



## FEATURE

### Researching and developing remote teaching in mother tongue tuition

Fanny Pettersson, [fanny.pettersson@umu.se](mailto:fanny.pettersson@umu.se)

Umeå University, Sweden

Peter Hjelm, [peter.hjelm@regionvasterbotten.se](mailto:peter.hjelm@regionvasterbotten.se)

Region Västerbotten, Sweden

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## Researching and developing remote teaching in mother tongue tuition

Fanny Pettersson, [fanny.pettersson@umu.se](mailto:fanny.pettersson@umu.se)

Umeå University, Sweden

Peter Hjelm, [peter.hjelm@regionvasterbotten.se](mailto:peter.hjelm@regionvasterbotten.se)

Region Västerbotten, Sweden

### **Abstract**

This feature describes an ongoing research and development project (2019-2022) on remote mother tongue teaching in Sweden. The project is based on the collaboration between the Department of Education, Umeå University, and the Competence Centre for Multilingualism. The feature elaborates on challenges and needs for research and practice emerging from the first phase of the project including (1) Strategies for systematically increasing pupils' digital competence, (2) Remote didactics for interactive and collaborative learning, (3) Forms and methods for more active teaching, especially for younger ages, and (4) Digital relational competence for pupils, teachers and supervisors.

Keywords: distance teaching; distance learning; rural; school; collaboration; K-12

## **Background to the research and development project**

This feature describes an ongoing research and development project (2019-2022) on remote mother tongue teaching in Sweden. In Sweden, there is strong statutory support for the provision of mother tongue tuition to children who are entitled to such tuition according to the Education Act (2010:800). According to the Swedish National Agency for Education, mother tongue tuition has an important role in children's learning and development. It has been highlighted as a foundation for pupils' language learning, for the creation of a sense of community and for supporting pupils' learning in all school subjects (see also Ganuza & Hedman, 2018). However, providing pupils with access to mother tongue tuition, especially in minority languages, has been a challenge for many schools in Sweden (cf. Pettersson, 2017; Stenman & Pettersson, 2020). In some cases, this is due to long geographical distances between schools, meaning that valuable teaching time is spent on travelling. In other cases, this is due to difficulties in recruiting mother tongue teachers, not least for those schools situated in villages and small municipalities.

To increase the access to mother tongue tuition, the Education Act (2015/16:173) was amended to allow remote tuition in certain subjects, among them the mother tongue subject. The prescribed remote teaching forms would enable pupil/pupils to be located in their school premises together with a supervisor while the teacher is in another location conducting the teaching via information and communication technology (ICT).

For remote mother tongue teaching, the amendment to the Education Act in Sweden provided new opportunities, but also new pedagogic and didactic challenges for schools and teachers. The Education Act (2010: 800) states for example that school and teaching in Sweden should be based on academic research and proven practice, but research and the Bill proposing (2015/16:173) show that there is an explicit lack of pedagogical research and methods in the field of remote teaching. This need for pedagogical research and methods in remote mother tongue tuition form the basis for the ongoing project (2019-2022) reported on in this feature. The project is based on the collaboration between the Department of Education, Umeå University, and the Competence Centre for Multilingualism (CCM).

### **Development of remote teaching**

Internationally, remote teaching in the compulsory and upper secondary school systems is not a new phenomenon. The first two schools offering full-time online teaching started, in the USA in 1997, and in 2016-2017 to about eight million pupils were estimated to be enrolled in remote teaching courses, only in USA (for a more detailed account of remote and distance teaching, see Clark (2003, 2007) and Barbour (2011, 2018, 2019) and Cavanaugh, Barbour and Clark (2009)). In Sweden, however, the principle of vicinity has historically prevailed in the compulsory school system, meaning that there were schools in areas where families lived. However, as a result of increased urbanisation in the 1970s and onwards, school closures increased, especially in villages and small municipalities. In addition, the introduction of a national certification of teachers in 2011 led to increasing teacher recruitment problems. Remote teaching was allowed in 2015 as one solution to these problems, but with some limitations as to subjects and how the teaching is to be conducted (for a more detailed account of remote and distance teaching in Sweden, see Pettersson (2017) and From, Pettersson and Pettersson (2020)).

For obvious reasons, there is limited research on remote teaching in a Swedish context. According to Barbour (2018, 2019), most of the research on remote teaching is based on studies carried out in the USA. These studies are often based on teachers' self-reported statements and experiences (interviews, questionnaires) and are rarely validated through observations of actual teaching situations. Barbour (2018) holds that this field of research has been characterised by a lack of conceptual frameworks defining specific aspects of remote teaching. Several studies also point to a lack of a pupil and parent perspective (Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015) and relational aspects on distance teaching and learning (Wiklund-Engblom, 2018).

Compared to traditional classroom teaching, mother tongue tuition is often characterised by small teaching groups (or individual pupils), often younger age groups in need of active teaching and newly arrived pupils with specific needs for introduction to both society and digital teaching. Thus, in this project, remote teaching is understood from the perspective of the different conditions of the mother tongue subject (languages, group sizes, pupils' and teachers' backgrounds, teacher's competence etc.). Studying the specific challenges facing the mother tongue subject could hopefully provide important pieces of knowledge that might help to develop and understand the larger research field on remote and distance teaching. In the next sections, the project design, challenges and needs emerging from the first phase of the project are described.

