages of the one-week intensive training and cultural immersion study course (Intensive Business Swedish Week) set-up – for language learning, context understanding, insight into cultural nuances, and personal and academic growth of both participating students and teachers. **Novelty of the contribution:** Modern teaching entails including students in teaching and learning design and practice. In this case, we have experimented with including them in a one-week intensive study period abroad. Spending a week abroad is a rather usual study format. In our case, it is not just study visits, but a coherently built-up intensive learning course that takes place there. In addition to the course results, the article analyzes the cultural impact of this learning arrangement and gives advice to colleagues wishing to initiate similar cooperation.

**Keywords:** Epidemiology, Prevalence, Incidence, Descriptive research, Health epidemic

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**INTRODUCTION**

In modern learning, business studies should often include an understanding of different culture and skills in different languages. Business studies include a lot of theory, but the communicative side is as important. Fluent language, and importantly – knowing the details of cultures – bring success or delete a project.

How to enable students to learn all three in a fun and attractive way?

To unite these aspects, we have decided to participate in and organize Intensive Business Swedish Weeks (BSW) that take place annually on a rotating basis in three Nordic countries: Sweden, Estonia and Finland. The goal of organizing such Weeks has been language learning, but also promoting entrepreneurship and managerial skills in tune with their cultural knowledge. In this article we share our experience of participating in (and organizing our share of) these intensive Business Swedish Weeks. The aim is to analyze the benefits of international cooperation, learning language, communication and cultural nuances needed for business development and also one's professional and personal growth.

The structure of the article is the following:

1. The set-up and principles of the International Business Swedish Week
2. A brief survey of some relevant highlights in literature on student learning through doing, positive emotions and experiencing

3. What do we learn during the Business Swedish Weeks
4. Observed benefits and student feedback on Intensive weeks and Possible lessons for the future
5. Conclusion

The methodological framework of the article is Ethnography. It is action research based on the description of activities over a prolonged period of time. The analysis is enriched with a brief literature review on project cooperation and learning specific cultural aspects. The empirical part consists of Semi-structured interviews with participating students (7x4= 28) and teachers (4) during the cooperation period. At the end of each study visit the students write a self-analysis based on a semi-structured interview questions. Also these self-analyses results have been taken into account in final analysis of the process experience description.

**The article is presented an opinion/discussion article.**

**Business Swedish Weeks and their arrangement principles***The set-up and principles of the courses*

So - What is a Business Swedish Week?

The Business Swedish Week (BSW) is a cooperation format between Tartu University (Estonia), Halmstad University (Sweden), Tampere University (Finland). Since 2015 these three universities in Northern Europe (Finland, Sweden and Estonia) have participated in organizing these. The initiative came from Joni Sallila at Tampere University of Applied Sciences. The goal is to teach students Business Swedish in a stimulating and authentic environment. The course also aims at encouraging students' business-thinking, developing their

managerial skills, learning and self-efficacy through deep motivation and insight. The idea, projects for the cooperation, as well as financial and arrangement organization come from lecturer in Swedish and English Joni Sallila from Tampere (Tammerfors) University of Applied Sciences in Finland. During one week, students and teachers of Swedish at the three universities (Tampere, Halmstad, Tartu) meet. One of the universities in Estonia-Sweden-Finland becomes the host for the event every year, on a rotating basis. During this week, students (and teachers) learn Business Swedish, have lectures, seminars and practical hand-on activities on Swedish business and communication style. In addition to this, we also organize different study visits to local companies, start-ups, creative people, and some cultural projects.

