

## Pros and cons of teaching dead languages to black screens

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### Abstract

*The discussion in this paper is based on the presentation “Teaching Old Norse on Zoom: The Black Death and black screens – the dark age of Covid” (Haugan 2021) held at the 3rd ERL Online Session in March 2021 where the overall topic was “Covid – A Source of threats or opportunities for linguistic education?”. While most of the approaches to language teaching within the ERL context are concerned with “living” languages and maybe preferably English as a second language, I would like to draw the attention to the teaching of so-called dead languages, i.e. languages that are no longer used as a first language and that have no active, natural speech community. In a Western educational context, Latin and Ancient Greek would be the most prominent candidates for so-called dead languages that are still taught today. Even though the historical element has been constantly reduced within Norwegian as a school subject, basic knowledge of Old Norse (Medieval Norwegian) may still be a part of teacher education in Norway. Teaching a language as a second language or as a foreign language obviously faces challenges during a pandemic where most or all teaching is reduced to online teaching. However, maybe there are some positive aspects of teaching online, too. This paper will discuss some pros and cons of teaching Old Norse and Norwegian language history online.*

**Keywords:** language teaching, language learning, online teaching, online learning, Covid

### Introduction

Due to the challenges for the educational system (among other sectors of the society) as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/2021, the International Association for the Educational Role of Language (ERLA) decided to address the topic in two online sessions (ERL events 2021). ERLA has a broad perspective on language which can be summarized by quoting the “WHY” and “WHAT” from the ERLA website (ERLA Home 2021):

The **WHY** of ERL Association. **Language underlies and binds education.** It merits a special place in educational studies and, with its highly complex character, it calls for interdisciplinary cooperation across subjects, schools and cultures. As we know from the so-called ‘linguistic turn’, how we learn and how we see the world around us is strongly determined by language. The association aims to systematize theoretical and empirical studies undertaken at the wide intersection of educational science and linguistics.

The **WHAT** of ERL Association. **Our focus is deliberately broad and we study the educational role of language at the level of SCHOOL, CULTURE, METHODS and PERSONALITY.** Additionally, within this extensive field we apply a (narrower) language user-oriented perspective by studying language beliefs (what we THINK OF language), language activity (what we DO WITH language), language affect (how we FEEL ABOUT language), and language matrices of reality interpretation (how we UNDERSTAND THROUGH language), all of which complement and support one another.

The 3rd ERL Online Session in March 2021 had the overall topic “Covid – A Source of threats or opportunities for linguistic education?”. Already implemented in the title of this online event, there is a dualism in the approach: *threats or opportunities?* Since a pandemic is a threat per se, one would expect that consequences of a pandemic are automatically “threats” in an overall perspective in one way or the other. The ERL approach, then, implicates a hypothesis that there might be both negative

and positive effects, and it is also an encouragement to educators and researchers to identify possible positive effects and share them with a broader audience.

My contribution to the 3rd ERL Online Session and the topic Covid-19 as a source of threats and opportunities for linguistic education was the presentation “Teaching Old Norse on Zoom: The Black Death and black screens – the dark age of Covid. The pros and cons of teaching Old Norse (Old Norwegian) language and history to black screens on Zoom” (Haugan 2021). While most of the approaches to language teaching within the ERL context are concerned with “living” languages and maybe preferably English as a second language, I would like to draw the attention to the teaching of so-called dead languages, i.e. languages that are no longer used as a first language and that have no active, natural speech community. In a Western educational context, Latin and Ancient Greek would be the most prominent candidates for so-called dead languages that are still taught today. In many countries, older varieties of the national language (or languages) may be studied and taught on different levels in the educational system.

Even though the historical element has been constantly and dramatically reduced within Norwegian as a school subject, basic knowledge of Old Norse (Medieval Norwegian) may still be a part of teacher education in Norway. Teaching a language as a second language or as a foreign language obviously faces challenges during a pandemic where most or all teaching is reduced to online teaching. However, as indicated by the dualism of the 3rd ERL Online Session “threats or opportunities”, there may perhaps also be some positive aspects or opportunities for teaching language subjects online. The object of this paper is to discuss some pros and cons of teaching Old Norse and Norwegian language history online as part of teacher education.

