DIGITAL PORTALS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING ENCOURAGING STUDENT AUTONOMY

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Abstract

In Finland, Swedish is a national language alongside Finnish. Within higher education, every Finnish speaking student must take an oral and a written exam in Swedish. During the last decade, students’ language skills have decreased which creates a challenge, since the requirements have remained the same. Teachers need to find new ways to motivate and encourage students and students need to have ways to review and learn professional Swedish.

This paper discusses two different language learning portals. The objective of these portals is to encourage student autonomy when studying professional Swedish. The aim is to motivate students by giving them more responsibility and autonomy for their own learning i.e. student empowerment. When using these portals, students become active content creators and owners of their learning. The portals encourage students to seek and process information in various ways and finally, to produce appropriate outputs. Furthermore, students are encouraged to use a wide range of digital tools in the different phases e.g. when processing information, learning vocabulary and grammar, and creating and presenting the output. The primary focus is on communicative skills and the students are encouraged to work with themes that interest them and where they can show their own expertise. Both platforms are suitable for blended learning, distance learning and independent studies.

The first portal is Smart svenska (Smart Swedish) developed as part of an Aalto Online Learning project (A!Ole) financed by the Aalto University. Smart svenska is created for learning Swedish within higher education and mainly aimed at business, arts, design, architecture and technology students. The portal has open access for anyone wishing to learn Swedish. The Smart svenska portal comprises of three sections called Input, Process and Output. First, the students seek information about a specific topic, then process the information and finally present it to others. The input section consists of links to authentic material such as field specific journals, blogs, videos and podcasts supplemented with instructions on how to make surveys or interviews in order to collect new information. The process section provides instructions and tools for processing information, for example digital mind maps, tools for arguing and discussing, and material for learning vocabulary and grammar. In the final section, output, students find instructions for creating their output e.g. video presentations, vlogs, pitches, pecha kuchas, podcasts and reports.

The second portal is a multi-disciplinary and open-access digital language learning portal called Svenskstudier för högskolestuderande, created by a teacher team from three institutions: Aalto University, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences and Laurea University of Applied Sciences. The portal has been created within the DIGIJOUJOU project, a national development project for digitizing second language learning in higher education in Finland financed by Ministry of Education. The portal comprises activities students flexibly select as part of a course or independent studies. The activities are suitable for different fields of study and they are on CEFR B1 – B2/C1 levels. All the activities follow the principles of flipped learning and are divided in seven thematic categories.

In the presentation, we demonstrate the portals and discuss the pedagogical aspects.

Keywords: higher education, language learning, student autonomy, digitalization, open educational resources.

1 INTRODUCTION

Swedish is a national language in Finland, which all students in higher education are required to learn and pass exams in both oral and written skills on CEFR level B1-B2. Teaching Swedish within higher education has become a greater challenge during the past 10 years because students are not required to study Swedish in high school to the same extent as before, and they can choose not to take a final
A matriculation exam in Swedish. Furthermore, students in higher education have tighter timetables and less time to concentrate on language studies.

Several national projects have tackled these challenges with the aim to advance digital language learning. In this paper, we present two language learning portals created in different projects and that have received funding for creating digital learning material. Both projects are based on pedagogical methods that encourage student autonomy and creativity.

The outcome of the first project is a web based platform called Svenskstudier för högskolestudenterande [1] (Svenskstudier i bufféformat in the abstract) and is part of the national DIGIJOUJOU project [2]. The second project is an Internet site called Smart svenska [3], created within an educational development project at Aalto University in Helsinki called A!Ole [4][5].

2 THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework of the portals namely learner autonomy, student empowerment, blended learning, flipped learning and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

2.1 Learner Autonomy and Student Empowerment

Autonomous learning entails that learners take responsibility for their own learning. This takes place through identifying learning needs and setting goals, reflecting and evaluating, understanding the purpose of learning and one’s own learning style. In addition, students need to be able to take decisions and choose learning activities. [6]

Autonomy has clear implications on motivation. Students can individually design flexible study paths within the scope of activities on the portals and discuss their goals and plans with their teacher to ensure that institutional curricula requirements are met.

On both the portals, students are empowered through making the learning meaningful with realistic and authentic learning activities that focus on professional communication. Studies with the portals enable them to take ownership of their own learning by taking an active role and responsibility. Learning is social action and problems are solved through study, discussion, testing and sharing. Learners are creators of knowledge and social interaction is essential. Knowledge is created through problem solving in collaboration.

2.2 Blended and Flipped Learning

Blended learning means blending online learning and face-to-face lessons where learners have a chance to collaborate, communicate and receive guidance and feedback. Students have autonomy to a certain extent on how they work online, they can choose the pace and between alternative activities. Not all students follow the same programme and do the same activities. [7]

Students do part of the work individually and part of it face to face in the classroom [8]. The fact that students are more in charge of their own learning and able to control it, is an important aspect of blended learning. The tasks in our platforms are designed to enable students to do part of them by working online. The instructions for the tasks are available online and they can be used for independent learning or in face-to-face meetings, and encourage the students to use online sources when searching for information.

Flipped learning is another method applied in the portals. Student autonomy is promoted in flipped learning as students take more responsibility for the learning process. In practice, students work independently on assigned materials to learn new issues before coming to class [9]. In the classroom, students solve problems and discuss the issues studied at home. Flipped learning allows differentiation and instructors may assist students better in the process of problem solving compared with students solving problems and performing tasks as homework. Notably, the tasks available on the platform are all suitable for flipped learning, since the idea is that the students work on a task at home, and then present and discuss it in class with other students and the teacher.
2.3 CLIL and CLT

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) focuses on content and the target language is used for learning it [10]. In a CLIL setting learning takes place in specific contexts starting with the content and focusing then on communication, cognition and culture. Subject matter is learnt via acquiring subject knowledge, and learners’ cognition develops as own understanding is created and analysed linguistically. Also here, learning requires a social context. In CLIL relevant tasks are vital, and it is best if they require higher order thinking. Bloom’s new taxonomy is a useful framework for creating CLIL tasks. The six steps of Bloom’s new taxonomy are remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating. This framework is beneficial for the cognitive process and provides context for learning language for higher-level thinking (i.e. analysing, evaluating and creating).