This cooperation is enabled by the Nordplus project – a program funded by the Nordic countries with the goal of enabling student and teacher cooperation, language learning and getting to know Nordic values and neighbors. Benefits of international exchange programs have been brought out in numerous articles as well as project home pages. For example, TBS education points out that international experiences constitute

“an immersive dive into the local culture, traditions, and societal norms that can be vastly different from their own. This firsthand cultural exposure fosters a deep appreciation for diversity and helps them break away from any ethnocentric views they might unconsciously hold. (<https://www.tbs-education.com/inspiring/advantages-of-international-exchange-programs/>)

It is also pointed out that such arrangements help students to get aware of their own identity and culture, as well as see and practice their potential of being a cultural “ambassador” for their country.

“On the cultural front, students experience a rich exchange. They develop invaluable intercultural skills, get exposed to new traditions, food, and customs, and learn to appreciate cultural differences firsthand. The experience often instills a deep sense of global citizenship” (ibid.).

Speaking more specifically about Nordplus, as Tretjakova (2022: 1) points out:

“The Nordplus programme supports projects that promote knowledge acquisition, exchange and networking. The programme embraces various spheres where such aims can be achieved including youth education, higher education, education of adults, horizontal education as well as Nordic languages”.

Our project aims at doing exactly this – promoting knowledge, exchange and networking. In addition to the formal program, there is an active “immersion” in the Swedish language and culture. In addition to the lectures at the university, different events are organized in informal settings. As students from the three countries are strongly encouraged to only speak Swedish, this also enables them to practice “real-life” Swedish in real communication. It is important that “real” in this context indeed means also many cultural conventions and principles that have to be followed in order for the communication to go right.

## The benefits for learning during additional programs and cultural immersion

Research on learning abounds on sources indicating that diversity enriches both the knowledge and motivation in students. Extracurricular activities, such as study trips definitely are one of the options that can bring more exchange and also positive emotions to learning. As our goal with this article is not to develop further the theory on the benefits of extracurricular activities, but rather the description of one specific framework for that, we will be relatively brief on the sum up of this area, giving just some signposts from research in the area to support our claims. Readers interested in deeper analyses on the topic are welcome to consult some of our earlier research, like e.g. Mullamaa 2020, 2022, 2023. Some of the main gist supporters of these will be briefed upon below.

### Having fun in the learning process

Research in psychology hints at that working with glee having a positive effect on the learning process. For example, Forgas (2001: 6; emphasis mine) points to the *rather specific cognitive areas* – that we deem to be essential in learning – to be *influenced by affect*:

/ Modern research KM/ “ /.../ clearly points to a *bidirectional rather than unidirectional link between affect and cognition*. There is much evidence for *affect influencing attention, memory, thinking, associations and judgements*. /.../

Also research on learning and student development has pointed to the link between positive feelings and cognition. More than that, the connection with experiences, insights, new impressions are mentioned. For me, this is an important aspect related to study visits in general. I suggest a connection to the positivity in the learning atmosphere and intensive weeks and organized study weeks abroad – can be made. For example, Boekarts (2007, emphasis mine) indicates:

“ /.../ an extensive body of literature documents that *individual’s emotions arising from an experience influence the content of their cognition, motivation and actions, as well as the way they act and process information*”.

As we see, the enjoying of the learning process not only influences the cognition and motivation, but also *information processing*. Forgas (2001: 11, emphasis mine) documents:

“ /.../ affect may also influence cognitive processing style owing to its motivational consequences. Positive affect may *motivate direct strategies designed to maintain a favourable mood*, for example, by avoiding cognitive effort. “ Furthermore, positive affect influences our memory. Forgas (ibid.: 11) points out:

“ /.../ affect will also have an impact on associations, inferences, and interpretations. /.../

Moreover, he also sees that “ *affective states are intimately linked to people’s memory representation*” (ibid.). And – what’s most important for me – Forgas’ research (ibid., emphasis mine) shows that strongly affective experiences “ /.../ can also influence impressions about people /.../ , *as well as self-perceptions*” (cf. also Mullamaa...).