The default hypothesis would in many cases be that the practical consequences of Covid-19 for teaching languages and language-related topics are a “threat” in the sense that the quality and the results are expected to be poorer in one way or the other. Speaking and learning a language is a social practice and, hence, direct social contact is considered the best way of learning a language. Online teaching and a reluctance among students to use their cameras, thus, represents a challenge or a “threat” to language learning. However, the constructive and more positive hypothesis of the ERL approach is that the challenges also may represent certain opportunities. Teaching a dead language comes with the inherent pedagogical challenge that there is no natural speech community to relate to. In the quest for identifying positive opportunities in online language teaching, it may actually be the lack of a speech community and the invisibility of the peer group that may represent an opportunity. In the case of teaching Old Norse and Norwegian language history, the concrete hypothesis is, thus, that lectures on screen and the reduced visibility of the peer student group may represent a teaching opportunity or advantage to some degree. The aim of this paper is, then, to discuss some of the positive and negative aspects of teaching Old Norse and Norwegian language history to Norwegian student teachers who choose not to engage actively in the teaching/learning process by being visible behind their cameras/screens, but who are still assumed to follow the lectures. It must be emphasized that this paper is a single case study based on personal observations and reflections from the teacher’s perspective, i.e. there is no organized student survey or other student feedback to support the observations and reflections due to the practical fact that the semester/course was already more or less finished by the time I considered my language history course relevant in an ERL context. The contribution to the field of practice and the research community, therefore, lies first of all in an analytic discussion of “classroom” observations and reflections on teaching strategies and adaptations due to more focus on digital presentations and online resources provoked by the Covid-19 restrictions on physical face-to-face teaching.

### **Method and theoretical background**

The approach in this paper is guided by the overall topic initiated by the Educational Role of Language Association (ERLA): *Covid – A source of threats or opportunities for linguistic education?* Research conducted by ERLA and the ERL network is mainly based on four pillars (ERL research, 2021):

- (*PREMISES*) Considering the fact(s) that every school determines
- what students think OF language and - conversely - how language determines their views, i.e.; **LANGUAGE(-)BELIEFS** (incl. students' views on listening, speaking, reading, and writing)
  - how students feel ABOUT language and -conversely - how language determines their emotions, i.e.; **LANGUAGE(-)AFFECT** (incl. students' emotions concerning listening, speaking, reading, and writing)
  - what students do WITH language and - conversely - how language determines their actions i.e.; **LANGUAGE(-)ACTIVITY** (incl. students' actions consisting in listening, speaking, reading, and writing)
  - how students understand THROUGH language and - conversely - how language determines their thinking, i.e.; **LANGUAGE(-)THINKING** (incl. students' world image as shaped by listening, speaking, reading, and writing)
- on the level of an individual, society, culture and reality, (*ASPIRATIONS*) the point of this initiative consists in:
- **carrying out GLOBALLY COORDINATED STUDIES** within and across various countries and their educational systems (assumed to differ within and across the four areas shown above), and
  - **systematising research problems and methodologies** applied in pedagogically-linguistic studies, and
  - **engaging academics falling into the four areas** wishing to cooperate within and across them, and
  - **bringing the world of language and the world of educational science closer together.**

As mentioned before, Norwegian language history and basic knowledge of Old Norse (Medieval Norwegian) is not the same as learning a second language or a foreign language in the most common contexts. The students are, for instance, not expected to speak or write Old Norse. From an ERL framework perspective, then, it would be interesting to reflect on what the students *believe* about Old Norse, and in what way their beliefs might be positive or negative for learning. Modern Norwegian, despite being a more or less direct descendent of Old Norse, has changed dramatically from the time of the Viking age to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the language has also undergone some changes the last five hundred years. Does realizing and problematizing this change of the national language – the so-called mother tongue for most Norwegian citizens – *affect* the students in any way that is positive or negative for learning? Student tasks are mostly related to commenting on Old Norse words, inflections and structures compared to modern Norwegian. Is it possible to view this kind of language activity as positive or negative for the students' learning goals? The last pillar of the ERL premises deals with language thinking. This perspective may seem irrelevant when it comes to working with a dead language that is normally not going to be spoken or written at all by the students. However, from the perspective of the purpose of language history as a support for understanding and managing today's language, knowledge of older stages of the language and knowledge of the origin of certain words might determine the students' thinking about language. Hence, all four ERL perspectives may be relevant and interesting when trying to look at the pros and cons of teaching Old Norse and Norwegian language history in online classes with minimal direct, dialogical communication.

Teacher education in Norway has the target groups preschool (kindergarten), primary school (grades 1-7, age 6-13), lower secondary school (grades 8-10, age 13-16) and upper secondary school (grade 11-13, age 16-19). Norway has two official Norwegian written languages due to historic and political reasons (see e.g. Haugan 2017 and references there). Hence, language history is an important part in teacher education since both written languages have to be used and taught in school and the historical background for this situation is still playing a role in today's society.

