From 3 to 130 Students:
Online University Studies in Languages
- the Case of Romanian in Scandinavia -

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1. Introduction

- The IT-based university-language-learning is still at its beginning. Only a small number of university-teachers have welcomed this new pedagogical model (Ditvall 2006b). *Why?*
- In this paper - we will not answer directly to this question – we will try to present some of our research-results within our ongoing pioneer e-project (which started for 11 years ago) and will in this way actualize some items about e-learning which may guide other teachers in their plans to adopt this education-model.

1.1 Why e-learning?

Are IT-based-courses necessary, once there exists a campus-based educational system, well-functioning, since hundreds of years?? What is then the purpose of online-university-courses? To reach:

- more flexible teaching-learning?
- more students?
- higher qualitative status?
- modern teaching?
- more effective & more financially-reasonable educational-system?
- a supplementary element to campus-courses?
- a replacement of some of the campus-courses or maybe all campus-courses?

turning, thus, the discipline into being more attractive, more interesting and more effective – with a surer basis to survive?

One may wonder!

2. Romanian University-studies – a pioneer project in e-learning

Lund University has, since about 50 years, raised the interest in Romanian studies – primarily due to professor Alf Lombard (1902-1996) – famous linguist in Romance languages.

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2.1 The late 80-ies

But first in the late 80-ies the Romanian studies could be taught in classroom. Yet, this happened only every other year or every third year. Only the first level existed. The number of students was very low: 3-5 students. Only 25%-50% attended the course completely.

2.2 The crucial year – beginning of a new era

In the mid 90-ies Lund University started different projects in view to develop the educational system by means of highly modern technique – inspired from *the American model: i.e. the IT-based education!*

Within short a high number of Institutions started research-projects in developing parts of their educational-system *online*. A great success!

… Yet, no Language-teaching-Institution opened its eyes towards this model – even if we were continuously shown the positive results of this type of project. … 5 years had run away …

2.2.1The Romanian section menaced to be abolished

The low number of students and thus the diminishing financial support menaced the section to be abolished. Thus, the only university in Scandinavia where it was possible to take a degree in Romanian studies was on its way out … Other language-sections, in other universities of Sweden and even Scandinavia, with similar background, were closed!

2.2.2 1998

In the beginning of 1998 I[1] completed the Ph. Dr. thesis in comparative linguistics – including Romanian (at Lund University - being professor Lombard's last Ph-Dr. candidate).

Trying to save the Romanian *situation* I adopted immediately the thought of starting a research-project about *IT-based university* ***language*** *studies* – then the project-work "*Romanian studies online*"started. My hypothesis was: "Online-teaching should mean a wider geographical area, no bounding factors as time and room - thus an augmenting number of students!?".

2.2.3 1999

In January 1999 – the first level (in its complete shape, i.e. including all modules) started.

About 27 students were registered. They lived all over Sweden and Denmark. About 80 % of the students went through the course and about another 10% completed the studies the following year(s).

The statistics showed *a dramatic change – a positive change – maybe a new era?!*

[1] "I" is expressed, apart from this paragraph, by the term "we".

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3. E-learning vs campus-learning?

As we know all development may bring up, along with positive changes, even some negative changes. What about this in the case of IT-based education?!

Below, we will try to point out some of our results, trying to illustrate the development of the *e-Romanian*. We will focus on the view of the both parts of the *learning* - "the *out*-learning" i.e. the teachers and "the *in*-learning" i.e. the students – and will try to compare the e-learning-model with the traditional campus-learning-model. The information below has its basis primarily in the evaluation of the e-courses (throughout the project's 11 years – until today) that we collect at the end of each academic year.

3.1 The teacher's opinion (some headlines):

3.1.1 Larger geographical area?

True! By means of the internet-technique we do reach students spread on a much larger geographical area. NB! Our e-students are Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Finns or of other nationalities but speaking a Scandinavian language – our "*teaching*" takes place in Swedish!

As we mentioned above, our Romanian section – at campus-courses-level - had since decades represented a tiny language-section, i.e. with extremely few students living in or in the surroundings of Lund respectively Copenhagen – section menaced, finally, to be abolished.