### ***A boost to self-perception and identity creation***

As directly results from the above, we may suggest that if positive emotions and affect can influence students' self-perceptions, their enhanced self-image may also support their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, I suggest, could be described as strong internal motivation, coupled with your belief in achieving what you undertake. So is it emphasized e.g. in Reeve 2009:

“Persons with a strong sense of self-efficacy attend to the challenges of the task, visualize competent scenarios for forthcoming behaviors, and harbor enthusiasm, optimism and interest. Persons with a weak sense of efficacy, however, dwell on personal deficiencies, visualize the formidable obstacles they face, and harbor pessimism, anxiety and depression”.

As is also widely acclaimed in popular science (cf. Duhigg 2023), the achievement of results is often related to adapting one's identity. For – a strongly simplified - example: Instead of thinking “ *I must be health-oriented. I must go running this evening*”, you make it your identity: “ *I am a person going running every day. I love it!*”.

As said above, a plethora of additional relevant resources could be cited for the support of additional motivation enhancement, as well as the role of believing in oneself, self-efficacy and positive emotions in learning – which all occur, we believe, during such extracurricular activities.

But let us now turn away from theory, and look towards the concrete opportunities for learning (and building self-efficacy, as well as motivation through positive emotions) during our Business Swedish Weeks.

### **What do we Learn during the Business Swedish Week**

The contents of the Business Swedish Week consist of learning in the classroom, learning during study visits and cultural visits, and finally – learning during communication (in Swedish!) between the students (and teachers) themselves. Below, we take a look at each of the learning (and fun) areas.

### **Learning Business Swedish - The Primary Goal of the Business Swedish Course**

The primary goal for arranging the Intensive Swedish Weeks is to enable students to develop their Swedish, especially Business Swedish skills. Learning is definitely made more fun through the authentic environment. The opportunity to visit Swedish enterprises in all three countries, to meet and speak to company founders, and hearing their story in native Swedish during the company visits is often the highlight of the trip for representatives of all countries. But it is also often the classroom where the seminars and mini-lessons give students the right tools to conceptualize what they see.

### **Business Culture and Cultural-Organizational and Conceptual Principles, Values and Behaviours**

Cultures and behaviors vary across nations and across geopolitical borders. As the Business Swedish lectures and seminars are always given by the Swedish students learning to become future teachers of Swedish at Halmstad högskola, we can be assured of that

1. The latest native language context trends and principles are being taught to our Finnish and Estonian students.
2. As the students are also most eager to convey their knowledge and skills as well as possible (and in addition to the inner motivation, they are also observed by their teachers of practice (*undervisningspraktik!*)), the materials, topics brought up, as well as methods of teaching and charisma are top-notch.

### **Cultural communication: what to learn in Business Swedish communication**

The topics taught have – throughout the years – entailed most of the traditional business language classes constituents, starting from greetings, starting the conversation, writing e-mails and delivering presentations. Also figurative language and metaphors, as well as idiomatic expressions and sayings have been the topic in our classes – fully reasonable, as fruitful communication entails creative and flexible language use.

It is especially important that within this – perhaps seemingly easy topic range – essential cultural nuances and issues were tackled.

### ***An example of culturally influenced topics in Business Language: How to write e-mails?***

For example, the future Swedish teachers have taught the Estonian and Finnish students how to write e-mails that are efficient and strike the right tone in the Swedish business- and work context. So let us take a look at this topic, as an illustration of how one of the areas may be culture-specific, and what one might learn related to this during an intercultural immersive intensive week.

As support, I would like to use a good recent article on this topic, by Stolt and Bergström (2024), who have devoted some research on this important area of Swedish Business Style in communication.

