

SVEBINAR - AN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' SWEDISH ORAL SKILLS WHILE STUDYING ONLINE AND USING FLIPPED LEARNING AS A METHOD

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Abstract

Four institutions from three different countries (Latvia, Sweden and Finland) are taking part in the Nordplus project SVEBINAR 2017 - 2020. Dalarna University (Sweden), Satakunta University of Applied Sciences (Finland), Oulu University of Applied Sciences (Finland) and Latvian Academy of Culture (Latvia).

The main goal of the project is to improve students' Swedish oral skills and to prepare teaching material which can be used both for online teaching and in the traditional classroom. Furthermore, the goal is to advance online based education and alternative ways of teaching which require more responsibility from the student and provides more freedom in choosing a venue where to and the time when to study. In addition, the project promotes international cooperation.

The project has been constructed using the flipped learning method as its base and functions according to several steps. Firstly, there is prerecorded mini-videos (3 minutes long) with predetermined topic which is supplemented by a manuscript, a glossary and a set of discussion questions. Secondly, preparation in the classroom is done in each institution before the online seminar takes place where the students from all the partner institutions would meet. Thirdly, an online seminar is organised and monitored by teachers from all partner universities, each taking their turn.

There are ten online seminars scheduled in total and additional ten language cafés where the students have an opportunity to discuss a topic of their own choosing. The topics cover wide variety of subjects, i.e. educational systems, environment, transport, technologies, culture etc. The students are encouraged to share the information about their respective countries while discussing the topics.

The results of the project are and will continue to be spread in the respective partner institutions, regional and international teachers conferences and online.

The teaching material that has been created as the result of this project will be made available after the project has concluded in 2020. There will be a databank published on the Nordplus homepage as well.

Keywords: Swedish, language teaching, flipped learning, online education, international cooperation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2016 Swedish teachers from four different institutions and three different countries met at the Nordplus contact seminar in Copenhagen, which resulted in a project application the following year. The name of the project, as was decided then, was to reflect the idea that the teachers had, i.e. online based Swedish seminars for students from Latvia, Sweden and Finland, focusing on improvement of students' Swedish oral skills. The name SVEBINAR was chosen ('svenska' meaning Swedish in the Swedish language in combination with the word 'webinar'). The project application was submitted and a few months later the Nordplus project SVEBINAR 2017 - 2020 was approved and the following institutions - Dalarna University (Sweden), Satakunta University of Applied Sciences (Finland), Oulu University of Applied Sciences (Finland) and Latvian Academy of Culture (Latvia) became official partners.

The main goal of the project, as it was decided from the very beginning, was to improve students' Swedish oral skills and to prepare teaching material, which could be used both for online teaching and in the traditional classroom. Furthermore, the goal was to advance online based education and alternative ways of teaching, giving both the students and the teachers a chance to make use of online based learning/teaching platforms such as Adobe Connect (used by Dalarna University and Oulu University of

Applied Sciences) and Webex Cisco Hill (used by Satakunta University of Applied Sciences and Latvian Academy of Culture), and to make use of flipped learning method. In a broader scope, the project was to promote international cooperation, especially to increase understanding about the usage of the Swedish language in the Baltic Sea region.

During the project both the students and the teachers have not only had a chance to get acquainted online but also visit each other and learn more about the online based learning/teaching or aspirations for online based learning/teaching solutions in each institution. The last visit in the project is scheduled for this November at the Oulu University of Applied Sciences, which would also serve as an official closing event for SVEBINAR 2017-2020.

2. METHODOLOGY

The project has been constructed using the flipped learning method as its base. The reason why flipped learning was chosen was because it was rather unfamiliar to some of the teachers in the project and for some it was in fact the first encounter with this learning method invoking an interest to see what results it might produce if applied.

Flipped learning was introduced and functions according to several steps.

Firstly, there were prerecorded mini-videos (3 minutes long) with predetermined topic which were supplemented by a manuscript, a glossary both in Swedish and English, and a set of discussion questions. The students had access to each mini-video several weeks prior to an online seminar, so they had a chance to get acquainted with the topic and prepare accordingly. Before each seminar, the students had an opportunity to meet online for a language café where they could engage in conversation with no particular predetermined topic, yet they could use this additional discussion opportunity to prepare for the seminar ahead.