Benefits of CLIL are that it often increases motivation levels and learners benefit cognitively from the use of the target language. Learners of foreign or second languages might not always have many possibilities to practice analytical skills involving higher level thinking and learning. Most of the tasks on the portals can be considered to be CLIL applications as the objective of learning is not only language.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has the aim of teaching through communication, and on the portals, students learn communicative competence for their future professions. In accordance with the principles of CLT, the goal is to prioritize the students’ needs and give the students the freedom to choose topics that are interesting and relevant to them. The central idea is that learning happens through peer input and in interaction. [11] [12] As this is also one of our aims, we offer many different types of tasks, which allow the learner to practice producing various types of texts.

3 TWO DIGITAL PORTALS FOR LEARNING PROFESSIONAL SWEDISH

Promoting student autonomy is the key focus of both portals presented in this paper. In this chapter, we present how student autonomy is implemented in the websites for learning Swedish.

The main difference between these portals is that Svenskstudier för högskolestuderande provides different types of readymade assignments, while Smart svenska provides resources and instructions.

3.1 Svenskstudier för högskolestuderande

Svenskstudier för högskolestuderande was created as a part on a national project DIGIJOUJOU with the aim of creating digital and flexible paths for learning Finnish and Swedish. The project is financed by the Ministry of Education. The portal has been developed and tested for over two years by four teacher from three different institutions of higher education. As of now, it includes 60 target-based activities in seven thematic categories. The categories are professionally oriented (figure 1). The themes are multi-disciplinary and cater for students with various majors. Through the activities, students can for example practice telling about their studies and institutions, gain information about innovations and experts within their own field and learn about sustainability and ethical marketing. They can also practice skills they need when looking for a job and different types of working life skills. The activities help students to look at things from different perspectives, for example that of a student, company or customer. Students use the portal in independent study or as a part of a blended learning or flipped course with face-to-face classes. Teachers may use the portal in various ways e.g. as an activity bank. The activities can be adapted and they can be used for project work during lessons. All the activities are licenced under CC-by-NC.

Students can make individual study plans according to the course requirements and study on their own, in pairs or in groups. This allows them to be autonomous and to integrate learning context and language learning. Students practice both oral and written communication skills when presenting their work in class or online as well as when they comment on each other’s work. They can also choose which digital tools they use when preparing their final outputs for each activity. The portal gives suggestions on suitable digital tools. All work is submitted to their institutional learning environments such as Moodle or Blackboard.
3.2 Smart svenska

Smart svenska was created as an Online Learning project at Aalto University. Aalto Online learning supports teachers and staff in developing novel technical solutions and pedagogical models for online and blended learning and actively foster a strong support network at Aalto University.

Smart svenska is a web portal, divided into three sections: INPUT, PROCESS and OUTPUT. In the INPUT section, students find various types of material in Swedish, and all material is related to the their own fields such as subsections tailor made for engineering students, business students and arts students and subsections about leadership and sustainability. In the input section students find video, audio and text resources in Swedish that they can explore and choose according to their own interest and choice. The material is chosen so that it would be interesting and useful for the students and
encourages them to learn more. It is also important that the material provided in the INPUT section consist of mainly links to material that is up-to-date and being updated continuously. The section provides also links to daily news.

Figure 4. The Smart svenska landing page for the INPUT section

Figure 5. A subsection page at the INPUT section of Smart svenska

In the PROCESS section, the idea is that students process the information that they have obtained in the INPUT section. We have digital mind mapping tools and other tools for processing information, such as guidelines for SWOT analysis, storytelling and the six thinking hats method. In addition, we have links to vocabulary and grammar resources and exercises. We encourage the students to add their own personal touch to the information before presenting it to others and to work with the language. The PROCESS section helps the students to work with their obtained material in creative ways.

Figure 6. A subsection page at the PROCESS section of Smart svenska
The final section is called OUTPUT and here the students find guidance on how to present their processed information in different ways, both orally and in writing. They find instructions for different types of presentation formats, for example traditional presentations, video pitches, pecha kuchas, vlogs, blogs and reports.

The Smart svenska website promotes learner autonomy and online learning culture in many aspects. The platform opens up for more flexible studies, which is much asked for. Furthermore, it gives possibility to use the versatile authentic resources in Swedish outside the classroom. It also empowers the students, since they have the possibility to make their own choices of material as well as process methods and ways of presenting their material.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The digital portals described have proven to be helpful tools when encouraging students to take more responsibility for their own learning. Students have expressed satisfaction with the possibilities to plan their studies according to their own personal interests, to choose their own time and place for studying and for the easy access to up to date and authentic material and activities within their own fields of study.

The demand for flexible study paths has increased, and both Smart svenska and Svenskstudier för högskolestudenter meet this demand. It is also expected that the demand for more individual study paths will continue growing, which results in great need for engaging and relevant study material.

Both the platforms are open access with CC-by-NC licence and we believe that the demand for such environments will grow. Students and teachers may not wish to register to many portals and applications.

The Svenskstudier för högskolestudenter -portal will be developed further to enhance the visual outlook and navigation features. Both the portals will be developed further in content and usability, and the authors seek to find further financing for this work. Furthermore, both the portals play a central role in future implementations of courses in professional Swedish in Digicampus, a Finnish online learning portal for higher education.

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