My language history course was targeted at grade 8-13 teacher students, i.e. lower and upper secondary school. To learn about the relation between the two Norwegian written languages, Bokmål and Nynorsk, plays a more important role in lower and upper secondary school, among other things there are separate grades after 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> grade in Bokmål and Nynorsk. Hence, it is also more important for teachers to be able to explain and “legitimize” why the pupils have to learn both written languages in school. Some of these “explanations” lie in Norwegian language history and the fact that Norway had been a part of a union with Denmark for several hundred years where Danish was the only official written language also in Norway, whereas the original Norwegian written language more or less ceased to exist after the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Naturally, neither pupils nor student teachers are usually very interested in medieval Norwegian language and history, except from maybe the Vikings. To make it “worse”, my language history course starts with Ancient Nordic, i.e. the time before the Vikings (ca. 200-750 A.D.). Hence, from a motivational point of view, things are not necessarily going the teacher’s way.

As a consequence of Covid-19, teacher education is also recruiting a new segment of students. Several students reported that they either had lost their job or that they were afraid of losing their job during the pandemic. Therefore, they decided to invest in a “safer” profession, like, for instance, teaching. Norwegian as a school subject is taught from primary to lower to upper secondary school and is considered a rather “safe” choice within teacher education when it comes to the job market. However, choosing a subject because of practical considerations like, for instance, “safety”, does not necessarily mean that the students are interested in learning every part of the subject. Most students are not prepared for the fact that they would have to acquire some knowledge about language history from two thousand years back in time and their motivation may not be on top.

In its form and method, the reflections in this paper are based on a type of case study. “A critical question for all researchers employing cases as the basis for their research is, ‘What is this a case of?’ This question focuses researchers’ (and readers’) attention on distinguishing the phenomenon of interest from the studied unit or instance.” (Schwandt and Gates 2018: 342). Schwandt and Gates (ibid.) point out that defining a case may be problematic and that there is significant variation in the ways in which case study is understood. The overall topic/perspective was initiated by the ERL event *Covid – A Source of threats or opportunities for linguistic education?* Within this topic, my case consists of the changed learning conditions for a group of 25 students “attending” classes in Norwegian languages history, which is a part of the one-year study programme in Norwegian language and literature at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. I put “attending” in quotes because it may not be clear to what extent all students that were logged on actually attended the classes. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, all classes were changed from being physical lectures in an auditorium to being held via the digital platform Zoom, making it possible for teachers and students to sit at home or another convenient place other than the auditorium and communicate through their computers or mobile devices. According to privacy-protecting restrictions in Norway, the students could not be forced to use their camera during the lectures (the law is not clear in this respect, see e.g. Datatilsynet (The Norwegian Data Protection Authority 2021). As a result, the majority of students chose to have their camera off and, thus, the teacher could only see the students’ names on black squares instead of the students’ possible facial and bodily feedback during the lectures.

Going from classroom teaching to online teaching is, of course, a dramatical pedagogical change in many respects and the challenges associated with black screens during online teaching have been discussed in many different forums during the pandemic (some random references might be Colucci 2020, Heaton 2020, Pitts 2020). The lack of face-to-face communication is in many respects more severe in language teaching and learning than in many other disciplines. However, the Norwegian language history course deviates from ordinary language learning courses in the way that the students do not have to learn to speak or write Ancient Nordic or Old Norse. The learning goals of the course are restricted to acquiring knowledge about the alphabets, the sound systems and (assumed) pronunciation and the grammatical systems in comparison to Modern Norwegian. Hence, there are some interesting differences between typical foreign language learning or second language

learning and learning to compare a dead language to a living language. One important factor in language learning, as in all learning, is *motivation* (e.g. Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011). When it comes to second language learning and foreign language learning, the success rate in terms of reaching a high level of competence is according to sociocultural learning models like e.g. Dörnyei (2009) or Norton (2013) closely tied to motivation and the vision of a so-called future self or an imagined identity, i.e. the acquisition of another language will usually be easier if the learner is motivated and has a more or less concrete vision of him- or herself as a user of that language in a language community.

There may be some academic circles or individuals who would be able to speak or write Ancient Nordic or Old Norse to some degree. Speaking or writing Ancient Nordic would be very difficult in practise because the recorded vocabulary is way too limited to be able to have a normal conversation. Speaking and/or writing Old Norse would be much easier because of the comparably extensive text corpus of saga literature and other sources and the possible references to Modern Icelandic. However, under normal learning circumstances, an average student would not have an Old Norse speech community to relate to. Returning to the question “What is this a case of?”, one could say that the topic is a somewhat “amputated” case of language learning in that respect that it lacks typical aspects like active speaking, writing and social interaction in a language community. This may lead to motivational and learning challenges by itself. However, the concrete case under investigation and the research question is whether the change from classroom teaching to online teaching of a dead language like e.g. Old Norse may have positive or negative consequences.

