

A Formative Dialogue Method Using Social Media

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Abstract

The tool we have used is Ning, which has proven to function very well for us. It gives the possibility of inviting those concerned, it lets the pupils create their own pages and it simplifies the use of other media in form of links that the pupils can follow.

At first, our project was meant to be used to develop and deepen the classroom discussions about subjects such as xenophobia, human rights and equality, but we soon realized that this dialogue based forum was an extraordinary arena for language learning. By giving the pupils instant feedback, and, thus, instant possibilities of practising and developing their language skills, it proved to be a formative way of working. The teacher (or a pupil) decides on a topic for discussion, the pupils write in the forum and the teacher and the other pupils give feedback and advice on how to evolve the text. We found that this method was very rewarding for the pupils, as they could now use their newfound knowledge instantly, instead of doing it a month later, as is often the case in school.

The possibilities are limitless when it comes to language learning. For instance, one could easily invite schools from other countries to participate in discussions when studying different cultures, and by doing so the goals set in the European Framework can be obtained more easily. This form of dialogue is also optimal for exchanges with universities and their language students. What better way to prepare a future teacher than to interact with pupils in authentic situations ?

The discussions in the forum provide a good chance to develop the pupils capability of arguing on different topics, of exercising criticism of the sources, of reading analytically and of writing coherently. Moreover, it makes fun !

1. Introduction

In Sweden, many schools face the challenge of 1-1, which means that each pupil will get their own computer to use in their school work. To meet this challenge, we need to apply teaching methods that has proven to work and that are in line with our steering documents. The new technology has many possibilities and requires new teaching methods. In the SAMR-model, the American Ph. D. Ruben R. Puentedura, describes how the teaching undergoes four stages when schools implement new technology. In the first two stages, nothing really happens. The computer is simply another tool, used to carry out the usual assignments. In the last two stages, the teaching changes and the content becomes palpable. Puentedura describes these stages as the teacher modifying and redefining the teaching.[1]

As teachers in the Swedish school system, we are not only obliged to teach our subjects, but also the fundamental values established in the curriculum. In the Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, it says that "As well as being open to different ideas and encouraging their expression, the school should also emphasize the importance of forming personal opinions and provide pupils with opportunities for doing this" .[2]

After heated classroom debates between pupils on xenophobia and human rights, we teachers realized that we had pupils with intolerant views. A typical classroom debate has many flaws: it is

unequal since there are hierarchies within the group and between the pupil and the teacher. That causes many pupils to remain silent instead of expressing their opinions. It does not give the participants any time to reflect on their views, since it is constrained to a given time and place and often based on emotions rather than facts. We were frustrated and felt the need to find an arena where these discussions could take place. We needed a forum where we had time to reflect, and where every pupil had the same possibility of giving his or her opinion. We wanted facts rather than emotions to provide the basis for the arguments.

The Swedish curriculum also points out that "Language, learning, and the development of a personal identity are all closely related. By providing a wealth of opportunities for discussions, reading and writing, all pupils should be able to develop their ability to communicate and thus enhance confidence in their own language abilities" [3]. By using social media in the classroom, we have now found the arena where we can provide the pupils with the above mentioned range of opportunities to discuss, read, write and reflect. We wanted to be able to identify the pupils' strengths and weaknesses in their language use, and we wanted to be able help them take the next step in their language development, by giving them constructive feedback and by allowing them to use their new knowledge immediately. We have chosen to call this a formative dialogue method.

2. Presentation of the working process

We chose to create a social networking site with Ning. The advantages of using a Ning networking site is that we can create one page per class. We only need to invite the participants concerned. We can invite other people temporarily, such as people from universities or others with specific knowledge. We can easily add links to other websites, such as radio, newspapers or TV. The pupils can design their own pages, which is appreciated, and the teachers are able to moderate the discussions in the forum.

Each discussion begins with a new topic, suggested by a teacher or a pupil. The pupils then write about their ideas, give each other feedback and ask follow up questions. The teacher's role is to guide the pupils in their argumentation and in their criticism of the sources. Above all, this is a great opportunity for the teacher to help the pupils improve their language skills. Thus, the teacher works on two levels – on the one hand, he guides the pupils in the discussion, and on the other, he can help them advance in their language use.