Secondly, preparation in the classroom was done in each institution before the online seminar took place, where the students from all of the partner institutions would meet. This gave the students yet another chance to revise the information they had become acquainted with from mini-videos, manuscripts, glossaries, and a set of discussion questions, and prepare them even better for the upcoming seminar.

Thirdly, an online seminar was organised and monitored by teachers from all partner universities, with each taking their turn. This gave those teachers, who do not use online learning/teaching platforms in their daily routines, a chance to get acquainted with the platforms and see how they can make the teaching process more efficient. Some of the students had already used said platforms before, yet the ones who had not were given a chance test and learn how to use them for further online seminars.

3. RESULTS

There are two types of results in this project; the first ones are related to participation experience and skills acquired both by the students and the teachers, the second ones are physical teaching materials that have been produced so far and will be supplemented by one more publication before the end of the project in the spring of 2020.

The participation and skill-related experiences for the students and the teachers are as follows.

Firstly, the students have practiced Swedish oral skills and made acquaintances with students from other countries.

Secondly, they have tested and learned how to use digital platforms in their studies.

Thirdly, both the students and the teachers have had new experiences while studying/teaching and have exchanged views on variety of topics.

All three above mentioned results were summarised from annual participant survey, which was anonymous.

Fourthly, both the students and the teachers have had a chance to visit schools, universities and institutes of higher education in Sweden, Finland and Latvia.

The second type of results is more tangible, i.e. there are ten mini-videos called *snack* (Swedish for 'chat' or 'talk') filmed at Dalarna University, and each of these videos has a supplementary manuscript,

a glossary and a set of discussion questions. This was the fundamental learning material which will be discussed in detail in subsection 3.1. Each video is structured the same way. It starts with several Swedish students trying to pronounce difficult Swedish words and continues with a discussion of a certain topic. The second part focuses on language related ideas provided by Antti Ylikiiskilä - professor of Swedish at Dalarna University. The end of the video encourages the students to discuss the topic by displaying the main discussion question in the very centre of the screen.

3.1. Mini-videos and subsequent seminars

3.1.1. Language and Culture

The first mini-video had to do with language and culture. The partner institutions considered it important to point out the cultural and linguistic peculiarities of Sweden, Finland and Latvia, which is why the first mini-video and seminar were underlining those individual traits. It was also important to introduce students from three different countries to Swedish language and culture related views in each country, while at the same time also comparing those views with global tendencies. This was particularly interesting in the case of Finland, which has two official languages. The dynamics of a bilingual and multilingual society were discussed, since it is a common tendency in all three partner countries.

3.1.2. Leisure activities

It is important to point out that not all the students participating in the project had the same command of the Swedish language. That is why it was essential to choose topics which would suit all of the participants. When studying a foreign language, one often learns the basics, such as presenting oneself, before proceeding to more advanced topics, which is why the topic of leisure activities was chosen for the second seminar. The students had already become acquainted with one another, so discussing leisure activities was a topic that suited all of the students and their respective Swedish language levels.

3.1.3. Care and Welfare

There were students from Finland participating in the project, studying to become nurses and caretakers, which is why it was of importance to include the topic of care and welfare. It would help all students to get acquainted with the vocabulary necessary in daily lives or professional situations, and to discuss health-related topics in all three countries. It was particularly interesting for students from Latvia, since their field of studies is rather different (more culture related) from those studying to become nurses and caretakers - they do not have a chance to discuss this topic very often.

3.1.4. Economy and Enterprising

Discussing the economy in general, and one's individual approach to it, is an important topic to talk about. Financing your studies or receiving state funding was discussed, indicating the differences and/or similarities in different countries. Discussing how to start your own business and what kind of similarities and/or differences there are in Sweden, Finland and Latvia was also one of the focal points of this seminar.