The question of possible positive or negative impacts on the teaching and learning of, for instance, Old Norse arose through the 3rd ERL Online Session in March 2021 where the overall topic was “Covid – A Source of threats or opportunities for linguistic education?” and the upcoming ERL Journal #5 that would be dedicated to the same topic. I did not initially plan to conduct a study related to this topic, and by March 2021, my language history course was almost finished. Hence, to be able to contribute to a broader discourse on linguistic education within the context of the Educational Role of Language framework, I had to see things in retrospect. Schwandt and Gates (2018: 342-343) list a variety of definitions and ways to conduct a case study. Several of the definitions or descriptions would fit my aim, e.g.:

- The study of the particularity and complexity of a single case. ... Case study research is not sampling research. We do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one case. (Stake, 1995, pp. xi, 4)
- [...]
- The study of a social phenomenon:  
[...]
- By monitoring the phenomenon during a certain period or, alternatively, by collecting information afterwards with respect to the development of the phenomenon. ...  
[...]
- Where the researcher, guided by an initially broad research question, explores the data and only after some time formulates more precise research questions, keeping an open eye to unexpected aspects of the process by abstaining from pre-arranged procedures, and operationalisations

The overall, broad research question was “Covid – A Source of threats or opportunities for linguistic education?”, initiated by the ERL Association. Since my language history course was almost over by the time I decided to contribute to the broader discourse, I had to collect information and formulate more precise research questions afterwards. “Covid – A Source of threats or opportunities for linguistic education?” is, obviously, a very broad question. Relating this question to my case, the Norwegian language history course involving among other topics Ancient Nordic, Old Norse and Middle Norwegian, the more precise research question would, then, be whether the change in teaching and learning conditions from classroom lectures to online lectures yielded any pedagogical/didactic threats (cons) or opportunities (pros) in my class. But instead of questionnaires and organised student feedback, I had to base my reflections on my own observations from my side of the screen. In that respect, the current presentation is a descriptive case study (Schwandt and

Gates 2018: 346). Even though the question of a case being representative or generalisable is not necessarily relevant in descriptive case studies (cf. Schwandt and Gates 2018: 347), it would be only natural to try to see teaching and learning of dead languages in an online-learning context in comparison to foreign language learning and second language learning and the more general context of language learning. The overall question of threats and opportunities implies a hypothesis that the changed teaching and learning conditions, in fact, may have both negative and positive effects. In that respect, this case study is also a form of hypothesis testing (cf. Schwandt and Gates 2018: 349). Since the concrete question of threats and opportunities in linguistic education was a topic of the ERL Association and the topic of this ERL Journal issue, it is also natural to relate the topic to the overall perspectives of ERLA.

## Discussion

Even though Covid-19 restrictions led to a sudden stop of most classroom activities at Norwegian universities and colleges in March 2020 (as everywhere else in the world), there was a certain optimism when the new academic year started in August that year. Therefore, most students were able to sit in the auditorium and attend the first semester of their one-year study of Norwegian language and literature. The obvious advantage for me as a teacher was the fact that I could see all the students at the same time while communicating with them. While talking and giving them important information, I could have eye contact with most students and I was able to see their faces and read their gestures, which was a great help when trying to determine whether I should repeat something or make it clearer, or whether I should continue. I could also use my own body language to invite the students to engage and ask questions (see e.g. Mey 2001: 223). Direct contact with single students or minor groups of students was easy and made dialogue possible. All these aspects are the well-known pros of classroom teaching, cf. e.g. Johnson (2009: 63):

Teaching as dialogic mediation involves contributions and discoveries by learners, as well as the assistance of an “expert” collaborator, or teacher. Instruction in such collaborative activity is contingent on teachers’ and learners’ activities and related to what they are trying to do. The assisting teacher provides information and guidance relevant to furthering learners’ current goal-directed activity. Both information and guidance need to be provided in a way that is immediately responsive and proportionate to the learners’ varying needs.