Since 1999 (the start of the e-Romanian-project) we reach students throughout Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, other countries in Europe, the USA or other parts of the world[2].

3.1.2. Higher number of students?

Definitely! This fact is indirectly confirmed by the larger geographical area that we reach by the e-model. (Ditvall 2001)

From the first beginning the number of students increased *dramatically*: from 3 students every other/third year, having access only at the beginner-level (level 1) – by means of campus-teaching -, directly to approx. 27 students and thence more and more for every term.

Today – by means of e-teaching – the section has approx. 130 students, every term, NB having the opportunity to run the complete university-programme (2-years) online, i.e. all 4 levels in parallel (from the beginner's level to the pre-doctoral level).

3.1.3 Flexible teaching and learning?

Yes! Neither the teachers nor the students are depending on time, space, buildings (Bradley 2005).

[2] One of our students was living on the Island *La Réunion* in the Indian Ocean – she was collecting information for her Master-thesis within Politechniques, another one in *Tanzania*, *Africa* – where she worked as a Red-Cross officer, another one in another African country (we forgot details), in the *bushes* (even there having access to internet !!). – he worked for the UN, and so on.

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The whole course-material (including even the administrative material) is online. Both the teachers and the students have access to the course-material at any time, from anywhere. The learning-process is "conducted" by means of a *Timetable* where certain deadlines must be respected, but the learning-process is flexible, for instance, among other aspects, if student X wants to start with module 3 and student Y chooses to start with module 4 – while the other students work with module 1 – it is completely possible. The student has access, once he logged in, to the entire course-material. Text- and audio-files lead him through the lectures, keys help him with the exercises.

Even the communication-process is flexible, i.e. questions, answers, comments - all take place, in writing, in special fora. This type of communication is not depending on time: roughly speaking - one "*asks and answers when he likes*". On the other side we have created fora for direct interaction, i.e. at a given time, live – by means of a webcamera, which we use primarily when the teachers give feed-back on pronounciation, or on other moment in oral or written proficiency or where debates (assisted by the teacher) take place a.s.o (Braconi Eklund 2005).

By means of this model we "teach" the students, beside the *foreign language***,** independent learning, self-discipline and initiative-taking (Ditvall 2004).

3.2 The student's opinion (some headlines):

3.2.1 The geographical area – important or not?

Yes, very important. 95-99% of our students do not live in Lund or Copenhagen or the surroundings. A large majority of these people travel a lot or are settled down far away from Lund and Copenhagen or live abroad. They have confirmed that the only possible way for them to study Romanian has being offered thanks to our online-model and they highly appreciate this incredible opportunity.

3.2.2 Flexible learning or not?

Yes, indeed! The flexible "frame" of learning is very appreciated by the students: this makes possible the combination of studying a foreign language beside working or doing other main-studies. On the other hand this improves the possibility of studying on an interdisciplinary status – a majority of our students have other discipline as major study-field (as Political Sciences, Economical Sciences, other Romance Languages etc) which they combine with the e-Romanian education-programme.

Flexibility in this respect, within the e-courses, is highly possible and strengthens undoubtedly the student's motivation. But working and studying at the same time or combining different study-fields - if these two items take place in different parts of the country) – meet clear impediments at the level of campus-courses.

3.2.3. Access to the course-material – limited or in continuum?

At campus-courses one may miss lectures or lessons, because of sickness, travelling etc. Then one can, for the most, hardly get *complete* notes, if any, from some classroom-mate.

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But in the case of e-courses, one *does not miss a single* lecture or lesson. As shown above the entire course-material is at the disposal of the student: *"the lessons, the exercises, the keys, the pronounciation – all is "there" when he comes back"!* And the access at every lecture etc is possible in continuum – which allows the student to repeat and repeat …, in continuum, having there the "feed-back" in pronounciation or written proficiency, in continuum.

This type of learning is very appreciated indeed of the students and has shown itself to be very effective in the improvement of the language acquisition.

4. Alterations in the (linguistic) communication – in the learning-process

Now, both the teachers and the students seem to be positive, in the terms shown above, vis-à-vis the e-learning-model.

One may, though, wonder: but does this "type of communication *at distance*" not alterate the communication, the language-learning?! Is the risk higher within this learning-model?!

