Pedagogical Methods in Web-Based Language Teaching-Mapping

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Abstract
The purpose of this presentation is to introduce the research project progress in “the mapping of pedagogical methods in web-based language teaching” by Högskolan Dalarna (Dalarna University). This project will identify the differences in pedagogical methods that are used for online language classes. The pedagogical method defined in this project is what the teachers do to ensure students attain the learning outcomes, for example, planning, designing courses, leading students, knowing students’ abilities, implementing activities, etc. So far the members of this project have analyzed the course plans (in the language department at Dalarna University) and categorized the learning outcomes. A questionnaire was constructed based on the learning outcomes and then either sent out remotely to teachers or completed face to face through interviews. The answers provided to the questionnaires enabled the project to identify many differences in how language teachers interact with their students but also, the way of giving feedback, motivating and helping students, types of class activities and materials used. This presentation introduces the progress of the project and identifies the challenges at the language department at Dalarna University. Finally, the advantages and problems of online language proficiency courses will be discussed and suggestions made for future improvement.

1. Introduction
The purpose of this presentation is to introduce the research project “the mapping of pedagogical methods in web-based language teaching” financed by Dalarna University. This project will identify the differences in pedagogical methods that are used for web-based language courses in Dalarna University.

2. Background of the research
The language department at Dalarna University has expanded rapidly in recent years. The expansion became even more obvious when web-based education was introduced in 2006. Presently, most of the language courses are taught on the web. With the rapid development of the web-based education, developing pedagogical methods has been a major challenge for teachers since the pedagogical methods for the traditional campus based courses are not easily transferable for use in web-based courses. In addition to that, pedagogical methods are often discussed related to the traditional campus based course and problems or difficulties in web-based courses are often neglected. Therefore, this research project was established to identify different pedagogical methods used in the language department and to share good examples. The final goal of this project is to improve the quality of our education.

The results of this research disagree with the widespread belief that online education is not as good as traditional education and effective teaching cannot take place via computer that is that distance education is inherently inferior to traditional education. There are many who express criticism towards distance learning, including the Minister of Education in Sweden. The criticism also appears in the latest budget proposal in 2011, which says that the passing rate of students in distance education is lower than the campus based education, which implies that the government is negative about web-based distance education [Högskoleverket, 2011]. A Swedish newspaper also claimed that web-based distance education has lower quality in education [Expressen, 2011 January 18].

Another misconception of web-based education is that the “contact time” between teachers and students is less than traditional campus-based education. In order to prove otherwise, we have included “contact time” in the mission statement of this research project.
3. Methodology
This project is a one-year project which started in February, 2012. The research group consists of five teachers from the language department at Dalarna University. The project was designed as follows.

3.1 Definition of “pedagogical method”
The first issue which was raised and discussed in the project group was the definition of “pedagogical method”. There are many established “pedagogical methods” for language education such as the “Audio-Lingual Method”, the “Total Physical Response”, the “Communicative approach” etc., but in the last decades, it has been often said that there is no absolute pedagogical method which works for all learners [Tornberg, 2009]. Ramsden describes teaching as the aim of a course, the methods of presenting the knowledge those aims embody, assessing students’ achievement and evaluating the effectiveness of the whole process [Ramsden, 2003, p11]. The definition of “pedagogical method” in this project followed Ramsden’s theory and it was defined as “all the things what teachers do to ensure students attain the learning outcomes”. It includes planning, designing courses, leading students, knowing students’ abilities, implementing activities, reflecting on those things and etc. It may sound too broad for a definition, but that was our aim to keep it broad in order not to miss any small, but interesting method which teachers practice.

