

Mobile Learning and High-Profiling Language Education

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Abstract. The number of students learning a second or foreign language and participating in instruction in languages other than English has been in decline for some time. This seems to be a general tendency across nations albeit for a variety of reasons idiosyncratic to the particular national conditions. This paper gives an account of a diversified national project designed to infuse foreign language learning classes in upper secondary schools in Denmark with renewed enthusiasm through systematically experimenting with the new media by taking advantage of the social aspect in their application. The aim has been to make language classes attractive and relevant and to highlight the attractiveness and fun in learning through web 2.0 and mobile units. The umbrella project was supported by the Danish ministry of education as well as the individual participating upper secondary schools. The individual projects were selected through an application process and assessed before being allocated funds. The overall project as well as individual minor projects were monitored and assisted by a select group of researchers, who helped guide and support the participating secondary school teachers through seminars and individual consultations. The collaborative efforts and reciprocal benefits enhanced the outcome of the project, and this paper will discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of such action research collaboration. The focus of the paper will be on results concerning motivation and the reported perception of the status of foreign language learning ensuing from the participation in the experimental classes. The participating students have been surveyed on-line and individually to assess the effect of the projects on student motivation and autonomy. The investigation throws light on personal experiences as well as the generally perceived image and status of foreign language learning in upper secondary schools. The overall results show an encouraging student belief in the power of the new media to improve interest in language learning. They perceive the new methods and approaches as a way to lift the image of language learning in general. It is clear that the potential imbued in mobile learning and social media has given rise to a strengthening of student participation and engagement. The projects have had the side effect of invoking an interest in new ways of teaching and learning also among the teaching staff not directly involved in the project.

Keywords: mobile learning, digital media, social media, motivation, action research.

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1. Introduction

The dominance of English permeates all spheres of education in the wake of globalization in general and internationalisation of education in particular. The on-going project reported on in this paper reflects the desire to strengthen language education at the national level and to encourage upper secondary schools to adopt foreign language education at a high level in a variety of languages in addition to English while encouraging students to select language options in their choice of specialisations. The project came about as a result of a determined effort to modernise language education and to give language education a new profile through digitally based teaching methods while sharing knowledge and experiences with local and national colleagues through project seminars. Autonomy and motivation are key concepts in this project which has allowed ideas and initiatives to develop in local projects while supported through national as well as local funding.

The individual projects were partly funded out of the budgets of the participating upper secondary schools and partly by supplementary funds from the Danish ministry of education. The overall project as well as individual minor projects were monitored and assisted by a select group of researchers who through seminars and individual consultations helped guide the participating secondary school teachers. The primary aim has been to make language classes attractive and relevant and to highlight the attractiveness and fun in learning through web 2.0 and mobile units through systematically experimenting with the new media by taking advantage of the social appeal in their application (Liaw & Huang, 2011). The hope was to infuse foreign language learning classes in upper secondary schools in Denmark with renewed enthusiasm in both students and teachers.

The study reported in this paper was the one common study embracing all the participating individual projects. One common feature for all individual projects was the digital approach to language teaching and learning, and this study was created to gauge the effect on motivation and the perception among the participating students of the incorporation of the digital media and ensuing change in teaching methods. The students were all upper secondary students attending language classes at one of the participating fourteen schools. At each participating school project, teams worked together to plan and implement the activities in the various languages. A total of fifty-eight language teachers and their students participated in the project comprising seven languages other than Danish.

2. This study

2.1. Aim

The national project aimed to improve and sharpen the profile and to bring the interactive aspect of foreign language learning to the forefront. Each participating

project had individual aims for their school's project, but in addition it was important to investigate the effect of the new media on the perception of the general language learning environment as well as the attitude of individuals towards language teaching and learning through new methods. The affective and motivational aspects, which were a common influence on the success of all the projects, became a priority area of investigation.

2.2. Data collection

The method employed to collect information of the attitude towards new ways of learning a foreign language was an on-line questionnaire which each participating student could access and return anonymously. It was important to get as many respondents to fill in and return the questionnaire and to this end the assistant of the participating language teachers were enlisted. In practice it meant that the language teachers took time out from their teaching to ask the students to go online and answer the questions in the questionnaire. Respondents were anonymous but tracked through IP-addresses and the system was set up so that each respondent could only return one questionnaire. The respondents filled in the questionnaire after having been involved in the experimental language classes for two-thirds of the school year.