Our experience has faced the following reality. Within the e-conducted-courses, in comparison to the campus-courses – there seems to be:

- a better and more regular, finally constant, feed-back (orally and in writing), either by means of the keys and the audio-files or by the direct interactive feed-back, live, which takes place more often than in campus.

- a better supervising-possibility, in the fact that the teacher has better and more *control* on the classroom as a group as well as on each individual. On the other hand the teacher has a complete view of the group's or the individual's acquisition-activities – and thus have the chance to intervene immediately to "*straighten up*" the situation (ex. if the teacher observes that student X has not attended a certain amount of lessons, he can immediately – within his e-task of supervisor - contact the student, get to know about his problem and solve it, in case the technique or different misunderstandings or difficulties in other fields may arise – cf. in campus if a student "disappears", i.e. does come to the lectures any longer, because he cannot cope with too many problems within the course, the teacher can hardly call the student home to ask *why*?!).

- a better interaction between the teacher and the student: the interaction takes place more frequently and seems to be nearer than in campus. On the other hand by means of the great diversity of fora the interaction is very intensive.

Self-feed-back in continuum (through the audio-files and the keys), a more regular feed-back from the teachers, a better supervising/control-opportunity and a better, nearer and more frequent interaction are some of the factors that – within the online-model – help to adjust possible alterations in the language-acquisition-process and may even contribute in eliminating quite a few. In addition, the effects of these factors seem to prove a clearly improved result in the student's oral and written proficiencies.

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5. Towards a conclusion

In the present paper we have focused on some of our research-results revealing the advantages of e-learning - as the positive sides of this new educational development are clearly more numerous than the negative ones.

Online-studying, compared to campus-studying, seems to:

- create a nearer contact between the students and the teachers,
- assure a continuous direct or indirect feed-back, at a larger individual rate that in campus,
- give the possibility of studying at a large flexibility rate (independently of time and room)
- have a better "control" in the language-acquisition-process trying to adjust more promptly eventual alterations
- be in a way more effective in the student's results in oral and written proficiency

And all this seems to contribute, by means of highly modern technique, to increase the interest for the discipline and the motivation for studying - resulting not only in the student's attending the entire curriculum, but also arises the interest of going over to the upper level(s). (Ditvall 2006a)

In the case of the *Romanian studies* in Scandinavia, the IT-based-model:

1) Not only *saved* the Romanian section from abolishment
2) But has also contributed to the *augmentation* from 3 students (before 1999) to 130 students (nowadays).

Today the Romanian section, a pioneer in online-language-courses, is one of the very few language-sections having IT-based courses and the only one in Northern Europe to have its *complete* academic programme *online*!

References (The references are translated from Swedish.)

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De 3 à 130 étudiants : les études universitaires de langues étrangères par l'internet: - le cas du Roumain en Scandinavie -

Dans la communication présente nous avons mis le focus sur quelques-uns des résultats de nos travaux de recherches sur e-learning. Nous nous sommes concentrée sur les items positifs de ce nouveau système éducationnel, car les avantages se sont montrés plus nombreux que les désavantages.

Nos résultats montrent que les études par l'internet, par rapport à ceux au niveau traditionnel - en campus, semblent assurer:

- un contacte plus proche entre l'étudiant et le professeur
- un mieux feed-back, directe et indirecte, pour chaque individuel
- une large flexibilité (hors des facteurs du temps ou d'espace)
- un mieux résultat dans l'acquisition de la langue

Tous ces facteurs, près d'autres encore, semblent contribuer à l'augmentation de l'intérêt pour la discipline respective et une meilleure motivation de suivre les études.

Le modèle éducationnel par l'internet a réussi, dans le cas des *Études Roumaines* en Scandinavie :

1) non seulement de sauver la section (en train de disparaître)
2) mais aussi d'augmenter le chiffre des étudiants, de 3 (avant 1999 – le start du Roumain par l'internet) à 130 étudiants (aujourd'hui).

L'exemple du Roumain va peut-être inspirer d'autres professeurs d'adopter ce nouveau modèle, moderne, d'éducation universitaire même dans les sections de langues étrangères.

Lund, Sweden

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