[This is not an article, chapter, of conference paper!]

2. Background

2.1 Online education in Sweden

The number of students studying online at Swedish universities has risen dramatically since the beginning of the 2000s. One-third of students in higher education now engage in some form of online study compared with only 10 percent of students 10 years ago (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2012). Currently around 30 universities out of 50 in Sweden offer online courses.

At the same time, however, the Swedish government is worried that the pass rate for online courses is lower than that for courses on campus. Indeed, the average pass rate in higher education in Sweden was 81 percent in 2012, but for online (distance) education, it was only 55 percent (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2012). This has given rise to strong expressions of concern about the future of online education in the Swedish context (Budgetpropositionen, 2012). The present study project was initiated at Dalarna University in response to these concerns.

2.2 Online education in Dalarna University

Dalarna University has a strong focus on synchronous online education that includes real-time instruction. At present, 72 percent of all students at Dalarna University study online. The university started to invest in online education in 2002, and this investment made the university one of the fastest growing institutes of higher education in Sweden. In 2011, Dalarna University decided to aim to be a leader in Next Generation Learning (NGL) by 2015. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2010) defines NGL as follows: "*the intelligent use of technology to develop innovative learning models and personalized educational pathways*". The vision of NGL at Dalarna University is to develop and renew educational settings with the support of technologies. In 2012 and 2014, various NGL projects were established to investigate ways of improving the educational situations.

With the focus on online courses and NGL projects, the language department at Dalarna University expanded rapidly. Presently, 12 languages are taught there: Arabic, Chinese, English, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Swedish as a Second Language. Most courses in these languages are taught online using a web-conference system called *Adobe Connect* and a learning management system called *Fronter*, both of which are continually being improved through discussions with teachers to ensure optimum pedagogical quality.

2.3 What are pedagogical methods?

Hampel and Stickler (2005) claim that online language teaching requires different skills than face-to-face language teaching and that online language tutors (teachers) must therefore be aware of the differences and focus on how to utilize technology to ensure the quality of online education. The rapid development of online education at Dalarna University has turned the development of new pedagogical methods into a major challenge for teachers. Our research group was therefore established to explore the challenges and potential pitfalls of pedagogical methods used with online language education and to develop a portfolio of ideas for enhancing the quality of our education.

For the purposes of this project, pedagogical methods are understood in broad terms to include whatever teachers do to ensure that students attain the relevant learning outcomes. This includes planning, designing and delivering courses, knowing students' abilities, guiding students, implementing activities, designing ways to give feedback, etc.

3. Methodology

The research is based on a qualitative and quantitative methodology. It was conducted in 2012 and 2014 by six language teachers. A questionnaire and in-depth interviews were used to collect data from both teachers and students in the language department at Dalarna University. The analysis of data collected

in 2012 is complete, while the data from the second part will be fully analyzed in the autumn of 2014. Subsequently, a comparative analysis will focus on alignments and misalignments between teachers' and students' perspectives. Based on this, the project will develop methods for the enhancement of the quality of online education.

3.1 Participants

3.2 The first project

The participants of the first phase were teachers in the language department at Dalarna University. Around 90 teachers teach approximately 200 courses in the 12 languages taught there. For this project, we focused on those who teach languages at the lower (beginners') levels. The main reason for this choice is that lower-level courses usually require more teacher support than higher-level courses. Thus, we hypothesized that both the benefits and the challenges with online teaching would be most visible in lower-level courses. Further, we estimated that these courses would have the most to gain from the development of new pedagogical methods suitable for online teaching environments.

   After this preliminary selection, 23 teachers who teach lower-level courses focusing on oral and written proficiency were chosen to receive questionnaires. In addition, 11 teachers who specialized in pedagogy were chosen for in-depth interviews regardless of the courses they teach.

3.3 The second project

The participants in the second project are students in the language department at Dalarna University. In the beginning of May 2014, we sent out a questionnaire to around 2,300 students who were active in the online courses at that time. In addition, we aim to carry out 15 - 20 in-depth interviews with students for follow-up, in-depth interviews. These students will be chosen based on their language of study and level.

4. Findings

4.1 Findings from the first part - teachers' point of view

There was significant variation in the types of activities, lessons, materials and assignments that teachers used for online courses. Even so, in terms of having students reach the learning outcomes, it was commonly asserted that there is little difference between online education and campus-based education. The three most frequently raised issues were the following:

- Issue 1. No physical co-presence
Several teachers noted that the lack of physical co-presence with students was a disadvantage with online education. Even though this issue was not viewed as fatal in terms of having students attain the learning outcomes, many teachers said that it is easier to hold conversations in classrooms, while online classes feel less like a personal encounter, have a colder atmosphere and are less dynamic.