### **The Competence Centre for Multilingualism**

The CCM is a municipal school unit offering mother tongue tuition to some 1650 pupils each year, including 75 teachers. Its aim is to give all children and pupils opportunities to develop and strengthen their languages. Multilingualism is seen as an asset in Sweden, and the CCM provides language support, mother tongue tuition and study counselling to preschools and schools. Mother tongue tuition is offered to both private school and municipal school pupils, from pre-primary school up to upper secondary school. Pupils in the compulsory school and upper secondary school system, as well as those in the compulsory and upper secondary school systems for pupils with learning disabilities, can also receive study counselling in subjects and courses. Such counselling is offered to students who need support in the language they feel most confident in and is intended to help students acquire subject knowledge while at the same time learning Swedish.

In the autumn of 2015, the CCM began work to develop remote teaching in the mother tongue subject with a view to increasing access to mother tongue tuition and equivalence of education for students outside the central parts of Umeå. In the first year, the work involved students in Years 7-9. The response from pupils, teachers, parents and schools was positive. The remote format meant less travel by car and bus for the teachers and gave pupils outside the central parts of Umeå access to teaching together with children and young people from the same linguistic and cultural background. The CCM then proceeded to develop the teaching also for younger pupils. As of the autumn term 2018, the teaching is conducted in groups of up to four to five pupils in Years 2-3, 4-6 and 7-9 from different schools. Mother tongue tuition for pre-primary and Year 1 pupils is conducted via remote teaching technology only in special cases.

## Project design

In the spring of 2018, the CCM expressed a need to evaluate and developing its remote teaching activities. As the CCM had been trying out remote mother tongue tuition for three years by then, technological and organisational structures were already in place. The challenge and development needs now identified were of a more pedagogical and didactic nature, in line with the challenges also pointed out in research and the above-mentioned Bill. The request from the CCM resulted in a research application together with Umeå University that was awarded a research grant by the Umeå School of Education.

The project started in 2019 and will end in 2022. The overall aim of the project is to develop tools and methods for evaluating and developing forms of remote teaching, especially in mother tongue tuition. The project is designed on the basis of five overall phases comprising (1) mapping of challenges and needs for research and practice (2) formulation of joint aims for the project (3) development of evaluation methods (4) developing methods for remote teaching and sustainable support structures and (5) dissemination of results.

In this feature, some initial results from the first phase will be presented. The intention of the first phase was to provide a basis for the design and content of the project where researchers and practitioners would together formulate joint content. Based on the overall goals of the project, a thorough mapping was made in the first project year of the CCM's activities with a view to identifying opportunities, limitations, and needs. The mapping was based on data obtained through interviews with the management, remote teachers, informal dialogues, and observations of the CCM's activities. As a starting point for the data collection, five overall criteria were formulated together with the CCM to obtain a representative view of its activities (remote lessons, management team meetings, teacher meetings etc.). The criteria were based on 1) variation in the teachers' experience of remote teaching, 2) even representation of men and women, 3) variation in minority languages and major languages, 4) variation in alphabets, and 5) variation in the teachers' length of employment. The interviews, dialogues and observations include 8 languages, 3 men and 5 women, 2 national minority languages and 2 alphabets.

## Early findings and expected outcomes

The one-year mapping has so far resulted in the identification of four initial challenges and needs: (1) Strategies for systematically increasing pupils' digital competence, (2) Remote didactics for interactive and collaborative learning, (3) Forms and methods for more active teaching, especially for younger ages, and (4) Digital relational competence for pupils, teachers and supervisors.

### *(1) Strategies for systematically increasing pupils' digital competence.*

The mapping indicates that many pupils have limited digital competence. This recurring problem is sometimes due to the fact the pupils are young or newly arrived to Sweden and have no previous computer experience. An expressed need concerns method for gradually develop pupils' digital competencies as a natural part of courses.

*(2) Remote didactics for interactive and collaborative learning.*

An essential aspect for language teaching, according to both research and practice, is pupils' opportunity to speak their language with other peers. While remote teaching has given pupils from different city districts and surrounding villages the opportunity to participate in group teaching, there is a lack of remote didactics for group interaction and collaborative learning in the remote classroom. This means that the potential pointed out in the literature, i.e. that students can speak their language with peers, is lost. The existing research is often focused on a different kind of classroom context with traditional classes and larger groups of pupils that is not always comparable to that of mother tongue teaching.

*(3) Methods for more active teaching, especially for younger ages.*

Activity and creativity are central elements of the teaching for younger pupils in all school subjects, including mother tongue tuition. Younger pupils have shorter attention spans and need greater variation between focus and activity. As shown by the mapping, this is a major challenge in remote mother tongue tuition, and remote teaching in general. There are good examples of teachers at the CCM having developed for example play-based teaching, but these methods need to be developed and disseminated.

*(4) Digital relational competence for pupils, teachers, and supervisors*

Getting to know each other and establishing relations between teacher-pupil(s) and pupils-pupil is according to the CCM an important but complicated aspect of remote mother tongue tuition. A mother tongue teacher that teach at a distance also has little or no insight into a pupil's daily school experiences, for example, what happened in the break just before the lesson. This limits the possibility for remote teachers to physically be there and show empathy for pupils who may be feeling sad or insecure. These aspects, which have been discussed in the literature in terms of digital relational competence, seem to be under-researched in all types of distance-based classroom contexts.

## **A Few words in conclusion**

Internationally, remote teaching in the compulsory and upper secondary school systems is not a new phenomenon. However, compared to traditional virtual classroom teaching, mother tongue tuition is often characterised by small teaching groups (or individual pupils), often younger age groups in need of active teaching and newly arrived pupils with specific needs for introduction to both society and digital teaching. Studying the specific challenges facing the mother tongue subject (languages, group sizes, pupils' and teachers' backgrounds, teacher's competence etc.) could hopefully help to develop the practice and to inform research. Thus, the project is planned to be specific enough to develop the CCM's challenges, but also general enough to be a contribution to the larger research field.

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