Classroom dynamics are an important aspect of teaching. As opposed to teaching in primary or secondary school where the teacher normally follows a class many hours a week over several years, teaching in higher education is most often limited to one or two semesters, and maybe even as little as just one or two hours during the week. Naturally, it is not equally easy to get to know your students compared to a school class. However, based on many years of experience, one might have developed a certain intuition that would help interpret the habits of some students. Often students choose to sit in the same seat (see e.g. Chandra 2018), and often the choice of placing yourself in the auditorium may say something about your personality and preferences (see e.g. Totusek and Staton-Spicer 2015 or Dortch 2015). Even though I do not know my students very well, the geography of the classroom helps me adapt my teaching. The group dynamics of the classroom also strengthen the “communication contract”, i.e. it is more difficult to not engage in a dialogue when everyone is in the same room looking directly at you. The “communication contract” associated with teaching would normally also dictate that one would try to pay attention and that one would not engage in other, non-academic, activities while being in this context, cf. e.g. Mey (2001: 71): “Communication, furthermore, requires people to cooperate; the bare ‘facts’ of conversation come alive only in mutually accepted, pragmatically determined context.” To some extent one might even speak of common courtesy and politeness (see e.g. Mey 2001: 79, 268). You just behave in accordance with the rules and conventions in the society. There are, of course, certain rules that follow with a teaching context (see e.g. Widdowson (1990: 181) on the roles of teacher and learner). Even though it might not be obligatory in all cases, normally it is expected that the students actually attend every lecture. Group dynamics might enhance this. It is much more visible when a student does not attend

a lecture, and normally all eyes would be on the one student being late for class. One could even risk to get a comment from the teacher in front of the entire group.

Even though the fall semester 2020 started with ordinary physical classroom lectures, there soon came group-size limits and eventually more or less all physical classroom teaching stopped, and the universities and colleges went over to online teaching for students and home office for teachers. “Luckily”, this was the second time in 2020 the universities shut down, so in the meantime, many teachers and students had had a chance to get acquainted with online platforms like, for instance, Zoom or Teams. Hence, the purely technical aspects did not represent a great challenge. In January 2021, then, the second semester with, among other courses, the language history course started for the same group of students that I had met in the auditorium once a week on Monday mornings from 8:15-10:00 in August 2020 and then on Zoom at the same time during the rest of the first semester.

Obviously, the whole Covid-19 situation had an impact on the psychology and motivation of students and people in general. Out of 25 students enrolled, only 10-13 (sometimes even fewer) chose to attend the lectures after they were held on Zoom, i.e. a drop of 50 %. It must be said that it is statistically normal that the student presence at lectures drops during the semester when it is not mandatory, especially in subjects that require a lot of reading and discussions are more difficult because of the nature of the subject. However, this was a rather dramatic and sudden drop. As a teacher, one immediately starts wondering whether there was something wrong with the physical lectures and whether the students just needed a reason to stay away. Clearly, this kind of sudden absence of students has a negative impact on the motivation of the teacher, cf. e.g. Mey (2001: 270):

When it comes to actual conversation, the assumption is again that people across cultures will obey certain rules of collaboration in order to make conversation happen and have the flow of talk to progress as smoothly as possible. This is the principle behind the well-known rules for turn-taking that conversation analysts must be given due credit for having formulated in much persuasive detail. Still, a lingering doubt remains. What if people decide not to be cooperative?

Not only did the attendance drop, after some lectures, more and more student cameras went black and at the end, there were only two or three students who chose to show themselves on camera. The black screens became a nationwide and worldwide topic when academics debated teaching online (cf. the method section above). With no students on screen, the teacher is deprived of the possibility to read their faces and body language and dialogue between teacher and students seems impossible. This brings the term “addressivity” to mind, cf. Mey (2001: 271):

The term ‘addressivity’ was originally coined by the Russian linguist and semiologist Mikhail M. Bakhtin. In his understanding, it denotes a constant quality of speech: namely, the fact that any utterance is addressed to somebody, every utterance is ‘dialogic’. Basically, addressivity is the “quality of turning to someone” (1994:99), a quality which Bakhtin then uses to develop his theory of ‘speech genres’. (See further Mey 1999: chs 4.3.3 and 6.2.3.)

One could equally well just have recorded the lecture beforehand and uploaded it so that the students could have streamed it whenever it suited them. Principally, not being able to see the students is a major con (threat) of online teaching. But that already seems to be the common opinion. Would it, then, be possible to detect some positive aspects (opportunities) of teaching language history on screen instead of in an auditorium, as indicated by the implicated hypothesis in the question of threats or opportunities?

