**Pedagogical Approach to Teaching and Learning Languages and Cultures**

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**Abstract**

This study concentrates on some important factors that are present in learning in general and in language learning in particular.It also tries to deal with the conceptions and beliefs that may be hidden to the actors, and offer tools and scientific knowledge for analysing them and learn from the results. Some methodological issues of language learninng are slightly observed. Cultural perspectives are dealt with from a teacher´s point of view.

The presentation is a survey that is based on the earlier studies of the reseracher. Their data was collected from teachers´and student teachers´reflective essays and interviews and analyzed using qualitative content analyses.

**Key words:** cultural sensitivity, foreign language learning, language methodology, mental models, pedagogical principles, second language acquisition

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**Introduction**

To understand our present situation in language learning and second language acquisiton, we must understand our professional background. I made a historical study on the language learning conceptions from the time of Comenius to the 90´s (Nissilä 1993). Unfortunately, the research is in Finnish. It became obvious that second language learners did not learn in the same way as children acquire their first language – by drawing the innate faculty for language.

Researching the history of methodology gives a wide understanding of the fluctuating principles throughout the times. The study included also an empirical part concerning language teaching in secondary schools and the ways how language teachers adopted new learner-centered methods.

The next study was my doctoral research in 2006. It studied the conceptions and methods that

the university-level teachers of all subjects were willing to adopt, and transformative approach

which was becoming an aim of teaching. Its material from 100 teachers and student teachers

will be availed of in this study like the results of my earlier research papers (1997, 2002,

2003 and 2009).

So my approach was originally that of a teacher´s: from theory to practice. Later it changed to a theory and research perspective. Now I think it also appreciates from practice to theory approach. Various perspectives have come out. Applied L2 refers to social and pedagogical aspects, while scientific SLA (Second language acquisition) contributes to the nature of the human language faculty and hence to linguistics, psychology and sociology. (Ellis 2020)

This study will concentrate on general pedagogical qualities of learning, with references to L2 learning and SLA.

**Pedagogical Background**

It seems that there exist at least three important perspectives which should be considered when teaching various subjects, especially languages. The three viewpoints are those of teachers´ and students´, the target subject and the culture which are all interconnected with the aspects of attitude and each other, like in the following figure.

1.Actors: Teacher & Learner

Attitude

2.Target

Language

3.Culture

Figure 1. The three perspectives connected with attitudes: actors, culture, and language.

**Teacher and learner: Teacher´s pedagogical thinking and attitudes.**

Pedagogical thinking is said to be decision-making based on the personal belief systems. (Kansanen 1995). Jyrhämä (2002, 8) adds to it that it is a process of becoming conscious of the arguments and alternatives in decision-making, ending up in restructuring knowledge. Uusikylä (2000) and Talvio (2002, 160) see it as a complex process in which the teacher applies his/her knowledge intuitively in complex, continuously changing situations. Pedagogical thinking becomes visible in action (cf Kansanen 1991) as an ability to conceptualize and model action and to evaluate the backgrounds, and conceptions. The decision is a result of combined rational and intuitive thinking which becomes concrete in the situations which demand immediate reaction and decision-making. Pedagogical thinking is not, however, mechanical, routine decision-making, although it may be reactions to given stimuli. Reactions are always preceded by reflected earlier experiences. What is here called reactions is the same as reflection-in-action by Schön (1987).

Pedagogical thinking is sometimes equalled to thinking of the contents and discipline or more often pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1986;1987). However, it appears in the context of facilitating student learning. In doing so it encompasses understanding of common learning difficulties and preconceptions of learners. Besides the cognitive side of the process, the emphasis lies in the emotional and ethical or moral growth of teachers (and students) as well.

**Teacher and Learner Attitudes**

A teacher´s attitude is one of the most influential factors in learning languages and cultures. A teacher personality and attitude towards learners and languages/cultures is the most important factor in student learning and feeling pleasant in lessons. According to some studies even 70% of learning outcomes can be explained by teacher attitudes and personality depending on learners ‘age and level. Next in this study, the most obvious hidden factors will be discussed: the attitudes towards students, colleagues, and the target subject as well as teachers ‘and learners ´mental models, personality factors and interaction skills.

**Mental models and L1/ SLA theories**

Within mental modelsthere are also explicated values, self-concept, self-esteem, identity, autonomy, and emotional intelligence, which are all hidden and can be observed through choices and action. Facing professional work, it is not just an intellectual and rational matter. It is also a question of undertaking the necessary emotional work inherent in any profession.

