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FROM LANGUAGE LAB TO BREAKOUT ROOMS. INNOVATIVE METHODS IN TEACHING FINNISH PHONETICS ONLINE

Keywords: phonetics, Finnish, online teaching, games

Summary. Due to the pandemic, all the courses at the Institute of Scandinavian and Finnish Studies at the University of Gdańsk were organised online during the academic year 2020–2021. Due to this, teachers did not have access to the Language Lab, which is specially designed for speaking activities and teaching phonetics. Therefore, the course had to be planned again by modifying the exercises to be taught online. Phonetics combines theory with practical exercises such as dictations, games, and pair work. The aim of the exercises, often carried out through a game play, is to teach the students how the Finnish sound system differs from the Polish one (Polish being the native language of the students) and familiarise them with these sounds. Several aspects were chosen for the article to show how a course of phonetics and Language Lab activities can be organised online. The article also covers the importance of teaching and learning phonetics and why games are a crucial part of teaching for various reasons, such as offering the students a stress-free environment to practice what they are being taught and interact with each other.

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the pandemic, the courses at the Institute of Scandinavian and Finnish Studies at the University of Gdańsk were organised as online courses during the academic year 2020–2021. Despite teachers had already gathered valuable experience of online teaching after the university was closed at the beginning of the spring semester in March

2020, online teaching can be challenging and stressful due to lack of interaction with students and co-workers, constant sitting in front of the computer screen and adjusting into a new form of teaching while having to find new ways to organise tests, teach different subjects and create activities for the students.

In this article, I will describe how the course Finnish phonetics was organised online, what kind of adjustments were required and what resources were used. First, I will explain why phonetics is a crucial part of any language studies, what is a Language Lab and how it can be used in teaching. Second, I will provide reasons for using games when teaching adult language learners and cover the importance of support and good resources. Then, I will describe selected aspects of innovative teaching. For this article, I have selected four aspects that I will investigate more closely by providing aims and key skills of these exercises, how they were prepared and presented to students, how those selected activities were used, what was the outcome and how students reacted to the tasks. Finally, I will summarise the feedback retrieved from students.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONETICS

The first-year students at the Institute of Scandinavian and Finnish studies at the University of Gdańsk have Phonetics in their schedule once a week for the first year of their studies. The aim of the course is to learn the sounds of the language, to able to distinguish different sounds from each other, and be able to use relevant terminology.

Phonetics is a crucial part of every language learning process for several reasons. On the website E-Polish, Paulina Kuc (2018) has listed reasons why it is important to learn pronunciation of a foreign language. First, when students learn what kind of rules concern the ways of articulation, new language becomes less strange or foreign for them. Second, students might make typos in writing if they face difficulties with the new sounds of the language, for instance not being able to distinguish similar sounding sounds from each other. Third, problems with pronunciation might even cause difficulties in communication when people are not able to understand what is being said. Fourth, the cite suggests that "the language level is usually assessed intuitively through the prism of pronunciation" (Kuc 2018, translation by L. S.). This means that despite having a basic vocabulary and making mistakes with grammar, a good level of pronunciation can give a picture of a good language user. Kuc also states that correct pronunciation should be incorporated

in the teaching especially at the initial levels after group activities such as communication exercises and whenever new vocabulary is being introduced to the students to pay attention to difficult sounds or words. Students can also be given more relaxed activities, such as tongue twisters, song lyrics, or role plays that aim to teach correct pronunciation. Warm-up games at the beginning of the lessons can serve as a great lesson starter as they require concentration, especially when it comes to distinguishing different sounds (Kuc 2018).

University of Gdańsk is equipped with several Language Labs that have Sanako Lab 100 software. Sanako is a Finnish Education Technology company, which has specialised in providing language teaching software, which does not require Internet connection. It consists of many activities from listening comprehension to pair discussion (Sanako online). Language Lab is a very useful tool that gives the teachers possibility to listen how individual students pronounce certain words at their own pace while the students do not know when they are being listened to. The students concentrate only on their own performance. Students can be divided into pairs or groups and practice dictating words to each other.

3. GAMES FOR ADULTS

Games and teaching have always gone hand in hand. In this chapter, I will have a look at the functions of games in teaching and what kind of positive outcomes they can provide. Hyacinth Gaudart wrote already in 1999 about the significance of games and other simulations in teaching. According to Gaudart (1999), when students of a foreign language play games, they can practice the forms they have been taught and experiment with the new structures in a less formal situation in which they feel comfortable (p. 283). It is very important that the students feel safe and confident during the lessons.