3.2 Selection of the courses
The second issue which was discussed in the project group was how to choose courses/teachers to receive questionnaires and make interviews. The language department in Dalarna University has 10 different languages, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. There are around 90 teachers and 200 courses in the language department, which are far too many to perform qualitative research. Therefore, after some discussions, it was decided to give priority to lower level courses focusing on oral and written proficiency. The main reason for this was to investigate the “contact time” between teachers and students, which was also one of our goals for this project. Usually in higher level courses such as thesis writing, students can work autonomously without much support from the teachers, whereas, usually in lower level courses such as writing proficiency courses for beginners, students need a lot of contact time and teachers’ support until they are able to work autonomously. Therefore, lower level courses were chosen in order to know much time is needed for support. After this selection, 23 courses (23 teachers) were chosen to receive questionnaires. In addition to that, 11 teachers who are specialized in pedagogy were also chosen for interviews regardless of the courses they teach. Some teachers teach lower level courses and others teach higher level courses.

All the web-based language courses at Dalarna University are offered using a web conference system called Adobe Connect and a Learning Management System called fronter. Adobe Connect is used for online seminars and fronter is used for sharing course information, assignments hand-in, and forum discussion, etc.

3.3 Questionnaires and interviews
The next step was to send questionnaires and conduct interviews with the selected teachers mentioned above. To make a common framework for the questionnaires and interviews, all the course plans of the selected courses were checked and the learning outcomes were categorized. The purpose of this process was to inquire about what kind of pedagogical methods are used to achieve different learning outcomes. After this process, the learning outcomes were divided into 6 categories for oral proficiency courses and 9 categories for writing proficiency courses.

- Categorised learning outcomes of oral proficiency courses
  - The students will be able to
    - pronounce the language sounds correctly
    - use basic/rich vocabulary
    - use grammar correctly
    - communicate with simple sentences (understand and ask)
    - understand spoken language in everyday situations
    - participate in conversation and express themselves
Categorised learning outcomes of written proficiency courses

The students will be able to
- use basic/rich vocabulary
- use grammar correctly
- use dictionaries
- read and write alphabets, characters, phonetic script
- read and understand texts
- write texts
- summarize texts
- analyze texts
- translate texts

The categorised learning outcomes above have led to the following questions.
- How teachers use Adobe Connect and fronter to make students reach the learning outcomes and if they use web based tools other than Adobe Connect or fronter.

In addition to this, the questions below were asked to investigate what the teachers focus on when teaching web-based courses.
- What teachers do to help the students stay motivated.
- The advantages and disadvantages of web-based synchronous education.
- Issues regarding pedagogical methods which they want to discuss with others.

By the end of June, we had received 15 completed questionnaires and had conducted 11 interviews. Interviews were made one by one for around one hour. The contents of the interviews were almost the same with some additional question points as seen below.
- About administration
- About evaluation

3.4 Contact time

The measurement of contact time between teachers and students will be implemented in the autumn together with another project, which is also financed by Dalarna University.

4. Preliminary analysis

Follow-up interviews based on responses to the questionnaire or more focused interviews are planned during the autumn 2012, but the preliminary analysis was based on the 15 responses and 11 interviews. Because this project is qualitative in nature, we found many variations. These include the type of activities, lessons, materials and assignments etc. One common answer in the responses was that the teachers must make their own teaching materials. This is inevitable since using Adobe Connect requires the use of PowerPoint. In the autumn, we intend to focus our attention on how they make their own teaching materials.

4.1 Different languages have different areas of focus

One of the interesting points from the results was to see the differences in focus depending on the types of the courses. The differences were shown when it came to students’ motivations. From the responses to the questionnaire and interviews, courses were divided into two types. One type is the courses which are directly related to students’ work and the other type is the courses which are related to students’ interests.

Two teachers from the English and the French departments who answered interviews mentioned that they do not need to motivate students much because their students are all very motivated and engaged. One of the possible reasons is that both are higher level courses in the teacher training program. The students are already working as teachers and the course materials are directly linked to their working environment.

On the other hand, many of the teachers who answered the questionnaire wrote that they work very hard to keep the students motivated. Some teachers hold extra sessions during the term in order to help students who are behind. This is often the case with teachers of non-Western languages. Many of the students in these courses enroll to further their interest in the target language and culture. This
explains the high number of applicants as well as the high dropout rate. As their major subject becomes more difficult, many students find they do not have the time to continue a language that they are interested in. The preliminary analysis shows that the teachers in those languages need extra care or support to keep the students' motivation. Considering about the fact, it can be said that the approaches and focuses may differ depending on the types of the courses though further analysis is needed for this assumption.

