

Media use in distance education in Sweden

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This article gives an overview of distance language teaching which developed rapidly in Sweden after the Second World War. It argues that so far little use has been made of technical aids and that the computer as such is still a stranger both to the language teacher and the student. The writer concludes that perhaps the time has come for a technical revolution amongst Arts students.

Met hierdie artikel word 'n oorsig gegee oor afstandsonderrig—spesifiek wat tale betref—soos dit in Swede ontwikkel het na die Tweede Wêreldoorlog. Daar word op gewys dat tot dusver min gebruik gemaak is van tegniese hulpmiddels en dat veral die rekenaar onderbenut is. Die skrywer sluit met die gedagte dat die tyd moontlik ryp is vir 'n tegnologiese rewolusie in die geleedere van die Lettere en Wysbegeerte.

Since the Second World War, one of the outstanding aspects of social reform in most societies has been the spreading of educational opportunity to previously underprivileged groups, coupled with the realisation that education is not a once-and-for-all process, completed in adolescence or early adulthood. The pace of change in the modern world entails for many recurrent education or re-education at various stages of their working lives.

One result of these insights has, in many countries, been a change in the role of the university department, in the range of courses offered, and in the composition of the student population. In my own department, Language for Special Purposes is steadily growing in importance and as a proportion of our output. The so-called mature student is a commonplace and over half our students are to be found in part-time courses proceeding at half speed. We have experimented with decentralised courses in other towns in our region, although the burden on an overworked faculty is such that I no longer favour this form of decentralisation. We are obliged, however, partly for local political reasons, to run part-time courses in our twin city some twenty-five miles away.

A type of decentralisation which now seems to

have achieved permanence is, however, the distance course, intended to bring a university education within reach of those who, because of physical distance from a university town, employment or child rearing, for instance, are unable to benefit from the conventional type of course, whether full or part-time. The best known of all such distance teaching organisations is, of course, the British Open University, established to devote itself entirely to the needs of those unable, for various reasons, to pursue traditional university studies. This was conceived from the outset as a "University of the Air" and extensive use is made of the national radio and television networks as media of instruction.

In Sweden it was decided not to set up a separate institution to cater for distance teaching, but to decentralise the responsibility to the existing universities and their departments. While the Open University still, as far as I know, offers no foreign language courses in its curricula, the department of English in Linköping was one of the pioneers of distance education in Sweden, and we are now in our eleventh year of such activity. Since 1974, the number of language departments offering distance courses has grown from three to at least fifteen, some offering courses in more than one

language. All such courses are part-time at half-speed or less.

As distance education would seem to offer various opportunities to use technical aids to compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact of the traditional course, and as our own courses rely heavily on

especially the cassette recorder and the telephone, I decided to conduct a survey of the other departments recorded as offering distance courses. All returned the brief questionnaire which I submitted to them, and the results are summarised in the table.

University	Subject or Dept.	No. of courses ¹	CASSETTE TAPES			TELEPHONE		LOCAL RADIO/TV		Video/Computers/Other	Sum of recorded uses
			pre-recorded tapes	teacher commentaries	pupil assignments	contact	instruction	information	instruction		
GOTHENBURG	English	3	X		X	X					3
	Slavic	3 ²	X			X					2
LINKÖPING	English	2	X	X	X	X	X				5
	Swedish	2 ³		X	X	X					3
LUND	Russian	2	X			X					2
STOCKHOLM	English	1				X					1
	Finnish	1				X		X			2
	German	2			X	X					2
	Swedish	1 ³				X					1
UMEÅ	English	3	X	X		X					3
	Finnish	1	X			X	(X)				2(3)
	French	1	X		X	X					3
UPPSALA	English	3	X			X	X				3
	French	2	X			X					2
	German	3	X			X					2
	Spanish	1	X			X					2
	Swedish	1 ³				X					1
Total	17	32	11	3	5	17	2(3)	1	0	0	

Notes: 1 Except where otherwise stated, the number of courses indicates the different levels (basic, continuation, advanced) at which the subject is offered. Each level is maximally equivalent to one semester of full-time studies (20 credits).