3.1.5. Studies

The focus in this seminar was to discuss the educational system in Sweden as well as compare it to that of Latvia and Finland. The students were encouraged to share insights into their own study experience and possible future study opportunities. A central element discussed during this seminar was language learning and various learning opportunities provided by each country.

3.1.6. Environment and Sustainable Development

This topic was chosen for various reasons. Firstly, because climate change has become a very topical issue around the world and also in the Baltic Sea region. The seminar focused on students' personal experience in becoming more environmentally aware - recycling more, reusing packaging, reducing plastic consumption, etc., as well as regarding global tendencies and more alarming environmental issues.

3.1.7. Technology and Robotics

This happened to be one of the most engaging topics for the online seminar, with the reason being that the whole SVEBINAR project is based on using technological solutions currently available in language learning. However, the negative aspects of technological development were identified and discussed. AI was one of the more controversial subjects - some considering it both a great asset and the future

which mankind is striving for, yet others perceived it as a threat to our existence. One of the aspects discussed was how far technological development can go, and whether or not has any limits.

3.1.8. Transport and Communications

Public transit and commuting was a topic which students eagerly discussed, especially because it functions rather differently in various countries. Just by comparing Sweden, Finland, and Latvia, one can find a wide variety of differences. Some typical examples are trains often being late in Sweden while public transit in Finland is very punctual, or Latvia having trolleybuses, which are not common in other countries. The infrastructure in respective countries was also discussed and compared.

3.1.9. Swedish Traditions

Since the entire project revolves around the ability to speak the Swedish language alongside Swedish culture, it was of great importance to discuss Swedish traditions. There are some Swedish traditions that other cultures might find peculiar; Lucia festival celebrated on 13 December, Midsummer solstice, the Crayfish festival, and others. It was culturally significant for the students to compare these traditional Swedish festivals with the ones celebrated in Latvia, Finland, and possibly a variety of other countries. By identifying differences, there were also many similarities discovered in the process.

3.1.10. Searching for Employment

This last seminar, which will take place on 15 October, 2019, will have to do with future career possibilities, challenges that students have to face when trying to find employment, as well as the language requirements in order to obtain certain types of employment. Some of the questions that the students will be asked to discuss have to do with the Swedish language in the Swedish labour market, for instance - if it is necessary to speak Swedish if so many people in Sweden speak very good English.

The mini-videos and supplementary material are currently accessible, yet will be available in their complete form after the project has concluded in 2020. A teacher's guide for helping other interested teachers to get acquainted with flipped learning, alongside online based learning/teaching, will be compiled and made available when the project has concluded.

The results of the project are and will continue to be spread in the respective partner institutions, regional and international teachers conferences, and online.

Produced learning material can be used for Swedish classes, but it can also serve as inspiration and can be adapted for other languages or fields of studies.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This project, although it has not concluded yet, is coming to its end and it can be considered successful for many reasons.

Firstly, although it is difficult to quantify, and it has not been the goal of the project to do so, all of the students involved from four different institutions providing Swedish language classes have improved their Swedish oral skills to some degree. Some started out with a significant language level advantage, yet even the ones who might have slightly lagged behind showed signs of improvement as was suggested by their teachers.

Secondly, the students have had a chance to meet other Swedish students from different institutions, mostly online but also in person, which has opened them up to international communication and made their study routine more dynamic.

Thirdly, learning how to study more independently and how to make use of different digital tools has made students more flexible and more prepared for their professional lives, where they will have to face different kinds of challenges and constantly learn new ways of adapting.

Fourthly, teachers have forged international contacts that will help them in the future not only with project work, but other forms of cooperation between universities.

Fifthly, the material produced during the course of this project can be used by other Swedish teachers and serve as an inspiration for other language teachers or teachers representing different fields of study, since the methods used are easily applicable.

Finally, it has been a tremendous joy to be able to approach teaching from a different perspective and not to rely only on textbook material. This project has given teaching a different dimension and a fresh vibe. The way we look at a language and ways it should be taught are changing for variety of reasons, one of them being the availability of technological tools. Instead of being reserved towards them, we should embrace and choose the most suitable ones and apply them to the teaching process.

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