4.2 Shared ideas
Some interesting ideas were shared in the questionnaire and interviews which can be applied to all languages and levels.

*Simple and easy information*
As mentioned above (4.2), students in teacher training are highly motivated. But this does not mean that the teachers in those courses do not need to motivate the students at all. Above all the teachers in these courses try to make the instructions as clear as possible so that the students know what is expected of them. This is also one way the teachers try to keep the students motivated. Many of the students are new to the web based system. They have plenty of questions about web-based courses and sometimes there are students who feel fear of taking web-based courses because of the lack of knowledge about computers. So, what is important when supporting those students and leading a course successfully is to give information as clearly as possible and as simple as possible from the time the students applied for the course.

*Comfortable atmosphere and group feeling*
The words “comfortable atmosphere” or “group feeling” were frequently given in response to the questionnaires and during the interviews. This shows that teachers actively try to make the web-based students feel at ease in their classes. The fact that the students are separated by geography can lead to a student feeling isolated or alone. This can cause tension in the classroom and a student may simply shut down. In order to promote active class participation it is paramount that the students find the classroom atmosphere comfortable, this will also facilitate a group feeling which will make it easier for students to do well.

*Selection of using lesson hours*
There are variations in the ways of having seminars. All the language teachers who teach web-based courses have online seminars in Adobe Connect. But some teachers use recorded seminars in addition to the normal online seminars to make use of the limited meeting hours with students. Thinking about what kind of abilities students can achieve through which tools is one of the important roles teachers should play.

4.3 Opinions about web-based synchronous education
Concerning the question about advantages and disadvantages when teaching in web-based synchronous education, several opinions were shown.

- **Advantages**
  - Use of a chat area in Adobe Connect makes class very interactive and makes students practice writing in real time in class.
  - Students are used to the online tools and finding material online.
  - Students are based in many different places, so they can add a lot to the classes with their current experiences.
  - They can work whenever they want because the media is always there; the question forum on fronter is always open.
  - The global advantage is to offer the possibility to educate people who would not study if it was not on distance. It’s also possible to use a lot of tools at the same time and to interact on the texts together.

- **Disadvantages**
  - Technical problems
  - Oral interaction is less spontaneous due to slow connections. Having to put on and off microphones is also time-consuming.
  - Commenting on handwritten assignments is time- and energy-consuming.
  - Less social contact between teachers and students or among students.
  - High dropout rate
Though there was the disadvantage of some technical problems, there were no technical problems that prevented the students from learning. This proves that the desired learning outcomes can be reached without problem in both campus-based and web-based courses. The high dropout rate may be related to the type of course. Further analysis is needed.

4.4 Raised issues
Some issues on web-based courses were raised from the questionnaire and interviews.
- How can we decrease the dropout rate?
- How do we give effective feedback during the lessons?
- How can we conduct heated debates in Connect?
- Any tips for online resources for peer-writing or peer-learning?
- Are there any good online tools for practicing pronunciation?

Further discussion is needed to share the experiences and solve the problems together. Discussion is planned during the autumn of 2012.

5. Conclusion
This project intends to identify various pedagogical methods that are used in web-based language courses and prove the high quality of the language courses at Dalarna University. As mentioned before, the project is an on-going project and further analysis with more focused interviews is required. But the preliminary analysis shows that the learning outcomes can be reached without problems regardless of campus-based education or web-based education. Also, the relation between the dropout rate and the types of courses were indicated, which needs a further analysis.

In the autumn of 2012, the measurement of contact time and a deeper analysis of the returned questionnaires and interviews are planned. As the final goal of the project, a workshop for sharing good examples and discussions about the raised issues is scheduled in the spring of 2013. The possibilities of web-based education will be discussed continuously.

References