



## Outdoor teaching as an alternative to Emergency Remote Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The recent and still ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of an education system built around in-door teaching. Worldwide, schools closed down to reduce the spread of the virus and where it was possible students and teachers were forced to switch to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), described as “a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances” (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020).

While the sudden switch to ERT allowed education to continue as well as possible, it did cause heightened anxiety, social isolation, and a worry that students would learn less (Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2021; Fraschini & Tao, 2021; Resnik & Dewaele, 2021). Foreign Language classes suffered particularly because online synchronous speaking activities did not allow spontaneous speaking → which is the very core of communicative language use → making the ERT class more monotonous and boring for FL students (SanakoBlog, 2022). It was thus not surprising that ERT classes were found to generate much less enjoyment, a little less anxiety, much more boredom and shorter periods in a state of flow among FL learners (Dewaele et al., 2022a, b; Resnik & Dewaele, 2021).

Two years after the onset of the pandemic, it is worth asking whether alternative approaches may have been chosen, or whether alternative teaching methods could have complemented ERT. We would like to argue that alternative approaches were indeed available. If educators had known about the use of the outdoors as an alternative learning arena, many students would have been able to attend school, not only for teaching but also to socialize with peers which would have benefited their mental health.

Formal learning and teaching outside the school buildings is referred to as outdoor education and the practice is particularly popular in Scandinavia (Myhre & Fiskum, 2021). It is a teaching method which aims to engage students and make them become more physically active, and it is best described as a learning philosophy covering diverse learning methods (Jordet, 1998, 2010). More specifically, outdoor education is “... an approach to teaching in which parts of the school day are spent in the local environment. The approach involves regular activities outside the classroom where the students get the chance to use all their senses and to create personal real-world experiences. This way of working provides other opportunities for academic activities, spontaneous play, curiosity, fantasy, experiences and social activities than in a classroom setting” (Jordet, 1998,

p. 24, our translation). This definition also includes the school grounds and nearby environments. Furthermore, outdoor education has a tradition of being placed-based, realistic and practical. The approach is a three-step process in which students first are introduced to and prepared for the outdoor activities in the classroom. Then they move outdoors where the actual activities take place before they gather in the classroom to reflect on their outdoor learning. Moreover, an outdoor setting represents an informal learning arena where the expectations of the traditional classroom are not present. Hence, the outdoors also offers different possibilities for learning (affordances). It must be stressed that outdoor education is not a method to be used only on days when the weather is nice, it also works on cold and even rainy days as long as the students dress appropriately.

The American philosopher and educator John Dewey's (1859–1952) perspectives have had a great impact on outdoor learning (Quay & Seaman, 2013). Dewey expressed his concern with the theoretical classroom and the lack of correspondence between the teaching taking place in the classroom and the world outside (Dewey & Dewey, 1915). He argued that learning happens only when body and mind are simultaneously active (Dewey, 1966). According to Dewey, students are looked upon as “theoretical spectators” in the classroom who absorb knowledge directly without having meaningful experiences (Dewey, 1916/1966). One of Dewey's key concepts, continuity, is reflected in his view of indoor education and outdoor education as being connected and he argued that the two should be viewed as a continual process to achieve holistic learning (Dewey, 1902/1974; Quay & Seaman, 2013). This anti-dualist position has influenced today's advocates of outdoor education.

Outdoor education is found to have a number of positive effects and evidence on how outdoor learning and teaching can benefit students is growing. Effects include improved physical health (Mygind, 2007) and mental well-being (Gustafsson, Szczepanski, Nelson, & Gustafsson, 2012), improved social competences and relations (Hartmeyer & Mygind, 2016; Mygind, 2009), and increased motivation and engagement (Beames & Ross, 2010; Bølling, Otte, Elsborg, Nielsen, & Bentsen, 2018; Fiskum & Jacobsen, 2012b). Furthermore, studies have found increased academic achievement among students (Fägerstam & Blom, 2013; Fägerstam & Samuelsson, 2014), and reduced stress levels (Dettweiler, Becker, Auestad, Simon, & Kirsch, 2017). Outdoor education may also give students more positive attitudes towards learning (Fiskum & Jacobsen, 2015; Myhre & Fiskum, 2021). Moreover, several studies indicate different communication between learners outdoors compared to the classroom (Fiskum & Jacobsen, 2012a, 2012b; Fägerstam & Blom, 2013; Myhre & Fiskum, 2021), including a higher degree of dialogue (Mygind, 2014). A study on anxiety and enjoyment among 106 young teenagers learning English as a FL in an outdoor setting in Norway (Myhre, Dewaele, Fiskum, & Holand, 2022), revealed that using English outdoors increased the students' feeling of safety and it reduced performance pressure and anxiety-provoking situations, which stimulated their eagerness to learn the FL.

Learning and teaching outdoors is not a new approach. During plagues in the past such as the tuberculosis and influenza pandemics in the early 20th century, teaching was moved out of the school buildings to mitigate transmissions among students as fresh air would diminish the spread of the viruses. However, this often implied that the outdoor teaching mirrored the classroom teaching, the main difference was a learning environment with fresh air (and occasionally rain or snow).

During the present pandemic educators seem to have forgotten about the potential of the outdoors and how learning in this setting can benefit students. Instead, there was a world-wide focus on technology. As the pandemic is still ongoing and we do not what the future holds in terms of COVID-19 or new pandemics, it should definitely be time for educators to think of the outdoors as an excellent alternative to ERT. However, to benefit fully from the positive effects of learning outdoors, classes should not simply be moved outside; educators need knowledge of how to implement outdoor education.

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