A full degree contains at least two subjects (120 credits).

2 Introductory courses in Russian, Bulgarian, Czech.

3 Courses in so-called "Practical Swedish". Also, at Linköping, in Swedish for Teachers of Immigrants.

I regard these findings as rather disappointing. Where I had hoped to discover someone making more adventurous use of media than my own department (we make no bones about stealing good ideas), it turns out that we are by far the greatest users of tape cassette and telephone, the only technical aids to be used at all. (Finnish in Stockholm uses local radio, but only to inform about coming courses.)

By far the commonest medium of distance education for all departments, including our own, is the printed word in prescribed books and study packages. This is, no doubt, as it should be. As one of my

informants remarked, perhaps with some acidity, "the printed word isn't such a bad thing!" Nevertheless, the spoken word should not be ignored.

Apart from home study packages and self-instructional material, we, in common with all other distance departments, call our students to short intensive courses. (For a more detailed presentation of the various components of our distance courses, see N.F. Davies 1977.) Their frequency varies from twice a term, in our case, to once a month in the case of Spanish at Uppsala, for instance. One good reason for our greater use of media may well be that we have kept the use of

face-to-face instruction to a minimum. I suspect that many of the other departments have done little more than concentrate the normal one to two evenings a week of a part-time, half-speed course to two or three days a month (usually at weekends), and have therefore felt little need to pioneer new methods.

If we look at the table in some detail, we will see that the only medium used by all is the telephone for pupil-teacher contact. This is no more than one might expect in a society as telephone conscious as Sweden. We have never had a student without access to a telephone. A previous investigation (Davies 1978) showed that roughly a third of students never rang their teachers, while 20% rang more than three times. Their phone calls are almost exclusively about such problems as inability to attend courses, changes in telephone tutorial times, or to seek study guidance in the face of changes in their domestic or employment situation which have greatly increased their work load.

The most common medium of instruction in the table is the prerecorded tape, used by 11 of the 17 subjects/departments. The amount of material recorded varies, the most common single use being in the field of pronunciation (9 of the 11). Other uses are for recorded lectures, listening comprehension and literary excerpts. All these uses are a feature of the distance courses of my own department, and we have, for instance, all the courses of lectures given in face-to-face instruction recorded for the benefit of distance students in such subjects as phonetics, history and civilisation, history of language, history of literature, and background lectures to set authors. These recordings are also much appreciated by regular students who miss a class and can either bring a tape for copying or listen in the language laboratory. We also economize on some part-time courses by supplying students with take-home cassettes instead of live lectures. This allows us to spend our limited budget on more interactive aspects of the course. In addition, after an initial diagnostic pronunciation test, our distance students are sent cassettes which train the specific features of pronunciation or prosody with which they have difficulty.

Only five departments record the use of cassette tapes for student assignments. In four cases these are for oral exercises or for pronunciation practice. In addition, our department and Umeå

French require students to submit taped assignments. We also have taped assignments in history and civilization studies.

These assignments are, in our case, commented on and corrected on tape. We also accompany all returned assignments in grammar, written English and pronunciation with a taped, individualised commentary by the appropriate teacher. The *number* of corrected assignments for a distance student is lower than for those following conventional courses; for economic reasons we must make some use of self-correction with a key and printed commentary. But about once a fortnight the distance student will be receiving some piece of work that has a sound commentary on his or her errors. This is not only a useful form of individualisation, but it also serves to keep alive a sense of contact between student and teacher. Only two other departments record the use of cassette tapes for teacher correction, and in at least one of the cases, such use is sporadic rather than regular.