The next passages will investigate the teachers´ conceptions of human beings, their personal epistemology, i.e., beliefs and conceptions about knowledge and knowing in general. Also learning conceptions and information/ language acquisition (=learning) will be spoken of.

Human conceptions suppose that all students should be noticed as individuals, they should be appreciated, their individual backgrounds and orientations should be observed, and encouraging feedback or extra supervision should be given to all levels of learners. Democratic attitude to all learners is vital.

Epistemic conceptions focus on the sources and the nature of knowledge and the elements in the knowledge acquisition process. Learners should be encouraged to act autonomously and actively as well as take responsibility for their own learning. Problem solving and understanding in learning are emphasized. Understanding is necessary for applying knowledge in different situations. Critical attitude towards information is considered important. The connection between theory and practice is found important.

Of learning conceptions, modern teachers have adopted the constructivist view of learning, with the emphasis towards socio-constructivism and situational learning. According to constructivism, learning is not passive reception of information but a learner´s active process of constructing and reconstructing their conceptions of phenomena. Thus, it emphasizes understanding instead of memorization. It also relies on social interaction and collaboration in meaning making.

Still, some teachers can sometimes see the usefulness of behaviouristic learning conception. In language teaching it led to audio-lingualism, having the idea of input and output -model with control. Next to behaviourism was in the 80´s the idea of language transfer (Kellerman 1983) which showed the first signs of cognitive phenomena emphasizing the conditions that led to positive and negative transfer. After it universal principles started to govern the order of acquisition and transfer. Researchers started to speak of universal grammar (White, 1989). The next theory in 80´s was speech act theory and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987). It emphasized comprehension and production of speech acts, especially polite acts, as well as differences between native and non-native speakers. The decennium ended with the emphasis on the linguistic environment that led to input, interaction, and comprehensible output hypotheses (Krashen 1985).

In the 90´s there appeared a controversy between declarative knowledge and implicit process in language learning (Ellis 1994). A key question became whether the nature of interface was explicit/ declarative or implicit/ procedural. It concerned mainly grammar instruction and led to skill learning theory. Later applications are information processing models in cognitive psychology.

Late 90´s witnessed the social turn in SLA (Block 2003). Unlike other social theories it recognizes the mind as a central component in learning and the importance of interaction. It means that learners participate in with others (=private speech). It was represented e.g. by Lave & Wenger´s Community of Practice theory (1991.) Vygotsky´s sociocultural theory (1986) stressed that learners have agency and actively construct their own learning contexts, as social interaction is crucial.

The 2000´s observed the multilingual turn which is more inclusive than social turn. It shares the view of language learners as complex and heterogeneous. (May 2013.) The result was Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman 1997). According to the theory, learning is individualistic and non-linear, interconnected with many variables. It rejects the bilingualism that is defined according to the development of monolingualism and thus represents transdisciplinary linguistics.

**Methodological applications**

Mental models and theories are reflected in teachers´ everyday work and are here represented e.g. by experiential learning (and Kolb´s model 1984), humanistic-cognitive approach, transformative learning, communicative, functional learning especially in languages and holistic learning. Besides information processing, interactive processes and learner activity are seen as the outcomes, when learning is organized according to cooperative methods. When learning is seen as a multiple representation of concepts and information, it creates the need to develop assessment procedures so that they are built in the learning process. Language teachers began to emphasize the communicative value of language use.

Fellows (1994) wrote about the effects of writing and group collaboration in learning and found that learners adopted new concepts and used them to explain new phenomena logically and to generate more useful descriptions. Vosniadou (1994) assumed that, on the other hand, if teachers´ everyday experiences are still based mainly on the behaviourist view of learning, their conceptions of learning will develop in the same direction.

**Teaching through personality**

In agreement with Van Manen´s (1995) perspective, it is in the pedagogical thoughtfulness that the essence of the teaching profession lies. It is a professional attitude composed of complex attributes: a sense of professional responsibility, moral awareness regarding the consequences of teaching, intellectual maturity and interpretative mind, openness to criticism, a passion for learning, and, not the least, caring for the well-being of the learners. Among teachers, participatory collegiality belongs to teaching quality.

Teacher identity*.* In the struggle for authenticity amidst vexing questions inherent in daily practices, teachers try to discover their true selves as responsible professionals (Grimmet 1996). Experiences of the outer world are important in creating the meaningful picture of oneself. We give meanings to experiences, and it leads to understanding them. It is the mind where all that takes place. (Rauhala 1981, Knowles 1992.) Creating new meanings leads to greater awareness of oneself as a person.