   Some teachers put in extra effort to resolve this issue. They strive to create a comfortable atmosphere and a group feeling. For example, they make it obligatory to use web cameras, or they ask students to evaluate their courses regularly so that they feel part of the course. Some teachers also spend extra time early in the courses to help students get to know each other. Finally, some teachers apply the concept of "personalization" (Kawaguchi, 2004), which aims to persuade students to express their own ideas, opinions, feelings and preferences.

- Issue 2. How can we have a "lively debate/discussions" in *Adobe Connect*?
The second issue was how to create "lively debate/discussions" in classes using the web- conference system *Adobe Connect*. Teachers noted, for example, that "interaction is less spontaneous due to slow

connections; you have to turn microphones on and off" and that "debate is artificial because you have to talk in turns."

On the other hand, some teachers did not find the technical issue insurmountable and were dedicated to making the debates or discussions active. They experimented by selecting and combining lessons: if students watch recorded seminars or if they hold discussions in the forum on LMS before the seminars, they will be prepared for discussion and will be able to begin the seminars at a higher level of engagement. Another idea was to divide students into smaller groups by using a tool in Adobe Connect, the "breakout room", so that students can use their microphones all the time instead of turning it on and off.

- Issue 3. How can we decrease the dropout rates?

The third issue was the high dropout rates. Teachers noted that high dropout rates are a problem with online education and as such they strive to decrease these. Our analysis indicates two possible factors for such high rates. One is that there is a relationship between the dropout rates and the types of courses: the dropout rates are higher if the course is independent (not part of a programme) or if it is a course for complete beginners. The other factor relates to information. If information is difficult to find or communication is unclear, students lose their motivation.

Additionally, it is important that a clear course description is available before students register. Often in beginners' level courses, students' expectations and teachers' expectations differ; some students have no academic intent, whereas teachers expect them to learn academic skills; therefore, it is important it be specified in advance as to what is required of students if they are to complete the course successfully.

4.2 Findings from the second part - students' point of view

Since the second part is ongoing in 2014, the results will not be available until autumn 2014. Considering the three challenges raised by teachers, our focus in making the questionnaire was on learning about the social aspects of online education from the students' point of view.

According to Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory, "distance" is a psychological distance and this transactional distance has to be minimized if learning by distance is to be maximized. To maximize learning in online education, four types of interaction play important roles: learner-instructor, learner-learner, learner-content, and learner-interface. The questionnaire was constructed to investigate how students experience these four categorized interactions. The results will be presented in the oral presentation at the conference.

5. Conclusion

Even though the project is yet to be completed, we have a number of preliminary findings. First, no teacher mentioned that it is difficult to have students reach the learning outcomes in online courses. Hrastinski (2013) also claims that there is no scientific evidence that online education is of lower quality than campus-based education.

Secondly, no pedagogical method works perfectly for all students. That can be seen from the various methods which are used by language teachers at Dalarna University. Ramsden (2003) claims that a variety of methods should be used to ensure that all students, with their many learning differences, are able to develop their knowledge and understanding. Accordingly, an important role for the teacher is to carefully consider which tools and pedagogical methods will help individual students in their learning.

In online education, students are spatially separate, and this can lead to feelings of isolation. Thus, it is very important that teachers create a comfortable virtual-classroom atmosphere. This can be achieved by using activities where students interact with each other outside class. For example, "personalization" helps students to get to know each other, and "breakout rooms" rely on smaller groups of collaborating students. Hrastinski (2013) also explains that problems exist with web-based education since students can feel isolated: this might cause higher dropout rates compared with campus

education. He also argues that it is important that students get to know each other and feel comfortable with each other, especially in online learning situations.

Säljö (1992) argues that the interaction that occurs outside of class also plays an important role in learning. Learning occurs not only in the school environment, but also in all situations of interaction between people, such as at a dinner table, during coffee breaks, and so on. In the case of on-campus classes, it is easier for students to be connected and to continue their discussions after class. However, when it comes to online classes, students are disconnected when classes finish, which leads to fewer social contacts. Therefore, teachers of online courses have to try to create a sense of group during class so that students interact with each other spontaneously and enhance their learning even outside class.

The project *Pedagogical methods in web-based language teaching: students' point of view* is being conducted in 2014, and as such the results of this part of our project will be presented at the conference. We can end by quoting Ramsden (2003), who reminds us that: "Good teaching involves striving continually to learn about students' understanding and the effects of teaching on it." Thus, education is not about one-way communication from teachers to students; rather, it is about teachers and students engaging in a process of mutual learning.

Acknowledgements

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