Sigríður Dögg Sigurðardóttir (2010) has listed eight reasons why games should be included in teaching. First, games are fun, which can help in making the students more active, even those who usually are reluctant to speak. She also notes that "[k]eeping students active is vital because teachers will never be able to actually teach students anything unless they can get them to participate in their own learning process" (p. 7). Second, games can serve as a great tool for creating a positive atmosphere, help the students get to know each other and keep the learning environment exciting. Third, she cites Langran and Purcell

(1994, pp. 12–14) when pointing out that the students have a chance to practice being in situations where they would use the language (such as role plays) and they have a chance to take on more responsibility in the situation, not just being listeners, which can end up in increasing their confidence. Fourth, games provide students a chance to take part in games which help them to get "exposed to the language in a variety of situations" (p. 8). Fifth, when students play games for educational purposes, they feel a range of emotions from excitement to amusement – which can in turn be a positive factor in the leaning process. Sigurðardóttir cites Langran and Purcell (1994, pp. 12–14) again when stating the sixth reason, which is providing a chance for the shy students to express themselves in small groups instead of speaking for the whole group. While playing games, the students can focus on speaking and fluency instead of grammatical correctness. Sigurðardóttir cites Sigurgeirsson (1999, p. 80) for the seventh reason, which is sparking interest and providing diversity in the learning process. Finally, games at the school or university provide a chance to play games in general, which not everyone has (Sigurðardóttir 2010, pp. 8–9).

4. RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

The support of colleagues is important in every profession. During the academic year 2020–2021, the online community turned out to be very resourceful, not only in terms of finding material but also when it came to sharing and receiving advice on how to approach certain issues in online teaching. Social media and countless blogs turned out to be a very helpful source of support when it was not possible to meet colleagues face to face. Despite popular Facebook groups, there are a lot of tutorials, premade lesson plans and material that can be adjusted to the needs of the students, applications, and games available for instance in YouTube, Pinterest, and other social media platforms. Those activities, that were previously used in the classroom setting, were able to be replaced by online variants.

One should bear in mind that online studies require initiative and a lot of concentration from students: for some, the presence of teacher or other students can serve as a motivating factor, but when such support is not available at home, it can be tempting to do something else and not pay attention to what is being made on a lesson. When working in a regular classroom or Language Lab, despite there being many small groups or pairs having conversations, it is still possible to monitor the

students so that the topic will not change to something irrelevant. In such cases, the teacher is able to direct the conversation back to track. However, when the lessons take place online, despite having the opportunity to jump from a breakout room to another to check whether students need help, it is not possible to see everything that is happening. In some cases, which were fortunately very rare, there was an empty breakout room waiting, students talking about something irrelevant, or someone who was supposed to be there was not, not letting the teacher know that there is an issue with technology. It should be noted that the first-year students started their studies in fully online form, they came mostly straight from an upper secondary school, and since they did not have previous academic learning experience, using their own initiative could have been at times difficult.

5. SELECTED ACTIVITIES

For this article, four aspects that can be used while teaching online have been selected: a way to simulate Language Lab at home, utilising online applications that are designed for learning purposes and two selected games. The games can be modified to meet the needs of different languages.

The aspects will be covered by providing an overview of the activity or method, listing the learning objectives and aims. The selected activities serve as overall examples of different activities that were used during the academic year, since it is not possible to introduce all of them here.

When the phonetics lessons took place, the students were first shown a plan for the day so that they knew how the lesson looked like. The lesson plan was a list of activities and exercises in a Microsoft Word file that was shown to the students by sharing the computer screen. Students were usually given instructions in English, and if it was necessary, someone was asked to translate them into Polish so that everyone would understand them. Then, students were shown step by step how to find a task at hand, either where to find a file in Microsoft Teams and how to download it or how to access a given web site and how to use it. After the instructions, students were divided into breakout rooms, which serve as a space for pair or group activities.

Usually, the students were divided manually into groups of two to four, based on several factors, for instance, whether they know each other beforehand in order to give everyone a chance to work with different

people. In some cases, a more talkative student can encourage and help a student who needs more confidence in speaking. Students were moved into the breakout rooms automatically after they were divided into small groups manually. Microsoft Teams offers the teacher a chance to jump from room to room and observe, check whether students need help, assist them, or provide the instructions once again, if need be. When the time was up, the students were sent a message about when the lesson would continue, to give them time to wrap up the current activity.