A great help for the teacher, and a great incentive for the pupils, is when you invite experts to participate in the discussions. On one occasion, we chose to invite a policeman who joined the discussion about law and order. The pupils were then able to ask him questions regarding underage consumption of alcohol and drugs. They discussed why some people end up in criminality and so on. Another expert who joined us was a university professor in the science of religion, who contributed with many new sources and perspectives regarding xenophobia and immigration.

3. The scientific basis of the formative dialogue method

According to the Norwegian professor Olga Dysthe, it is important to create an environment in which all the pupils participate and contribute in the learning process. Pupils, who do not feel secure within the group, are less likely to participate, and, in consequence, also less likely to improve their language skills. Dysthe argues that the pupils must listen to each other, for example by using other pupils' ideas as a means to develop their own speaking or writing skills. The pupils may refer to what their classmates have said or written, and by doing so they can develop an argument or contradict it. [4]

3.1 The formative method

The formative method is integrated in the dialogue method. In order to be able to develop the pupils' language skills by using a formative method, you have to make sure that these crucial requirements are met:

- First of all, it is important that the pupils understand the assignment, that they are familiar with the objective and the assessment of their work.
- The assessment should be an integrated and repeated part of the learning.
- The questions asked to the pupils must be open and authentic to give a possibility to discuss and to bring out different perspectives and opinions. These types of discussions may lead to a higher order of thinking, as seen in Bloom's taxonomy.
- The pupils need to read and comment on each other's contributions and in doing so, their work is at the same time a chance to attain self- and peer evaluation.

3.2 A virtual classroom

When we use our formative method, discussing topics in an internet forum, the pupils have the possibility of reading and re-reading what others have written and they can verify the message or contradict it by using other websites or sources. Since we, as teachers, also have the opportunity to comment on the pupils thoughts, they get immediate feedback from many readers and the chance to use the tips right away. The instant response can be compared to a normal classroom activity in which it can sometimes take weeks between the feedback and the next attempt to debate a topic.

In order to practice and improve their language, the pupils need constructive feedback. Feedback can give the pupil an opportunity to see his or her own language in a new perspective. By pointing out strong and weak points, the teacher can help the pupil understand what to practice, thereby making them more aware of their texts. [5] The next step is to give suggestions on how to improve the text, something that we have seen pupils do by looking at other pupils' texts in the same forum. The feedback from the teacher is very important, and in Språkboken [6] the advantages of teacher feedback is emphasized, by pointing out that it gives the teacher a chance to individualize the teaching, to see what kind of help each pupil needs when it comes to content and formalities. The teacher also has the opportunity to show the pupil how to give good and constructive feedback, that is, the teacher is the role model. We believe that this method is very rewarding when it comes to practicing language skills.

4. Evaluation

In our work, we have been able to conclude that a virtual classroom is democratic since it favors pupils who are not outspoken and who do not have a high status within the group. In a normal classroom debate, these pupils are sometimes invisible, but online many of them feel more secure and are a lot more active. This is of course good for the entire group. Thus, it is fair to say that the use of social media in the classroom is a way of creating the environment Dysthe talks about in her theory. The discussions in social media facilitate a varied language practice by means of a formative dialogue method. Since it is fun the pupils are very active, even when you do not expect them to be.

When the pupils start to communicate with each other, there are often examples not only of peer appraisal, but also of critical questions, for example concerning the facts that were used to support an argument. Apart from strengthening the language skills and the knowledge in the subject matters, the work in the social media also strengthened the communication between pupils in real life.

We aspire to develop the method by emphasizing self- and peer evaluation. We also aim to involve the pupils even more when it comes to selecting the topics for discussion. By discussing topics close to the pupils' own lives and interests, we hope to increase their activity further and to give better,



individual feedback. Another possible way of developing the work is to cooperate with university students who are preparing themselves to become teachers and to let them do some of their work experience in the virtual classroom.

References

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