

# Café Lingua: From Informal Language Café to Integral Part of the Language Learning Curriculum

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Café Lingua has been organized by the Language Centre of the University of Lapland since 2009, following the example of other Finnish universities<sup>1</sup>. Since the very beginning, the main objectives of this language café have been to offer Finnish students the possibility to practice languages in a more informal atmosphere outside the classroom, as well as to give them the opportunity to gain international experience and skills while staying at home. Thus, the language selection has included the languages taught at our Language Centre: Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, Scandinavian languages (Swedish, Norwegian, Danish) and Spanish. Additionally, in recent years Café Lingua has been seen as a way to support international students' adaptation process in the new academic environment and to improve their chances to meet and interact with Finnish students, thus leading to the creation of meaningful relationships and social networks; especially the latter is often mentioned as a major challenge for international students' social integration. Committing international talents to study and work in Finland was already then, and still is today a matter of high relevance and urgency (Malik 2016, Vaarala & Kyckling 2017, Jääskeläinen 2020, Opetushallitus 2023, YLE 2023). Furthermore, Café Lingua's already existing virtual community and social media presence can be an asset in the context of the post-Covid era, in which teaching and learning practices need more flexibility in terms of space, time and content.

In this article, we will reflect on three aspects that best describe the foundations of Café Lingua, as well as its evolution and future development. Firstly, we will describe the concept of Internationalization at Home and explain how Café Lingua can be considered a working example of this policy. The importance of a language café as a practice that supports internationalization at home will be underlined also in light of the changes in international mobility brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic. Secondly, we will reflect on Café Lingua as an example of non-formal learning, and how that can be beneficial not only for language learning, but also for socialization and integration. Thirdly, we reflect on our experiences with the virtual version of the language café and how they can be exploited in the future within the activities of the Language Centre. In conclusion, we will reflect on the journey of Café Lingua so far and consider what practices, tools and technologies can help us develop Café Lingua and make it a permanent and integral part of the non-formal learning curriculum at the Language Centre.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Café Lingua at the University of Oulu: <https://www.oulu.fi/fi/opiskelijalle/opintojen-suorittaminen/kieli-ja-viestintakoulutus/loyda-oma-tapasi-opiskella-kielia/cafe-lingua>

## Café Lingua as a Way of Promoting Internationalization at Home

University students have generally understood internationalization as going on student exchange for a semester or two. However, going abroad on student exchange has never been a real possibility for all students. It could be said that a solution to the problem of students who are unable to go abroad came about by accident or a need to come up with new solutions. In 1998 Bengt Nilsson, a professor of computer science at Malmö University, could not find any partner universities to which his exchange students could be sent. He found a way to help his students engage in international exchange without leaving Sweden, thus launching the idea that students could participate in internationalization without leaving their homes. Nilsson has generally been considered the father of IaH (Beelen, 2013).

The concept of Internationalization at Home (IaH) was expanded in 1999 during the annual meeting of the European Association for International Education (EAIE, 2000). A Special Interest Group (SIG) was created to develop IaH across Europe. The SIG created a wide-ranging concept of IaH: “Any internationally related activity with the exception of outbound student and staff mobility” (Crowther et al., 2001, cited in Beelen, 2013). The goal of IaH is to give all students – as well as university staff – a chance to have intercultural experiences and develop their ability to interact with people from other cultures. Several definitions of IaH have been implemented since then. Beelen and Jones (2015, p. 69) redefined the concept in the following way: “Internationalization at Home is the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments.”

In addition to helping students who stay in their home universities, IaH is also beneficial to those who go abroad. Students who go on student exchange benefit much more from their experience if they take language and culture courses – for example, courses offered by the Language Centre of the University of Lapland like Understanding France – before going abroad. Having a background in the language and culture of the countries in which they will be studying allows them to concentrate better on the subject courses they take during their exchange.

IaH helps students achieve the skills they need to work in an increasingly globalized world. Earlier it was possible for lawyers, social workers and other professionals to use only the national languages of Finland when working in their homeland. However, Finnish society is diversifying. The demographics of Finland are changing rapidly<sup>2</sup>, and work is becoming more international.

In recent years, it has become clear that the traditional internationalization by mobility is not always an option. The Covid-19 pandemic brought a halt to international mobility for several months. Even though the number of students going on international exchange has recently started to increase again, the Finnish National Agency for Education has observed some worrying trends (Opetushallitus, 2022). Factors that can hinder international mobility are, for example, geopolitical circumstances and students’ socioeconomic status, as well as sustainability concerns. Internationalization at home should be implemented both in the formal learning curricula and

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<sup>2</sup> Foreign citizens (Statistics Finland): [https://www.stat.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/maahanmuuttajat-vaestossa/ulkomaan-kansalaiset\\_en.html](https://www.stat.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/maahanmuuttajat-vaestossa/ulkomaan-kansalaiset_en.html)

by exploiting non-formal learning opportunities such as language cafés. The concept of non-formal learning will be further discussed in the following section.