Stolt and Bergström (ibid.) point out that e-mails follows written- language norms more than more modern communication channels. At the same time, e-mails allow for some picture icons or emoji... More than that, according to them (ibid.) it is

” typical /.../ that in the beginning and end /of an e-mail/ one uses phrases that would be called “smalltalk” in oral conversations. Smalltalk has according to Linell (2011) a social function and can promote togetherness even though it may be off-topic as for the content, as well as irrelevant for the goal to be achieved itself. “

This is fully relevant also to our joint analysis of our cultures – as the level of formality being rather different in the three countries. For example, in Estonia, it is rather not usual to have small talk as an introduction in formal e-mails, and using it may confuse the recipient. On the other hand, Estonian “matter-of-fact” style may put off our foreign partners, and seem cold and even unfriendly.

Stolt and Bergström (ibid.) point out,

“the norms of fluent e-mail communication are to a great extent culture-bound which makes this texttype an interesting

object of research in for example multicultural companies or students who have contacts over language-barriers.”

As we see, this description actually quite aptly also suits to describe our students and contexts – people from different backgrounds, ready to analyze the relevant topics and patterns both in their own context, as well as in the country the language of which they learn.

Indeed, in addition to hearing about the cultural conventions relevant in Swedish Business Language - our primary learning object – during our intensive course, we hear about parallels and contrasts in such (and other) communication situations in Finland. Students can discuss the issues. We can see how participants from different countries lighten up, feel enthused to bring in examples from their cultures and contexts. They compare, find similarities and differences, raise questions, ponder upon issues

So this has been a most welcome topic during our BSW. It is rewarding to participating students and teachers alike to hear the Swedish students insights on the cultural conventions to follow.

Stolt and Bergström (2024) mention that earlier studies have studied cultural differences in formality in e-mails. This is also of great interest to the Estonian participants in our BSW, as Estonia, being a post-socialist country, still has some formalities and rather many (sometimes hidden) hierarchies coming from the Soviet style.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, and similarly to Finland, we tend to adhere to the rather laconic, Fenno-Ugric style, which – at least in research on Finnish and Swedish business styles (cf. e.g. Tolvanen & Wide 2020) – has been shown to differ from the Swedish one.

Thus, during our course, it is rewarding to discuss, practice through and analyze our reactions and perceptions during the BSW group-work. Students have often expressed surprise that the other culture “indeed does have this preference”, for certain phenomena they may have read about, yet not ingrained yet.

### ***What is a consensus culture and why is group-think dangerous?***

In the general set-up of discussions and business style analysis of our participant countries usually the meetings and consensus culture is different. In the Fenno-Ugric individualistic approach – at least in Estonia - a person’s insight and competence are given the highest priority. Following the group is rather seen as negative - “group think”, a bit like too weak to dare have one’s own opinion or say this out.

Also, often voting – even in simple matters – is seen as a quick and democratic tool for arriving at decisions. Everyone has one voice and they don’t need to speak too much about why they think the way they do.

In the Swedish style, on the other hand, the explanation rounds with the purpose of arriving at a “consensus” can take rather long – and the group decision is favored over individual’s decisions sum. This can be very difficult to understand for a country (Estonia) that has spent its 30 plus last years on overcoming the Soviet enforced collectivism trauma,

oftentimes swinging the pendulum to the other end – to arrive at the final purge from this.

As we mention above, “group think, often negatively called “crowd-think”, is rather seen as a negative trait showing that people do not have their own ideas or courage to stand up for these. It is also believed to often lead to false or distorted narratives and truisms( Vadi, Pulk) and thus – a threat to democracy. If you don’t have your own views and are afraid to express these – then where is your free will, freedom to think and speak, and participate in work-place level or societal etc. processes.

### ***Nordic-Baltic cultures***

During our Business Swedish Weeks we analyze the above mentioned, and may other, aspects in depth. There is laughter and surprise – all good constituents of active learning. Things discussed in theory one day may be noticed in practice and commented on the next day during our study visits and real-life, intermingling with lectures and seminars at the university. We gain insight into new – also for researchers novel and intriguing – topics. Listening to young experts, fledgling future teachers of Swedish, who have just gained their higher education in the field of Swedish philology, supported by their teachers, who have been active in the field at the university for decades (who are the teachers of Swedish from the Swedish side), is both unique and highly motivating, opening insights into topic areas where the processes are yet unfolded. Beyond e-mail writing, we hear about other communication processes, be building “rapport”, presenting your product, or creating cooperation. And what a privilege of having practiced this with teachers of your own age from the original culture in Business Swedish skills consolidation. And the study week pays attention also to other important phenomena that make communication in professional and business context function.