6. LANGUAGE LAB – REMOTELY

During a typical lesson at the campus, the students would pronounce lists of words with the teacher in order to hear the correct pronunciation and practice it right after. Then, they have an occasion to practise on their own, at their own space by repeating challenging ones as many times as need be. While doing so, the teacher has a chance to listen to what the students are saying without them knowing this. When students do not know that the teacher is listening to them, it can, in fact, decrease the stress. Moreover, the presence of the teacher and course mates can help the students to concentrate on the task without distractions. The environment should be comfortable for the students to practice pronouncing new sounds. Meanwhile, the teacher can listen to each student, make notes of what seems to be problematic and, hence, practiced more. Teacher can also provide individual feedback for the students.

It is also possible to use pre-recorded materials: the teacher prepares a recording (word list or short sentences) before a lesson and shares the file with the students. The students download the file, play the recording and repeat the words after the recording at their own pace. For this activity, the students can be moved into individual breakout rooms. Teacher can go from room to room and check whether students need help. For instance, students practised pronouncing short and long vowels and consonants through minimal pairs, which are pairs of words that differ from each other just by one sound. In the Finnish language, such examples can be seen in words in which the only difference is the length of the consonant or a vowel, for instance: 'mato' (a worm) and 'matto' (a rug) or 'tuli' (fire) and 'tuuli' (wind). It is important to practise pronouncing vowels and consonants of different lengths in Finnish, as length can change the meaning of the word altogether and complicate communication.

To simulate Language Lab learning environment in Microsoft Teams, a list of words was recorded before the lesson with a regular cell phone. The audio file and script were sent to the students. Between every word or phrase, there was a pause of 5 to 10 seconds to give the students a chance to repeat the words once or twice. Students were also instructed to pause the recording and repeat a certain word or phrase more times, if they felt the need for that. Despite it was at times time-consuming to record material before a lesson, it enabled the possibility to jump from an individual breakout room to another during the lesson and listen to the students' pronunciation while they were playing the recording at their own pace. When studying remotely, this is as close as it can get to a real Language Lab setting, in which the lesson would be carried out the same way. The aim of the exercise was to give the students a chance to practice pronunciation by listening and repeating words. They also had a chance to download the file and practice at home on their own.

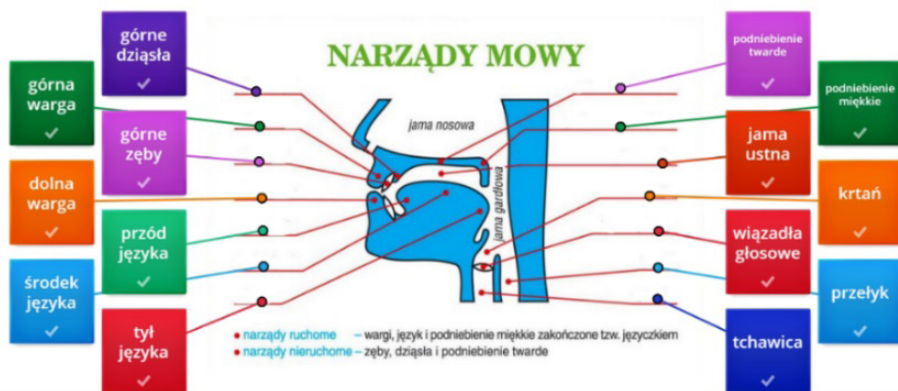## 7. ONLINE APPLICATIONS INSTEAD OF CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

When the pandemic started and courses were moved from campus to Internet, many teachers around the world found themselves teaching online for the first time in their life. In the classroom setting, it is easy to divide students into groups, let them play educational games, or give them cut-out cards with terms or phrases to explain and repeat what is being learnt. Suddenly, these activities needed to be replaced with online variants. At the beginning of the pandemic, it was not always easy to find good applications that would suit the needs of students or the course, but within time and the help of other teachers, it was easier to find proper applications and come up with creative ways to use them.

During the course, several online applications were used, one of them being Wordwall, which is a web site that provides teachers and students many kinds of learning material – not only for language learning but for many other subjects as well. It is possible to create an account and find already existing material or create exercises to fit the needs of the course, exercise, or students. To name few activities, the application offers crosswords, flashcards, and quizzes. However, the application is free only to some extent, and for frequent usage it might require paid login.

As linguistic terms can be challenging to learn and remember in foreign language, the mother tongue of the students was taken into

account when providing them with new terminology. The screenshot below shows a pre-made activity that was found in Wordwall and used during the lessons:

Picture 1. A key to 'Narządy mowy' (the organs of speech)

Source: https://wordwall.net/fi/resource/4153870/polski/dopasuj-nazwy-na-rz%c4%85d%c3%b3w-mowy [30.10.2021]

Before the students were given a link to the exercise and divided into pairs to complete the task together, they were shown how to access the material and how it is used: Students aim to connect the terms in the colourful boxes to the picture in the middle by clicking the colourful little dot and dragging it to the proper place. In case the answer is not correct, the dot will automatically return to its original place and students can try again.