Café Lingua supports IaH with practical solutions. The very concept of Café Lingua aligns with the definition of IaH: it is organized within the framework of Finnish educational institutions with the purpose of introducing international and intercultural dimensions into the informal curriculum. Over the years, Café Lingua has promoted IaH through various practices. Starting in 2017, the role of Café Lingua Leader was introduced. Leaders are native speakers of the languages offered by Café Lingua who work as hosts of language café meetings. They collaborate with the Language Centre on a voluntary basis and receive a certificate of participation at the end of the semester or academic year. The certificate is a beneficial addition to leaders' CVs when they seek jobs in Finland and abroad. The presence of native speakers in language café meetings provides participants with an excellent opportunity to get in contact with a foreign culture. Especially for university students, the fact that Café Lingua leaders – unlike most university teachers – are the same age as the students gives the students a chance to get acquainted with youth culture in the countries in which they are interested.

Additionally, several cultural events have been organized in connection with Café Lingua at the University of Lapland, both at the university campus and online. Some examples are an international food fair and a Chinese tea ceremony held on the university campus and a French treasure hunt in the city centre of Rovaniemi. Other examples are a debate on the US presidential elections of 2020, an Italian cooking class and an international Christmas party which were streamed online through the Facebook page of Café Lingua. Students have thus been able to enjoy international and multicultural experiences with all their senses.

## **Café Lingua and Non-Formal Learning: Enabling Language Learning and International Encounters.**

According to the Council of Europe (2023), non-formal learning is defined as follows:

*Non-formal learning takes place outside formal learning environments but within some kind of organisational framework. It arises from the learner's conscious decision to master a particular activity, skill or area of knowledge and is thus the result of intentional effort. But it need not follow a formal syllabus or be governed by external accreditation and assessment. Non-formal learning typically takes place in community settings.*

Café Lingua can be considered a relevant example of non-formal language learning. Although it is organized by a formal institution, the Language Centre of the University of Lapland, participation in Café Lingua is voluntary. Participants' reasons for participating in Café Lingua may vary, but the principal motivation is a desire to improve their linguistic, cultural and social skills. However, Café Lingua meetings are not merely language lessons. Even though they are organized on a regular basis, they do not follow a syllabus and are not planned by Language Centre

teachers. Participants do not receive credits towards their degree, grades or formal assessments of their skills. Nonetheless, language learning does indeed happen in Café Lingua: participants are exposed to foreign languages and participate more or less actively in conversations, thus improving their comprehension and production skills. Additionally, the contact with native speakers contributes to the acquisition of new linguistic and cultural skills. Finally, Café Lingua helps participants develop so-called 'generic skills': group leading, interaction, teamwork and intercultural communication are just a few examples of skills that can be practiced within language café meetings.

The social aspect of Café Lingua creates an opportunity for meaningful encounters in an international environment. The social dimension of Café Lingua has acquired growing significance especially as the traditional face-to-face activities resumed after the break caused by the Covid-19 pandemics. Interestingly, the Finnish for Foreigners language group above others has been particularly successful both when the language café was organized only remotely, and afterwards in face-to-face meetings. First of all, thanks to the collaboration of Café Lingua leaders, we were able to identify the need to split the group in two according to the level of the participants: Finnish for Beginners and Intermediate and Advanced Finnish. In terms of participants, these groups have been the largest both online and in person, and they have been gathering students, teachers, as well as other international guests from the Rovaniemi area and beyond. It can be claimed that Café Lingua has thus been able to play a role in supporting linguistic and social integration of foreign students and other residents of Rovaniemi. The effectiveness of language cafes to support the integration of migrants in society has been studied for example in Sweden<sup>3</sup> as well as in a common project between Greece, Poland and Slovakia<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, it has been highlighted (Asikainen-Kunnari et al, 2022) that the linguistic integration of international students in higher education currently relies mostly on a limited offer of language courses, and that other out-of-class activities, such as language cafes, should be taken into consideration as meaningful, cost-efficient and appropriate means of supporting the development of language skills.

## Virtual Café Lingua: Best Practices and Challenges

Virtual Café Lingua was launched in the spring of 2020 as a way to maintain the language café activities despite the impossibility of meeting in person. At that point, Café Lingua already had a Facebook page<sup>5</sup>, which was mainly used for communication and marketing concerning the language café meetings and special events. The Facebook page was chosen as the platform on which to build the virtual language café. Initially, the possibility to stream live videos was exploited to reach out to the page followers, and a few "Café Lingua goes Facebook Live" events, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Project "The language café as a social venue and a space for language training", Stockholm University: <https://www.su.se/english/research/research-projects/the-language-cafe-as-a-social-venue-and-a-space-for-language-training?open-collapse-boxes=research-project-publications,research-project-description>.

