CETL-LWW project "Resources for Teaching Scandinavian Languages in the Digital Classroom"

Final Project Report

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CONTENT

Participants

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Project participants:

- Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (Danish)
- Reynir Þór Eggertsson (Icelandic)
- Margrethe Alexandroni (Norwegian)
- Annika Lindskog (Swedish)

Rationale

Our languages in Scandinavian Studies at UCL, as is the case with all of the LWW, suffer first and foremost from a lack of language materials that go beyond the traditional language textbook with its audio/visual model dialogues and grammar exercises. Our language materials are not geared towards blended learning, the use of authentic texts, task-based learning or intercultural perspectives that are becoming more and more central factors and demands in today's language teaching and learning.

International and national groups of teachers in our individual languages are presently forming to confront this expressed need, and this project will prepare our teachers to be in the forefront of such future collaborations with creating materials and best practices for blended language learning. Individual teachers in our department have been involved in UCL and CETL projects in the past. Daisy Neijmann has been involved in an Icelandic language mobile learning project within CETL, and an introduction to Danish language in the ATLAS web-project was created by Jannie Roed, a former Danish language teacher.

Our department is giving all our courses a presence on Moodle, and this project will assist the language teachers in creating best practices of using digital materials in the (virtual) department. Our project is, then, continuous with smaller projects in the past and will prepare us for the demands of the future

Aims and objectives

The project aims to assist language teachers in Scandinavian Studies to develop and share their materials and practices in a group whose languages and challenges to learners are very similar. The project aims specifically to create language materials for blended language learning in the digital classroom.

The materials produced will be directed towards advanced beginners/intermediate levels. Each language teacher will produce materials for 8 hours of classroom teaching, equivalent to two weeks of term-time teaching. The final product of each teacher will consist of a collection of materials and tasks for blended language learning under the heading of a single theme (chosen by the individual language teacher) and accompanied by a detailed description of the best practices involved in teaching with the materials, the technologies used and the skills practiced, together with an evaluation of learning experiences including samples of students' work. All materials must include the use of at least four technologies/media for blended learning in the digital classroom, for instance audio/video materials, voice recording, websites and social networking activities such as wiki, blog or chat. The materials and tasks used and created must be made publishable on the Scandinavian Studies Languages Moodle site and made available there as a digital and interactive "text-book"

Project plan

The project was divided into three phases where the first phase (term 1) was devoted to preparing and creating the materials: teachers worked individually and met in three work shops to discuss progress and best practices with the participation and assistance of Ian Newby; the second phase of the project (term 2) saw the implementation of the learning materials in the relevant language classes; and phase three (term 3) was dedicated to the evaluation of the finalized followed by the publication of the materials on the project Moodle site.

Moodle site

The project leader designed a Moodle site to be the virtual platform for communicating ideas about our projects, as a depository for our materials in different versions, and as a calendar for our own and UCL work shops related to the project. Since some of our materials will be made accessible through Moodle to our students, it was considered important that we familiarized ourselves with the platform - and one way of doing this was by using Moodle for our own project.

Link to the project moodle site

Now the Moodle site still has the record of our Forum communication for future reference, it has sections with links to and descriptions of some of the technologies and software we have used, and of course sections where the participants have posted links to and ideas for their individual projects.

Description of intended products

Where will the materials be stored? - Following the creation, trial-run and evaluation of the materials, they will be made available in a uniform format on the Scandinavian Studies Languages Moodle site from where they will be accessible to the wider public. Visitors to the site will be able to see the materials, activities and tasks, read the teacher description and see student products and evaluations.

Perspectives and sustainability

How will they be integrated into the syllabi? - It is our hope that the materials produced will not only be used and adjusted continuously by the individual teachers, but that they will offer experience with best practices in blended learning in the digital classroom and encourage teachers to create new materials to be incorporated into the syllabi in the future. We also foresee that, if successful, this material and the ways into language learning it suggests might also lead to new ways of assessing our students' language skills both when it comes to the format and the emphasis on certain skills. As such the target group for this project is the language teachers in our department, but, naturally, with the specific target of improving and innovating our teaching and assessments for the benefit of our students.

The individual teachers involved in the programme will continue working on and expanding the materials created in this project, following their own specific interests; for instance one teacher will continue working towards an online course for teaching language skills through creative writing, other teachers will continue to create materials and practices for using Moodle and the Language Space as integral parts of their language teaching, and our teachers are independently involved in recently initiated collaborations with their respective national and international colleagues in their field, wherein creating and sharing blended learning materials and practices are central objectives. For instance, already this summer, the project coordinator will give the first ever workshop in the international organisation of Danish language teachers on how to teach in the digital classroom. Since it is one of the aims of this project to initiate a discussion of best practices in blended language learning for our department's teachers, each teacher will naturally want to improve, modify and expand the materials created during the project, based on the skills and collegial sharing facilitated by the project. It is our aim that the Moodle site (our repository for language materials) will be maintained and sustained by the language teachers in the department as a site and database for continuous debate and for posting future experiments with blended learning in the digital classroom. The Moodle site will initially be maintained by the project coordinator for the next two years. By the end of the project, the created materials will be made available to all language teachers at UCL, who will be given access to the "second generation" of our Moodle repository. It is our hope that this repository, including originally created materials, guides and discussions of blended learning practices, in the future, will become a collaborative "open source" Moodle repository for all language departments teaching LWW languages at CETL-partner institutions. It is, then, our hope that once we have carried out this project, it can be multiplied to other languages and to other institutions that offer Scandinavian languages.