The activity was used when speaking organs and manners of articulation were covered in order to teach what kind of a role the place of articulation plays in pronunciation. The aim was to give the students a chance to discuss how the items should be connected, help each other, and learn to use the terminology through repetition, teamwork, and game play.

8. BATTLESHIP – PERFECT GAME FOR PRACTISING DIPHTHONGS

As described before, games have many useful functions in teaching, and they can be used to engage students with the subject. For practising short and long vowels and diphthongs, a game called Battleship was used during the course. In the game, the players hide ships of different sizes into a grid. On the left side of the grid, there are letters and

on top of the grip numbers (or the other way around). The players try to find the hidden ships by forming coordinators, such as A-8 or C-6. If the player can locate a ship, or even part of it, the player whose ship was found says "hit" – and if nothing was found, "miss".

Finnish has 18 diphthongs (e.g. *ai*, *ui*) and 20 combinations of vowels (e.g. *ae*, *öe*), as well as short and long vowels (e.g. *a-aa*). The game offers a chance to practice these through the form of a game. Instead of forming coordinates of numbers and letters, the students need to create a diphthong, a combination of consonants or a long vowel by choosing a sound from the left side and then another sound from the upper side (such as *a-i*) as can be seen in the screenshot below:

Picture 2. Screenshot of the game grid

	A	E	I	O	U	Y	Ä	Ö
A								
E								
I								
O								
U								
Y								
Ä								
Ö								

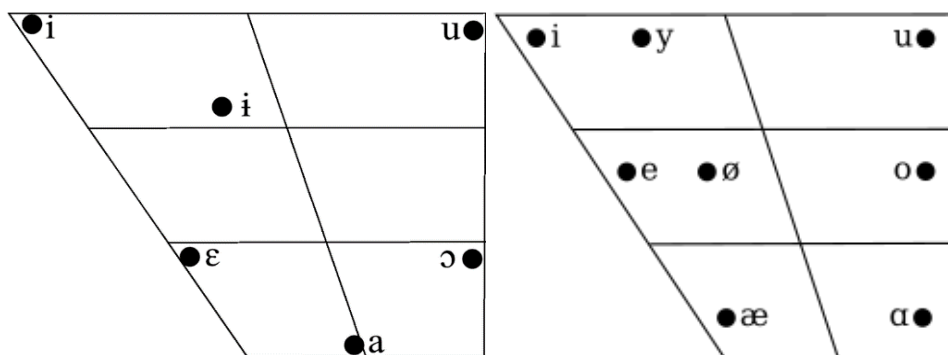Source: created in Microsoft Word by Laura Santoo

Before students were divided into pairs, they were shown how to find the game. Then, the instructions were covered in English and Polish, which is the mother tongue of the students. After this, the students were divided into breakout rooms in pairs. During the game, the rooms were visited by the teacher to see how the game goes on and whether the students need help. Afterwards they had a chance to share their thoughts or ask questions.

Key skill in Battleship is to be able to produce different sounds that appear in the Finnish language and pay attention to those that do not appear, since the sounds violate the rules of vowel harmony. Due to the lay-out of the grid and the amount of sounds, players are able to form also sound patterns which do not appear in the language and are, hence, incorrect (such as /öa/, which is against the rules of vowel harmony that concerns the usage of front and back vowels), but this provides, on the other hand, an occasion to practise sounds that seem to be very difficult to form and, hence, incorrect. Another key skill is to listen carefully and even try to produce the same sound, to see what it could be. Students were required to co-operate and help each other by asking the other student to repeat the sound or write the correct answer in the chat, if it turned out to be too difficult.

9. GUESS THE SOUND – THE IMPORTANCE OF PROPER PRONUNCIATION

The aim of the game Guess the Sound is to show the students the importance of proper pronunciation. Students were told to mute the microphones but keep the camera on and simply utter vowel sounds or two letter syllables (e.g. *la, tu, me*) while another student paid careful attention and tried to lip read what the sounds or syllables could be. The aim was to concentrate on the differences in pronunciation between Finnish and Polish vowels. As displayed in the vowel charts below, despite some minor similarities, the vowels in Polish (on the left) and Finnish (on the right) are pronounced somewhat differently, and there are more vowels (*ä, ö*) in Finnish, which can be challenging for some students and require careful repetition.