All countries present their jointly prepared reports on preferred cultural patterns and typical business communication. They prepare it already at home, and this serves often as a warm-up for the course. During the course, meeting their fellow-students from other countries, they can see and analyze if and what kind of patterns are true, what are just stereotypes, and also which are the most friendly and supportive ways for joint communication along these knowledge points.

### ***Students teaching students: practice base for future teachers of Swedish***

An extra positive trait of the learning environment during our Business Swedish Week is that teaching is carried out by future teachers of Swedish. As Halmstad högskola is the training base for them, such cooperation project enables their students to test their teaching skills in a real environment. Needless to say, their extra energy and motivation to perform the task assists a good learning atmosphere and flow during the course. As also teachers from partner universities, as well as their own ones, are present during their teaching sessions, they get a lot of deep feedback on their teaching, course planning, meta-levels to bear in mind, etc.

### ***Participant feedback and comments***

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with both teachers and students in the project. The results have been gathered through thematic analysis. Some additional viewpoints have also been deducted

## Benefits for teachers

Also for us as teachers, participation in the BSW is useful. Teacher exchange and development abroad is the main area that university sometimes leaves on teacher shoulders. Thus, having created this for ourselves through our projects, keeps us informed and educated also for our employer. It enables us to see our students' progress, hear about some latest developments in our field of teaching (be it e.g. issues similar to the same formula usage in e-mails discussed above, or some societal trends). We can also see young future teachers teach and be inspired by their enthusiasm. As well as – exchange experiences with our colleagues from different countries – hear what kind of processes they experience in education, society, teaching, administration etc. This has always been an extremely rewarding part of the course, offering “teacher further education” in an informal style, with lesson observations, site visits, and local culture organized and informal experiences. One of our colleagues has even expressed the positive impetus of the program as “this is what keeps me going with the whole university job”.

## Project evaluation by students

At the end of each Business Swedish Week students write a self-analysis based on a semi-structured questionnaire. It focuses on their development as for the academic achievement (learning Business Swedish during one intensive week), but also their insights about the new cultures they meet, and their development as a person. Students have described their experience in the superlative. Oftentimes, some longer friendships and partnerships may grow out of such incentives. Students have recommended the project also to their fellow-students, and some students, who were too afraid to join earlier, have expressed the wish to join us in the future. Students have always been very satisfied with the course. But for them sometimes completely different things from those that we might have guessed, based on the educational goals played the main role. For example, we guessed that they praise the good academic quality of the lectures and seminars given, or study materials. They were happy with this as well. However, students, put the primary emphasis on the easier and more relaxing activities: the possibility to walk around in a Swedish town, read the signs, and try to speak to their Swedish and Finnish fellow-students in Swedish. Thus, informal learning. Also the cultural discussions we briefly summed up above have been mentioned as yielding.

We ask students which skills they have acquired: Number one has been the rise in the level of speaking fluency and increase in the vocabulary resources. But almost on the same level is always the cultural input, awe and surprise of the effect on knowledge of just one week intensive stay in an intensive course.

We discuss the trip and experience as a group (including a Focus Group Interview), and in individual teacher-student discussion. And what repeatedly crops up is, in my view, the most important: the growth of belief in oneself. This, boost to the self-confidence is the somewhat hidden, yet major benefit of the trip. In using the language, in understanding and functioning in the country and society. But also a general boost to self-efficacy. For having undertaken the trip, successfully completed the course and having been a well functioning group member and “just” a good friend.