Finally, only Uppsala English and ourselves make regular, timetabled use of the telephone for tutorials. Umeå Finnish records sporadic, ad hoc use. While this is an expensive aspect of the course, both in telephone charges (which we pay) and in teacher time, we feel that it is well worth while. Four times during our basic course, only twice during our continuation course, we ring up the student at a pre-arranged time for a tutorial on a set book, read and carefully prepared according to instructions in the text course package. The discussion, in English of course, lasts some 30-40 minutes and is viewed very positively by the great majority of students. Those who live reasonably near the university are offered the alternative of a group discussion in the normal way, which saves us both time and money. But there is no doubt that the telephone tutorial offers the student an opportunity to talk freely and at length in English in a way that can scarcely be reproduced in face-to-face teaching, with the regrettably low staff-student ratio with which we have to contend.

We have considered using the group telephone or conferencing facility offered by the Swedish telephone authority, but have not so far pursued the idea. However, such use is reported from the distance education of class teachers in Pedagogics, Norwegian and Religious Studies conducted by Bodø Teachers Training College in the north of

Norway (Jarle 1982). This has been very positively evaluated by students, provided that the number involved at any one time is not excessive. The report writer recommends an optimum of 4-5 lines and a 60-minute discussion. This requires, however, careful regulation of turn-taking by the teacher if all are to feel satisfaction and an entirely free and spontaneous discussion is difficult to achieve so long as there is no visual contact between participants. The use of the conference facility in Bodø has meant an economic gain, as they have been able to reduce the travelling to local groups which is otherwise undertaken by the teacher.

In my survey, I included the use of radio, TV, video and computers, without expecting much response. Tape cassettes are preferable to radio for instruction, especially if the number of recipients is few, frequently beyond the reach of local radio stations, but not of national interest. I have, in fact, produced programmes for the national radio for which our distance students have received working material, but as these are not repeated from year to year, radio cannot be a permanent feature of a course. The same argument applies to television. There are many programmes in normal schedules that could form the basis of excellent language packages, but as they only occur once, it is not cost-effective to develop material around them.

Video, in these days when the home video player is becoming more and more common, might seem more attractive. Several respondents have noted the use of video on intensive courses, but none send out video tapes for home use. Given the high cost of video cassettes and of copying in large numbers, this is, unfortunately, also not surprising. However, if the copying problem can be overcome, one might envisage students submitting their own cassettes on to which programmes could be transferred from the departmental master tape, and which could be re-recorded with a series of programmes throughout the course. This is a facility which I hope in the near future to be able to offer students on a Business English course which we plan for 1985. I should also dearly like to see the Architectural History option which I teach, on offer to distance students.

As far as I have been able to discover, computers are not regularly used for any language instruction by any university department in Sweden. They are seen almost exclusively as a research tool. One would therefore hardly expect to see them in use

for distance education. And yet—the home computer is much cheaper than the video recorder. Indeed, such is the disillusionment experienced by large numbers of home computer buyers, that our local paper carries many adverts each week from people only too happy to offload their white elephants at knock-down prices. Is it feasible to develop meaningful language programmes for the cheap home computer, now rarely used as anything but a plaything? Perhaps not. The computer must wait. Yet, compared with video, for instance, or the tape recorder, it has the great asset of being, within limitations, interactive.

My survey raises, in my mind at least, the not unimportant question: *Why* does it reveal so little use of technical aids to language learning? We are discussing advances in media techniques; we hear colleagues who are at the forefront of developments. Yet I suspect, indeed I know, that the vanguard is small, and it is a very long way ahead of the main body of troops. For many an ordinary footsoldier, indeed, the vanguard is clean out of sight. I have made telephone inquiries about the quality of media training given at some major teacher training establishments in Sweden. The picture is mixed, but there is little doubt that even today, the amount of hands-on experience, even at the level of pushing the right buttons, is far too small. A woodwork teacher spends much time learning the use, care and maintenance of a wide range of tools: not so the average language teacher. The authorities are currently devoting much money to in-service training of teachers in computer science. It is not language teachers, however, who are to be found on the courses. As there are so few language programmes commercially available, this is perhaps hardly surprising. And yet—no egg, no chicken.

There is, in other words, a need for a technical revolution among Arts graduates which goes deep and does not merely attract the gadgeteers.

Bibliography

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