Picture 3. Vowel chart of Polish (left) and Finnish (right)

Source: https://pl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Polish_vowel_chart.png, https://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Finnish_phonology [30.10.2021]

When it comes to new sounds or sounds that are challenging to pronounce, it is sometimes better to start by exaggerating the pronunciation to get used to the way how the sounds are made. Then, when the sound has lost its newness or even strangeness, there is no need to exaggerate anymore – the pronunciation should get easier and easier by practising. In order to help the fellow student to understand the sounds or syllables, students had some fun exaggerating the sounds. Before students were divided into breakout rooms, they were shown how the game works and how they should read the vowel chart (shown above). Afterwards there was time for reflection and to share what was challenging.

10. FEEDBACK AND CONCLUSION

To get an idea, what the students find challenging or useful, they were given a chance to express their opinion after each activity and each lesson. At the end of the semester, they were given a feedback link to give feedback anonymously. They were asked what they find useful, what they would chance and how they rate their own learning (i.e. were they active during the course).

It is not, of course, possible to fulfil everyone's expectations and not everything is to everyone's liking, but when it comes to positive feedback of the course, students wrote that varied activities were nice, and they helped to remember new things more easily in a stress-free environment. The different type of exercises also helped them to maintain attention. Maintaining attention while studying at home can be at times challenging due interruptions. Studying is not, of course, just fun and games, but games can help us to relax, be less self-aware, get to know other students and as if by accident practice and repeat aspects that are being taught. The aim of the games and other resources was to get the students to know each other, help to create atmosphere in which everyone would feel confident to express themselves and to make it easier to learn and practice relevant terminology, new sounds, and intonation. For future reference, in case there will be a need to teach phonetics online again, it is possible to use the above-mentioned games and resources and modify them to meet the needs of different aspects of pronunciation.

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Z PRACOWNI JĘZYKOWEJ DO „BREAKOUT ROOMÓW". INNOWACYJNE METODY W ZDALNEJ NAUCE FONETYKI JĘZYKA FIŃSKIEGO

Słowa kluczowe: fonetyka, język fiński, nauka zdalna, gry

Streszczenie. Z powodu sytuacji pandemicznej wszystkie kursy w Instytucie Skandynawistyki i Fennistyki na Uniwersytecie Gdańskim w roku akademickim 2020–2021 zostały zorganizowane zdalnie na platformie Microsoft Teams. To spowodowało, że nauczyciele nie mieli możliwości korzystania z pracowni komputerowej (Language Lab) wyposażonej w program Sanako, który jest zaprojektowany z myślą o nauce i ćwiczeniach z fonetyki. Kurs musiał zatem zostać zaplanowany całkowicie od nowa w taki sposób, żeby był jednocześnie zasobny w informacje, praktyczny i interesujący dla studentów pierwszego roku, którzy zaczynali swoje studia zdalnie. Kluczowe było wsparcie i pomysły innych nauczycieli znajdujących się w podobnej sytuacji – pomysły zostały udostępnione w grupie dla nauczycieli języków obcych na różnych portalach i stronach w Internecie.

Ważne jest wczesne włączenie nauczania fonetyki w plan studiów, aby studenci danego języka mieli okazję przećwiczyć nowe dźwięki. W języku fińskim system dźwiękowy nie różni się uderzająco od polskiego, ale są pewne różnice wymagające aktywnego ćwiczenia. Kurs fonetyki łączy teorię z praktycznymi ćwiczeniami, takimi jak: dyktanda, gry, rozmowy oraz zadania do wykonania w parach i grupach. Celem tych ćwiczeń, czasami w formie gier, jest nauka dźwięków występujących w języku fińskim, pokazanie polskojęzycznym studentom różnic między fonetyką polską a fińską.

Przydatnym narzędziem do ćwiczenia nowego materiału lub nowych dźwięków jest gra, nawet w nauczaniu dorosłych. Gry mają na celu „przełamanie lodów" i rozluźnienie atmosfery w czasie lekcji tak, żeby każdy czuł się pewnie. Granie w gry często oferuje bezstresowe środowisko, w którym studenci mogą być odpowiedzialni za sytuację zamiast wykładowcy. Podczas zajęć studenci mieli okazję grać na przykład w statki (*Battleship*), których celem było stworzenie dwugłoski i znalezienie statków drugiego studenta. Mieli łatwy dostęp do materiałów także po zajęciach. Na podstawie opinii zebranych w ciągu lekcji i po jej zakończeniu można stwierdzić, że studenci byli zadowoleni z tego typu ćwiczeń.

W artykule przedstawiono, jak uczyć fonetyki zdalnie, imitując zajęcia prowadzone w pracowni językowej, gdy nie ma dostępu do wymaganego programu oraz w jaki sposób przenieść do nauczania zdalnego te rodzaje ćwiczeń i gry, które w normalnych warunkach wykonuje się w pracowni komputerowej.