At our university, there are many different auditoriums and lecture rooms in different sizes, and sometimes the class must switch rooms because of availability. Even with just ten or twenty students, one might sometimes have to use an auditorium that would take 50, 100 or even 200 students. And, as we all know as teachers, some students tend to sit in the back no matter how few students there are in the group or how large the auditorium is. That means that some students, theoretically, might be sitting ten or fifteen metres away from the teacher and the board or canvas in the room. Another physical challenge of the auditorium might be the size of the board or canvas. Smartboards, for instance, are usually smaller in size than the canvas of a projector that often may fill

half of the wall or more. Hence, not everything is that easy to read or view from the back row. Now that every student sat at home in front of a computer, the distance was 50 centimetres on average and the focus was more or less entirely on the screen, given that the students were not involved in other activities – which we are not able to see or control in any way. This, is of course, a pro of online teaching as long as the lecture is based on presentations and lecturing more than dialogue and discussion. For instance, when presenting an inscription of a rune stone, it is much easier to see the details of the inscription when sitting in front of a computer screen compared to sitting in the back row in an auditory. When trying to go into detail, all the focus would be on the topic on the screen instead of many other possible distractions. For instance, runic inscriptions on stones are often difficult to read after more than thousand years exposed to the forces of nature. Viewing a runic stone on a canvas ten or fifteen metres away is not necessarily optimal when trying to focus on the thin lines that are supposed to be runic letters. The students may possibly just see some kind of stone pillar which might not exactly trigger great interest and even fortify the perception of Ancient Nordic and Old Norse as “old-fashioned” and not relevant today (cf. ERL Language Beliefs and Language Affect). Having the stone right in front of oneself just half a metre away, on the other hand, makes the feeling of actually studying a real object much more realistic.

Runic inscriptions are written with the runic alphabet, i.e. letters that are unfamiliar to most of the students. When teaching in an auditorium, I usually let my students look at a short inscription with the help of a table with the runic alphabet and the corresponding Latin letters. The students can talk to each other and, naturally, they would also hear other students comment on the words in the inscription even though they for some reason do not choose to work together with another student. The oldest varieties of Norwegian are not supposed to be a big part of language history. I just want to let the students get an understanding of the runic alphabet and the challenges associated with interpreting inscriptions. So how do we deal with this in front of a group of students represented by black screens? I could, of course, ask the students to study the inscription for themselves for a few minutes before I continue with my lecture. However, with the black screens, I would have no way of telling whether they actually did this, or whether I just created a new “dead zone” in my lecture where I risk losing the students’ attention – given that I had it until that point. I could also use so-called breakout rooms and force the students to talk to each other in small groups for a couple of minutes. But that too does not seem to be an option when all the students hide behind black screens and you do not even know whether they actually follow your lecture or not. One way of handling this would be to announce beforehand that one would use breakout rooms in the next lecture – which would probably lead to a further drop in attendance, but those students who choose to attend would be prepared to collaborate. But, then again, the old Norwegian varieties are not supposed to take that much space in the curriculum, so one has to consider whether one wants to make a great effort for the smaller topics in a lecture.

One aspect of language teaching and learning is phonology. The students are not expected to learn to pronounce or speak Ancient Nordic or Old Norse. However, because of the limitations of the runic alphabet where one letter sometimes could represent two or more different sounds, trying to pronounce the sounds and “taste” them can be a great help in the understanding of the runic alphabet. Take, for instance, the first three words in one of the inscriptions I use in my lectures – transferred to Latin letters: *kunuur kirþi bru*. When trying to switch between voiced and unvoiced consonants and different vocal qualities, i.e. try and “taste” the sounds in the mouth, it might be possible for the students to detect a connection between the runic inscription and Old Norse standard writing: *Gunnvǫr gerði brú* and Modern Norwegian: *Gunnvor gjorde (ei) bru* (English: ‘Gunnvor built (a) bridge’). I find this kind of work much easier in a classroom than on Zoom. Speaking in ERL terms, this kind of *Language Activity* may be positive for the *Language Beliefs* and the *Language Affect* of the students. They may believe (understand) that also the older varieties of Norwegian were real languages, spoken by real people, and they may accept that it is useful to know something about these language stages and the development since then. Some students might even find these varieties “cool” and interesting which has an impact on their language affect. In my case, forty years ago, it led to further studies and a doctor’s degree in Old Norse grammar. So, everything



can happen. It may also be the case that the lack of the visible and audible peer-group motivates to pronounce the sounds and words while sitting in front of their screens. In that case the study situation may represent a pro. However, an attempt from my side as a teacher to compensate for the lack of physical experience was to elaborate my PowerPoint presentations in such a way that they might inspire to try this at home when the students (hopefully) download the lecture afterwards and work with the content on their own. Both the drop in student attendance and the lack of direct dialogue and collaboration led to more detailed PowerPoint presentations to compensate for that. Furthermore, I added repetition questions after every PowerPoint lecture to enhance the students' learning process. If the students were not able to answer a question immediately, he or she could just read and search through the PowerPoint again to find the answer. This kind of presentation enhancement may be seen as a positive result of the Covid-19 situation.