Evaluation methods

The evaluation of the project will fall in three parts: 1) by the end of term 1, and the final work shop, an evaluation of the work shops and the work on creating language materials will be conducted using Opinio; 2) the individual teachers will

conduct oral and written evaluations following the use of the created material in their language classes. Teachers will be using templates for forms produced by the project coordinator aiming at localising the strong and weak points of the total

learner experience (see appendix 1). Teachers will also be asked to write an evaluation of the individual classes, defining the aims, objectives, methods and level of the class, also involving thoughts concerning how the material might be improved for future classes; 3) A final evaluation will be conducted by the project coordinator based on the previous evaluations of individual teachers and learners, with the aim of writing a full report of the project and the materials, finally, published.

Results

Danish

Danish Digital Learning Objects by Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen

Icelandic

Icelandic Pronounciation Moodle Resource by Reynir Þór Eggertsson

This project was originally conceived by Daisy Neijmann, but she asked me to take over the project, which I very willingly did.

The main reason for the need for this material is the fact that Icelandic has a very high entry level, especially grammatically, which means that grammar takes up a lot of time on the beginner level. This means that pronunciation practice (both students practicing their own pronunciation and recognising correct sounds) cannot be practiced fully in the class-room. Furthermore, Icelandic has very few pronunciation variations (dialects) and native speakers have limited experience in understanding nuanced ('foreign-sounding') pronunciations, which makes it extra important for our students to obtain correct pronunciation.

2) How did you go about creating and shaping the materials?
Some material already existed from previous years, which has been used in classes. I structured the course on the basis of this existing material. Then with the help of Sybille, I recorded a great portion of the material, before sitting down and editing the Moodle-site, with great help and assistance from Jakob. My original plan had been to only use this as a read-and-repeat practice, but with time I have developed an interactive section, which is mostly based on sound recognition. The material is open for further development and editing which I hope will make it even better in years to come.

3) What were the challenges and rewards in the process?
The technical part was a small challenge, learning to use audacity and the different aspects of the Moodle-site. Also, choosing the appropriate tools in the interactive part of the course. I've learned a lot in the process, and I expect to be able to use online resources in a better way in my future teaching and research presentation.

4) Describe the final outcome of your materials?
The material is not fully finished, and I really expect it to continue to be a work in progress, which Daisy and other Icelandic teacher may be able to add to /edit in the future. As it looks now, it's a 12-lesson course, which can both be accessed and used in lessons, but most emphasis is on students taking the time to actually sitting down and practicing the pronunciation. I do see this as a course which students do not really finish with, but is there for their needs when they feel that they need to refresh their pronunciation, especially during leaves.

5) Do the materials do what you wanted them to do - what would you do different or how would you improve on them?
I believe that the material needs to be smoothed with time, probably the interactive part especially, as it may be too easy or too difficult for beginner levels. At the same time, I believe that the listen-and-repeat will work for those who take the time and use it!

6) How have you used the materials in your teaching?
I'm not teaching the first year course, so I have not used them myself. Neither has Daisy, yet, but I'm certain they will be very useful in the new academic year.

7) What did your students think about the materials? (here you can draw on the questionaires you asked the students to fill in)
Has not been evaluated by students yet, unfortunately.

8) And you could conclude with some remarks about the value of this project to your own teaching.
I'm certain that this material will be extremely useful in future teaching. It will give the students a source to go to at the beginning of their studies, and will hopefully work as an on-going source for them throughout their studies.
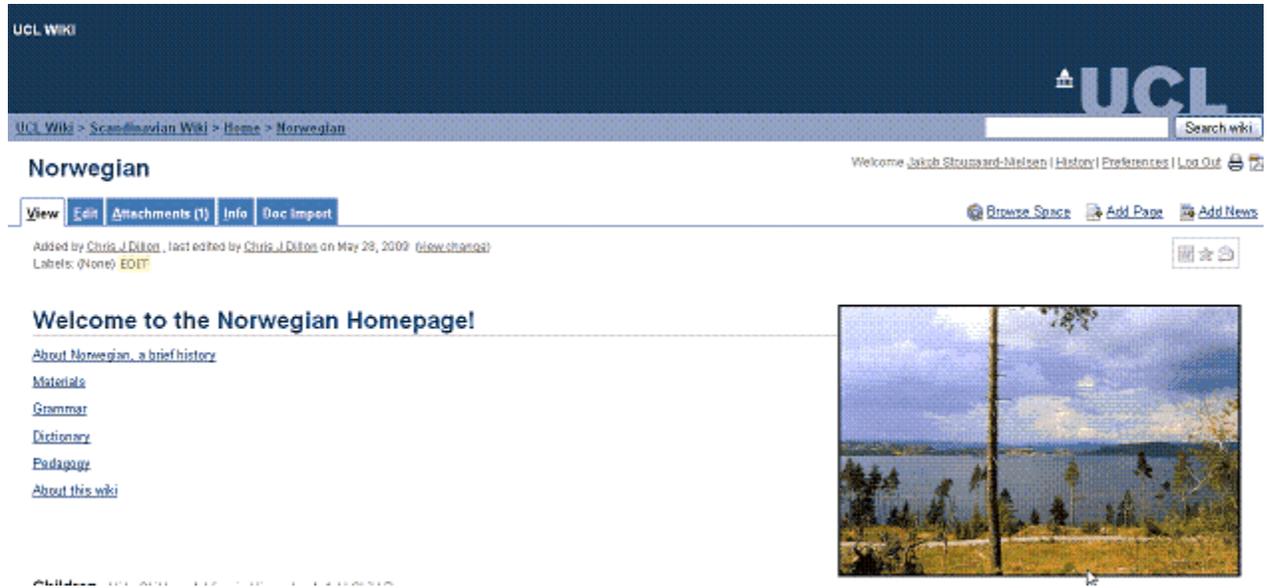
Norwegian