## Processes and Products: Action research and – “scrap book” with insights into cultural processes, Nordic and Fenno-Ugric Dynamics

We mentioned above that beyond the active participation activities, we also engage in action research together with students. We read relevant research on Nordic and Fenno-Ugric communication styles before the BSW, observe and analyse phenomena we notice, and students also write their study report-self-analysis including these topics. In 2024 we also published a collective booklet with student views on similarities and possible differences in both cultures (Mullamaa 2024). Business and communication are so closely linked that the experience and skills in communication suitable for another land's context are definitely to be beneficial also in their future lives as entrepreneurs and project leaders.

## Analysis of the processes and results and Sum up of benefits and results

It very clearly makes it visible that all factors play in in organising a good education build-up, which I would define, divided into different categories here below, as:

1. Content – science-based, relevant, up-to date, meaningful, well-structured and thought-through
2. Delivery - competent, structured, anchored in real-life , passionate,
3. Context – stimulating, supportive, exiting, surprising
4. Communication Mode – friendly, supportive, non-hierarchical
5. Teaching mode - interchanging formal and informal, classroom and field-work, study visits, cultural immersion, Socratic talks
6. Assessment - self-analysis, group feedback, individual learner based, informal in its interim stages, formative
7. Creating New Knowledge - Encouraging Research and Creating new knowledge - many new aspects in communication and cultural patterns that may not have been noticed nor researched before appear. This knowledge is immediately applied to real-life work situations. Also, project reports help to spread the new knowledge and develop research in the field.

When we analyse the results further, we see that the teaching environment and mode during that week involves a lot of criteria associated with modern teaching

It is also a special experience to experience different teaching styles in all the three countries: Finland and Sweden with the more individual and learning process focused, Estonia with some of the “old-school” “content, structure, achievement”, Sweden with long-going, meaningful discussions. Students have noticed and appreciated this all. It is especially rewarding when our groups include guest students, as they notice interesting additional aspects which we, as representatives of our own culture may be a bit “home-blind”.

## Conclusion

In the article above we have shared the experience of learning and teaching in a different learning context in the form of an Intensive Learning Week. As explained above, the goal of the course is to enable our students to have an environment for intensive learning of Swedish and Business Swedish. We do it

in cooperation with our Nordic cooperation partners. The Learning Week focuses on a specific language area – Business Swedish. It is organized by a different Nordic-Baltic university each year, taking turns in this role. The teaching is carried out by future teachers of Swedish, who in this way carry out their teaching practice. We also analyzed the benefits and possible areas for development of such arrangements. We took a look at how different areas in psychology, cognition, memory as well as evaluations but also self-evaluation and identity building can be influenced by positive emotions (cf. Forgas, Reeve, etc. above). As our Focus interviews and discussions with the participants have shown, the positive impulses have indeed boosted their self-confidence both in using the new language, but also for functioning in different tasks and their workplace (most students work in parallel to studies).

Student feedback also indicates that learning about the cultural nuances (be it greetings, e-mail sending, meetings or work culture, all discussed above) have given them the much needed clarity and more skills in handling different situations in their planned future cooperation with representatives of the other cultures. They also say that discussions have proved to be both inspiring and given them more confidence in communication with representatives from the different countries. Teachers have pointed out the usefulness of visiting other teaching/learning environments and experienced classroom organization, teaching principles as well as organization cultures and leading styles in the different countries. Based on these data, but also our own *participant* observation experience we believe the experience has helped teachers and students alike to develop throughout the years, and benefit enormously from the combination of the visit abroad, well-structured learning and study visit environment, and using future teachers' practice teaching as a catalyst for speeding up the learning processes – indeed a blend of different innovative educational ideas. We recommend our colleagues throughout the World to try out similar cooperative ideas to test out if and what suits them the best. Whatever the case, joy and freedom to experience, well-structured knowledge sharing as well as study visits could be some components you can't be wrong about.

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