There may also be some other positive sides of "the Covid-19 way" of teaching. For the teaching of dead languages, the cons are naturally not that severe. The students are not expected to learn to speak the older varieties and there is no speech community to relate to or be a part of. From that perspective, it is mostly about theoretical skills and not practical language skills. In a language learning context, this means that we are, first of all, interested in declarative knowledge as opposed to procedural knowledge which "is an old distinction made in philosophy, between 'knowledge about' and 'knowledge how to' (Johnson 2001: 104). Within language teaching and learning, there is a debate about whether declarative knowledge is "necessary" since there is normally more focus on the procedural skills. Many language learners manage to master a second or foreign language rather well without being conscious about grammar and rules (see e.g. Johnson 1996: 104). But when the goal is not to learn to speak a language and be able to relate to another language community, the procedural knowledge is limited to being able to explain grammatical development and differences. From that perspective, this is grammar learning and not language learning. In the context of sociocultural learning theories, learning a dead language comes with some cons on its own. For instance, terms like *L2-self* and *identity* from approaches like Dörnyei (2009) and Norton (2013) would be more or less meaningless in this context. The students are not expected to develop or imagine another identity or alternative self-related to Ancient Nordic or Old Norse. The purpose of the course is rather to enhance the awareness about Modern Norwegian, i.e. the first language and identity. From that point of view, learning a dead language also lacks some of the motivating factors that come with learning a living language. There are no direct positive or negative social effects of not being able to communicate in a dead language since there is no-one to communicate with. That being said, especially when it comes to Greek and Latin, some students might, of course, try to master the languages to a certain degree and build their own small speech communities. But this almost never happens with Ancient Nordic (which has a way too small documented vocabulary) or Old Norse (which is also rather limited in vocabulary for modern times). At best, some students get inspired and wish to learn the closest relative to Old Norse, Modern Icelandic, where one can use most of the grammar and gets a modern vocabulary and, first of all, a living speech community. However, due to the very limited direct contact between the teacher and the students and between the students on Zoom, chances are minimised with respect to recruiting new future candidates for the study of dead languages. To some degree, one might say that Old Norse as a natural language died because of the great 14<sup>th</sup> century pandemic, the Black Death. In the same way, it may be possible to say that Old Norse and other dead languages will lose academic ground in today's society due to Covid-19. That remains to be overserved in the years to come.

Teaching and learning in an academic context also has an evaluation part in the form of tests or exams. Ordinarily, the students were supposed to have a six hours written exam with exam invigilators at the university without access to any other sources than a dictionary. The second language semester consists of the study of dialects and sociolects, the neighbouring languages Swedish and Danish, Norwegian as a second language and the language history course, covering the oldest times (years 200-1500) and the time after 1500 with a special focus on the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Norway tried to restore or reconstruct a Norwegian written language. Language history is, thus, just a part of the whole curriculum. Traditionally, the students would have to choose between three or

possibly four questions related to the whole curriculum and choose to answer two of them. Hence, it is often possible to avoid certain topics that the students feel less comfortable with. In order to avoid the fact that many students speculate in this opportunity, the teachers would try to design questions (a short and a long one) that combine two different topics. Due to Covid-19, all ordinary exams were changed to home exams, i.e. the students had six hours at home without any exam invigilators and with all possible sources at their hand, including the “omniscient” internet to write their exam paper. A challenge with older language history as a topic is that it is concerned with certain grammatical “facts”. Hence, it is not that easy to formulate questions that cannot be answered by just checking in the book or on the internet. This is, obviously, also a motivation factor in the students’ study behaviour. Many students just rely on the fact that they will have all the resources necessary available to write their exams at home. Therefore, they skip classes and they often skip reading their textbooks during the semester. This “threat” is not directly related to my case or language learning; it is a general challenge with home exams. However, it may be even more visible when it comes to fact-checking exams like language history compared to more reflecting and elaborating exams.