What was your initial idea for the project and why was there a need for this particular material? My initial idea was to make use of material that I had written over the years. It was my intention to present students with information about Norway not normally found in textbooks. Norwegian textbooks tend to be attractive, (colourful illustrations etc.), but the content is often extremely dreary, and of little or no interest to people studying Norwegian outside Norway.

How were the materials made?

With the technical help of Chris Dillon the material was put onto wiki pages. I found the UCL wiki very easy to work with. The material was subsequently cleaned up and links were made from grammatical explanations to relevant texts and grammatical exercises. The major challenges were to present the material in a systematic manner. This work is still not finished.

Description of the material:

Evaluation of the material and the project
I must admit that I found student enthusiasm rather disappointing. They did not use the material, i.e. they did not post me exercises on the pages assigned for student work, even though I strongly encouraged them to do so and we practiced it in Language Space. When asked, their conclusion was that using the material and Language space in general made a nice change, but all in all they preferred the old fashioned class room approach.
I enjoyed working with the material and the aim is to develop it into an on-line text book with grammar and links to relevant texts and exercises. As the same text often contains several grammatical problems, different grammatical explanations will have links to the same text. I will also use other materials to encourage students to write things in their assigned space.
In their evaluations, students seemed to favour the old fashioned approach. Also, I strongly believe in the value of oral work and free expression. Being an experienced language learner I know that speaking a new language is actually much more difficult than writing it.
I have enjoyed working on the project and I will keep working on it to perfect it. However, to me there is an element of using technical equipment, i.e. computers for the sake of it because this is now all the rage of our time.
I forgot to say that students used to enjoy my texts very much. The texts and exercises always worked very well when used the old-fashioned way. The students would laugh at the stories saying: 'did you write this?' or 'you wrote this, didn't you?'
        However, when the material was transferred to the wiki the students appeared less enthusiastic. Thinking about it now I realize that it wasn't the material itself that was the problem. Possibly the students would have felt more enthusiastic if I had been more in command on our visits to LS. They must have noticed that I was outside my comfort zone, and therefore could communicate no great enthusiasm.
Sibylle was a great help and support and I don't know what I would have done without her.
        The students were definitely on my side though. Once I used an ordinary black marker pen on the sophisticated electronic board by mistake. I only noticing what I'd done when I was half way through a word. The students became quite hysterical digging out tissues and wanting to help wipe it off before it dried. Fortunately there was a bottle of cleaning solution at hand and I managed to wipe it all off. Big sigh of relief all around. That was when it dawned on me that they really were on my side. What I'm trying to say is this: The problem was neither the material itself nor my relationship with the students. It was the fact that we were all on unfamiliar territory and that the students must have picked up on me feeling insecure and out of my depth.
        I'm glad we are having this communication. It has brought me closer to realizing why the wiki material did not appear to be as successful as I had hoped. It wasn't the material, it was the unfamiliar environment and technology.
        Another thought, the present generation of youngsters may be less enthusiastic about computers than your generation. For them computers have always been there, which is why they might be less excited about them. The sense of wonder and exitement is gone.

How to use the materials
I told the 1st years in particular to uses it for revision and to post it to me for marking and comments, but none of them did so. This led me to believe that the material is perhaps better suited to good old-fashioned paper. Next term I'll spend a couple of LS sessions to better familiarize students with the material than I did this year. Actually I felt nervous and not very confident about the Language Space technology. Predictably this must have been reflected in my teraching in LS. It was after all a huge and difficult step away from what I had been doing for years. In addition there was your talk about finding new ways of teaching, which I took mean using technology with which I felt uncomfortable.

The future of the Norwegian wiki
Tidying it up and making it more coherent will be the next step on my project.
        For the coming year I shall make use of LS, but the main bulk of my teaching will be in the old fashioned way where I feel confident and in command. Of course, given time I shall feel more confident in LS as well

Swedish

Conclusion by project leader