



Teaching Teacher Students through Innovative Teaching Approaches in Online Learning

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Abstract

Innovative teaching and new teaching and learning approaches are needed in order to prepare the language teachers of tomorrow. As an alternative to asynchronous online instruction, teacher students have teacher-led online seminars every week. In addition to these seminars, several different ICT-tools and language teaching and learning approaches are used in order to prepare the teacher students for a digital future. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how digital resources and online teaching are used both for teaching university students, but also as examples of pedagogical approaches that these teacher students can use in school. The net-based courses on English language learning and teaching for future primary, secondary or upper secondary school teachers are structured in a similar way around online seminars. An online learning platform with course information and assignments is used for communication with students outside of the seminars. What makes these courses different from other net-based courses are that the additional tools that are used are tools that can be used in language teaching with younger pupils as well. For example, multi-modal resources such as video and audio recordings are used both for giving feedback and as an alternative to written assignments. In addition, free, readily available online tools for flipped classroom are used both for teaching the course, but also as examples of what our teacher students can use them for with their own pupils. Through collaborative writing projects where shared documents are used, university teachers gain a better insight in how students work together. In the online seminars, the teacher students discuss how these pedagogical approaches can be used in primary, secondary or upper secondary school. The aim is to let the teacher students experience an innovative approach to language learning in addition to reading about it.

Keywords: *net-based learning, language teaching, online learning, teacher training, ICT.*

1. Introduction and background

The opportunities for using innovative approaches for language learning has increased with the development of new technology. At Dalarna University, a relatively small University College in Sweden, online teaching is nothing new. We have offered online language courses since 2004 and out of our 14 000 students, around 9 000 (64 %) study online [1]. The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss how information and communication technologies (ICT), digital resources, and online teaching tools are used in courses for future English teachers. What makes these courses different from other online courses is that we use tools and pedagogical approaches that can be used when teaching younger pupils as well.

Both our campus and online courses are organized around our learning platform, *Blackboard Learn* [2], where students can find information about their courses. The learning platform is also used for asynchronous communication, such as participation in discussion forums, and it works as a place for students to hand in assignments. In addition to using the learning platform, courses are structured around teacher-led, real-time seminars every week. The seminars can take place either on campus or through online meeting tools such as *Adobe Connect* [3] or *Zoom* [4]. At Dalarna University, we train primary, secondary, and upper secondary teachers. They all have different courses, and we teach different content, but we work in similar ways with their seminars. Sometimes we have mixed online and campus groups, and sometimes all the students study online. In this paper, the focus is mainly on a course called *English Language Learning and Teaching (ELLT)*. The aim of the course is to introduce central language learning theories, examine policy texts, and discuss how English can be taught in school.

2. What makes this course special?

Like in most of our courses, the students have teacher-led online seminars every week. What makes this course different from our other courses is that, in addition to these online seminars, we also work with digital resources and tools that the teacher students in turn could use in their own teaching. We



constantly strive to connect theories and policy texts to the practical classroom work. The aim is to let the teacher students experience an innovative approach to language learning and teaching in addition to reading about it.

When teaching teacher students, it is both useful and interesting to discuss teaching practices openly. One thing I noticed when I started teaching at university, was that we rarely practiced what we preached. This also came up in course evaluations. Our teacher students had noticed that we taught them how to teach something efficiently, but did not always follow the same advice in our own teaching. One example of this was that that we let them read about how they could use digital tools in their teaching, while not actually using any of these tools or techniques ourselves. In order to change this, I started incorporating online tools that would be useful both for our own courses, but also for the students in their future profession.

In the course *English Language Learning and Teaching*, students experience first-hand how multimodal resources can be used in teaching. Video and audio recordings are used both by the university teachers as well as by students. At the beginning of the course, students are asked to record short videos where they introduce themselves in English. Students tend to be more comfortable with speaking English if they start out with video recordings. They have a chance of re-recording the video if they feel anxious about language or their performance. We also save time in the online seminar. We can now use the valuable teacher-led time for discussing topics such as how these pedagogical approaches can be used in primary, secondary or upper secondary school, or how this exercise relates to language learning theories or policy texts for school.

Videos are also used as make-up assignments for missed seminars. If a student cannot attend one of the online seminars, a common make up assignment is to record a presentation on the topic that was discussed in the seminar. It is not as good as attending the actual seminar, but much closer to what they missed than writing a text on the same topic. Students use a free online tool called *Screencast-o-Matic* [5] for making these recordings. The free version only allows 15-minute recordings, which is actually seen as a benefit by the teachers. This ensures that we do not end up with very long clips. Some projects require a little editing, and for that, another free tool is used. *KineMaster* [6] is an app that is intuitive and easy to use on a smartphone. By using a free app, rather than an advanced editing tool, we show that the content is more important than flashy editing.

Teachers use videos to pre-record lectures on certain topics. The videos are uploaded to an online tool for flipped classroom called *EdPuzzle* [7]. By working with a flipped classroom approach, we can use seminar time to work on students' higher cognitive skills, with the support of the teacher. The benefit of using the site is that teachers know exactly who has watched what film, and how many times. In addition, teachers can add quizzes in order to check that the students have understood the contents of the film. Another feature is that teachers can control whether or not to allow skipping. We have previously noticed that students tend to skip ahead in pre-recorded lectures, now we can make sure they see the entire video. We have also moved away from long lectures to shorter clips and videos. By using shorter videos, it is also easier to update or replace parts of a lecture when needed. We tailor-make our own playlists by combining what is available online from sources, such as *Youtube* [8] or *TED-Ed* [9], with our own recordings. *TED-Ed* is a useful source of materials, both for finding original animated videos on a range of topics and finding interactive lessons. These videos are well suited for younger pupils as well as for older learners. Teachers can also use the platform for creating their own interactive lessons, and lessons can be shared between teachers.

Video recordings are also used for giving students feedback on assignments. Most of the time, students hand in written work and receive written comments. Writing comments is a very time consuming task for teachers, and we have found that giving oral comments is faster and sometimes easier for students to understand. Rather than commenting in writing, the teacher can record their screen with the student text and move whole paragraphs or sections, or point at parts of the text while explaining to the student what they need to do to improve their writing.

Another way we work with writing is by letting students collaborate on texts. We are currently working on bringing collaborative writing into our courses more and more. Through tools such as *Google Docs* [10] or *Google Slides* [11], students can work together on documents or online presentations. *Google Slides* is very useful when presenting, since students can follow the presentation in real time on their



own device. They can also send questions directly to the lecturer through the chat, and these questions can be shown on the screen for the entire audience, if the lecturer chooses to do so. The main benefit of working with collaborative writing is that all the students in a group can participate and write at the same time. In addition, teachers can see exactly who has written what section of a text. Through collaborative writing, teachers gain a better insight in how students work together.

3. Summary

With new teaching and learning approaches, we prepare the language teachers of tomorrow. In our online seminars, we evaluate and discuss how the tools work, and how they can be used with younger pupils. We encourage the teacher students to develop a responsible and critical view of ICT-tools so that they know both what the benefits are as well as the possible problems. Our teacher students can combine what they now about learning theories with their practical experience of using the tools. By combining practical work with more theoretical seminar discussions, teacher students are much more prepared to work in an ever-changing technological future.

References

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