I have not conducted an organised study between earlier ordinary exams without external resources and home exams with all resources available. However, the overall impression is clear: During Covid-19 with home exams, most students tend to go directly to their textbooks and try to rephrase what they find relevant. The less they have read before or followed the online lecture, the more obvious is their lack of understanding and their ability to extract relevant information from the textbooks. Those students that only use the internet as their source seem to not have opened their textbooks at all during the semester. Most often their exams show a severe lack of source criticism (e.g. they use texts written for or even by lower secondary pupils), and they show a lack of knowledge and ability to determine what is relevant or not. With ordinary exams, we usually expect 15-30 % of the students to fail their exams. However, during this last semester, only one student failed the exam. This may be interpreted as a pro for home exams and the changed conditions, which it is not from a quality point of view. Having all possible sources available during an exam may lead to less reading and actual studying before the exam and, therefore, less knowledge. Furthermore, it is not obvious how one should design exams in grammar and language history related topics in order to make it impossible not to fail the exam with all the textbooks and the internet available.

Teaching and learning language history and grammatical features of dead languages has its challenges. To some degree online teaching and the advantages of computer technology may be a pro, but the limitations when it comes to dialogue and direct contact are still a frustrating aspect of teaching in the age of Covid-19. Most of the threats and opportunities discussed above are equally relevant in other disciplines than language history or language education in general. To draw the attention back to the ERL framework and its premises, the *language beliefs* of the students in the language history course are partly determined by the syllabus and the learning goals. Ancient Nordic and Old Norse are so-called dead languages that the students do not need to learn to speak or write. Consequently, most students believe that knowledge about the grammatical features of these languages are less “important” in the syllabus and in their future life. On the other hand, Old Norse as the language of the Vikings may have a certain status as a “cool” language and, therefore, have some *language affect*. Reading and possibly hearing Old Norse may trigger positive or curious emotions in some students. However, since popular culture and, for instance, the TV series *Vikings*, usually is presented in English, the status and language affect of Old Norse is limited. Still, those students who get interested in older varieties of Norwegian, may experiment with runes or even try to speak some Old Norse words for fun. Hence, the cultural and academic setting may trigger *language activity* related to the topic beyond the obligatory tests and exams. The educational goal of the language history course is a deeper understanding of Modern Norwegian, i.e. *language thinking*. Potentially, thus, if the students actually read their textbooks and study they would be able to develop a critical and investigating view on their own language and the ability to explain certain regularities and irregularities in today’s Norwegian, the development of Norwegian dialects and the still defining situation with two official written Norwegian languages. All these ERL perspectives are not necessarily dependent on the Covid-19 situation. However, the negative impact on the study and

learning behaviour of the students is obvious even though online teaching – potentially – could have enhanced some of these aspects.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have tried to discuss some aspects of teaching and learning a dead language like Old Norse (and Ancient Nordic) during the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic that forced lecturing out of the auditoriums to online platforms like e.g. Zoom. The discussion has been twofold: aspects of teaching and learning a dead language have been a topic on its own, while I have tried to identify positive and negative effects of the changed teaching and learning situation caused by Covid-19. Even though we talk about teaching and learning a language, the focus in the language history course is on the development of the Norwegian language from Ancient Nordic via Old Norse and Middle Norwegian to Modern Norwegian and grammatical features of older varieties. Hence, many aspects of traditional language teaching and learning are not necessarily relevant in this context. A crucial point is the fact that the students are not expected to learn to speak or write the language(s). The goal of language history is usually rather to develop language awareness and declarative knowledge regarding the modern variety of the language. With this come motivational challenges that are not necessarily connected to online teaching, but that may be fortified by the lack of dialogue and direct contact. Not necessarily related to language learning is the fact that exams are online and from home with textbooks and internet available as sources and without any exam invigilators. This represents another motivational factor in the way that many students rely on being able to write their exams based on their textbooks. Hence, they are not necessarily motivated to follow online lectures at all, and the quality of the learning and the exam results suffer from this situation.

Trying to answer the question and topic of the present ERL Journal “Covid – A source of threats or opportunities for linguistic education?”, I will conclude with a list of a few pros and cons. However, I will add some question marks to signalize that the claims might need more systematic research.

Pros:

- More elaborated presentations, easier to work with at home
- More comfortable study environment(?)
- More direct focus on teacher and presentation(?)
- Easier to listen and read from home
- Easier to contact teacher after the lecture (?)

Cons:

- Easy to skip lectures and wait for the presentation
- Monologue without (almost) any direct contact with the students
- Lack of facial and bodily feedback
- Limited possibilities for variation
- No way to know/control whether the students understand
- With home exams, it is too easy to rely on presentations, textbooks and other sources which leads to poorer study behaviour during the semester and poorer quality when it comes to exams and knowledge

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