<sup>4</sup> Project "Methodology for informal labour market language learning for immigrants and low-skills citizens, including adults 50+": <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2014-1-PL01-KA204-003519>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/cafelinguarvn>

a multilingual Q&A session and an interactive trivia quiz about languages and cultures, were organized. Subsequently, the possibility to link Facebook groups to the Café Lingua Facebook page was used and one group was created for each of the languages in Café Lingua. Leaders were assigned to the groups as moderators and took on the responsibility of organizing online meetings and sharing interesting content with the group members. Later on, an Instagram account was also created for Café Lingua in order to reach a larger audience and enhance communication with followers and marketing of Café Lingua activities. In more recent times, and as the traditional face-to-face meetings have resumed, the role of the Facebook page has significantly decreased, while the Instagram page is still the main communication and marketing tool. Online meetings have recently been organized with Zoom, which offers the possibility to create different virtual rooms for different languages and lets participants join the room corresponding to the language they wish to practice.

Based on our three-year experience with Virtual Café Lingua online, we have observed some best practices for the successful organization of an online language café, which we will group under three main themes: tools and technology, contents and materials, and learning. For what concerns tools and technology, it is vital that the language café is organized on a platform that guarantees synchronous interaction in different forms (audio, video, chat) and that allows the sharing of different types of materials, for example with a screensharing function. Basic conditions for successful online interaction are, of course, a quiet environment, a stable internet connection and functioning tools such as a microphone and webcam. Shortcomings in technical and technological equipment have been found to be discouraging for participants, eventually hindering motivation to participate in the language café meetings. As for contents and materials, it has been observed that conversation tends to function more smoothly when starting from a given input. The input can be visual (such as a picture or painting), audiovisual (a music video) or multimedia (a website, online game, Google Maps, ...). Inputs offer a good point to start the conversation, which can then continue on the same topic or move on to other related or non-related topics. Finally, we can conclude that the key to making Virtual Café Lingua a meaningful learning experience for everyone is to create a multilingual and multicultural exchange among participants. Especially when the groups feature both native and non-native speakers, conversation is at best when both parties can share knowledge about their own language and culture and learn from each other.

Many of the challenges that we faced in our online language café can to a certain extent be compared with those that teachers have been encountering in formal online teaching. In addition to the aforementioned technical issues, finding a suitable timetable for the meetings can also be a challenge, especially when considering that participants in an online language café can join from anywhere in the world and thus possibly from different time zones. Furthermore, the non-formality of the language café also plays a role in the success of the event: since Café Lingua is not a part of formal learning, nobody is forced to participate, and the level of motivation required to join an online language café might be higher than with the traditional face-to-face version. In order to be encouraged to participate, people need to be informed about the virtual language café: social media platforms can be of great help with marketing the meet-

ings, but they do still feature a certain level of uncertainty due to the unpredictability of their algorithms. Finally, conversation in an online environment is naturally more demanding than in person because of the lacking of several contextual elements. A virtual language café cannot be as spontaneous as a chat over a cup of coffee, but it can achieve the same goals. In order to do so, it requires careful planning, and possibly the presence of moderators and some type of linguistic input to facilitate conversation.

## Conclusion: Future of Café Lingua

In this text, we have shown how the activities of Café Lingua are related to major themes in higher education practices, such as internationalization at home, non-formal learning and the management of physical distances – the latter also corresponding to one of the three focus points of the Lapland University Consortium’s Strategy<sup>6</sup>. In light of our observations, we argue that Café Lingua, alongside other instances of non-formal learning, should have a bigger role in the curriculum of our language centre. Café Lingua could, for example, have a stronger connection with both the Finnish for Foreigners and Intercultural Communication programs. Furthermore, the virtual language café could constitute an interesting starting point for collaboration among higher education institutions both at national and international level.

In conclusion, we present a concrete suggestion for future implementation of the Language Centre curriculum. We suggest that a new study module of Informal and Non-formal Language Learning be created. The study module should be open to all domestic and international students and staff members and it should bring together all such activities that are not language courses, but through which students acquire knowledge of different languages and cultures. The module should be based on the learner’s independent work and self-reflection, and it could offer a series of activities from which learners could pick the ones that best suit them, and be granted ECTS credits for completing these activities. The program could include, for example, participating in Café Lingua regularly for a longer period of time as either a learner or a leader and reporting about the experience, or being otherwise involved with the organization of Café Lingua’s activities such as special events related to languages and cultures. Other suitable options for the study module are the already existing language exchange program Teach and Learn, as well as participation in conferences and guest lectures held in different languages both in Finland and abroad, for example in the context of an exchange program. The study module would not only exist as a stand-alone program, but it should also be possible to integrate it with other studies at the Language Centre, for example as an alternative way of completing a course.

By giving Café Lingua and other instances of non-formal language learning more importance within the curriculum, we might be able to achieve at least two important objectives. On the one hand, we would be able to offer students greater flexibility in their (language) studies, which would meet the requirements of a quickly changing higher education environment. Secondly, on a more general level, we would concretely show that language learning no longer

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ulpland.fi/EN/About-us/Our-principles/Strategy>.

means just passively sitting in a classroom or writing an exam, but much more: it means experiencing with all senses, being part of a community, and ultimately enjoying multilingual and multicultural encounters.

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