2.3. Participants

The online questionnaire was filled in by 431 students enrolled in foreign language classes across the nation and receiving experimental instruction in English (202), German (230), French (79), Spanish (105), and other languages (11). However, only 369 respondents completed the questionnaire.

2.4. The questionnaire

The items in the questionnaire can be grouped in three categories: a) respondent details, b) instructional details, and c) affective and motivational details. The questionnaire items in b) and c) sections were based on a six-point Likert-type scale (Dörnyei, 2010) ranging from *Strongly agree* to *Strongly disagree*. All in all there were seventeen main items, but the items comprising sections b) and c) each had a number of discrete sub-items pinpointing information completing the overall knowledge of the respondents' attitudes and perceptions.

2.5. Research questions

Particularly interesting for the evaluation of the project were questions about which digital tools had been applied, how the students received them and the accompanying changes in teaching methods. The most pertinent issues were:

- What methods and applications did the students prefer to work with?
- What were the students' perceptions of the digital learning environment?

- How did the digital learning environment influence the students' motivation for learning the L2?
- How did the students perceive the influence of the digital learning environment on their autonomy?

The answer to these research questions are clearly based on a qualitative and subjective assessment of the personal experience of the respondents which is always a depiction of a momentary situation. However, the method of data collection with the high number of respondents and the guaranteed anonymity underwrite the reliability of the results.

2.6. Results

The range of tools and applications that students interacted with was very varied, reflecting the various instructional approaches and pedagogical principles applied by the individual teachers to fit the language, level of proficiency, and the particular language skill to be developed. The reported results are made brief and only the results of the pertinent issues are reported here.

The issue of digital methods in contrast to traditional language classes has a very clear majority for digital learning methods in that 73% prefer this to 27% of respondents who prefer the traditional methods. Out of the digital tools, the preference is to use PC or Mac (94% positive vs. 6% negative) rather than mobile applications (29% positive vs. 71% negative). This needs further investigation. In fact, 74% of respondents have access to a smartphone of one version or another, and they are appreciative of the possibilities of mobile learning of the respondents. 61% say they like mobile learning because they can download apps and because there are many possibilities for mobile learning. However, only 35% agree that they have good language learning apps. Of the possible modalities there is a clear preference for using YouTube (61% positive vs. 39% negative), for other modalities the respondent attitudes are more negative than positive. It is also quite clear that when asked specifically the respondents prefer a combination of digital and traditional methods (91% positive vs. 9% negative).

The digital learning environments were evaluated with regard to the effect on the active participation of the students in learning activities. The majority agreed that digital learning made them more active in class (67%) and agreed that 47% of their classmates became more active. In other words, a respondent perceived herself/himself as being more active but only 47% could detect that heightened level of activity. This illustrates the qualitative method and inherent subjectivity of attitudinal research. The same situation – level of activity – is evaluated differently depending on the perspective of the respondent.

The influence of digital learning on motivation (Stockwell, 2010) was investigated through a number of sub-items approaching the issue from different angles. When it comes to assessing their own learning outcome, the majority of

respondents evaluate their own learning as better with digital learning (54%), but the difference between those who say they benefit more from digital learning is not great since 46% do not agree.

In order to evaluate the perceived influence on autonomy, the respondents were given statements which related to their self-determination as well as their own perception of autonomy (Ushioda, 2011). The respondents overwhelmingly reported an increased ability to take responsibility for their own work (86% positive vs. 14% negative). The majority of respondents were positive in the evaluation of their own autonomy (75% positive vs. 25% negative), and 83% said that they were free to work in a different way (Vinther, 2005), reporting that they have the possibility of being creative (80%) in their work with and in the foreign language.

3. Conclusion

The results warrant the conclusion that the experimental classes have achieved positive outcomes with regard to active participation, motivation and autonomy. The respondents report that they become more independent, more creative, and happier in their language learning activities. It is also evident that multimodal approaches to teaching and learning find favour with these Danish upper secondary school students.

The study answers many questions, but it also opens new trajectories for research of a more detailed kind as the need for more depth becomes apparent in relation to some of these issues. One case in point is the application of smartphones. Here the appreciation of possibilities is high among the learners, but the actual assessment of the application is low.

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