In exploring experiences the cognitive and affective are intertwined. The experiences are not transmissible to another person, since the language is never enough to express them totally. The aim, though, is to pursue self-understanding. Self-esteem and self-efficacy appear in action or as the result of action. (Nissilä 2006)

**Teachers‘ Interaction Skills*.***

Social theorists posit that learning takes place in the mediation of social interaction, since knowledge is not an individual possession but socially shared and emerges from participation in shared activities.

Ways towards active learning are cooperation in knowledge creation and learning to work together. Promoting interaction demands social perspective to achieve deeper processes of learning (Niemi 2000). To attain active learning the proper attitude is needed from the teachers. Therefore, it is utmost important what kind of atmosphere there prevails in the classroom and what kind of interactive skills the teacher and the learners have.

Social and teamwork skills, sharing ideas and encouragement and understanding one´s own and the others´ emotional reactions are utmost important. Emotional intelligence (Goleman 1995) is the ability to recognise those. It is nothing irrational, but emotions and feelings are an intricate part of cognition. Emotions and their communication through expressions are born in *dialogue,* and they are shaped in *dialogic* interaction with other emotions that are constantly becoming. Bakhtin´s (1981) notion of *dialogicality* shows that identity is linked to the recognition of others. The interaction with other people is precisely what defines our subjectivity, because without this moment of otherness we could not talk of mutuality, but only of the re-duplication of the self (Turski 1994).

**Target Language and Pedagogical Skills**

When the subject matter skills must be changed into the themes of teaching, it gives much reason to think about. For instance, a music teacher after an international career in which the personal expertise was appreciated is dubious about the significance of the subject matter mastery in teaching. For a novice teacher one of the challenges is to choose the right amount of right level knowledge to the lessons.

Motivation is approached here through the learning tasks. It evidently shows the disciplinary thinking. Challenging and variable tasks and learning arrangements, possibly graded materials and outcomes, similarity to real tasks in life and opportunity to self-directed and independent work are considered the best triggers, especially for teenagers and adult learners.

Sometimes the motivation is based on some other, more immediate needs. It is the prerequisite of learning. It is not sufficient, though, without making information available, without lectures, verbal definitions, narratives, examples of cases, models and the different applications and problem-solving tasks.

Preparing teaching material appeared to be very important to teachers. They prepared mainly hand-outs, power point pictures, transparencies, application tasks, problem solving and traditional exercises, as well as study material for self-directed learning. For differentiation some of them made material which was easier than normal. Preparing teaching material so that the logic of the science is kept clear and the sequences of performances profitable for understanding. The area of subject knowledge is a demanding task, and making information available in a didactically advantageous way, is an ever-present challenge. (Nissilä 2006) Most teachers seem to appreciate qualities such as disciplinary accuracy, social relevance, and critical spirit.

What is constructed in the lessons? David Perkins writes: “The performance view of understanding, challenges the centrality of representations. What the learner acquires is not just a representation but a performance capability.” (1998, 55).

**Language teaching methodology**

The implementation of teaching is like creating a red thread, a plot of a drama, and running it through the learning occasion, not forgetting to pay attention to any of the important factors needed for successful action. It can also be said that it is a teacher´s practical knowledge that counts in the lessons, combined with the objective scientifically proven knowledge of the teaching contents.

It is easier, in general, to focus on characteristics of what teachers know (their knowledge is complex, diverse, idiosyncratic, rich, holistic, personal) or on topics about which they think (routines, students, images, curriculum). More difficult is to give attention to the substance of that knowledge, to what teachers need to know about classrooms, contents, and pedagogy, and how that knowledge is organised. Collaboration in planning provides opportunities to shared expertise. To be successful, it presupposes partners who understand the goals for learning and master the logic of the discipline and the application and performance aspects connected with them. (Nissilä 2006.)

Teaching methods Teacher directed methods are, e.g., *lecture, narrative, and discussions.* They also include teacher-oriented *dialogue and collaborative discussion*. The teacher is also responsible for *demonstrations, illustrations, integration, and differentiation*.

Among learner-centred methods there are *methods which develop thinking skills* (learning by writing, mind maps, and disputations), *creative problem solving* (problem-based learning, learning by researching, creative group work and pedagogical drama) as well as methods representing *learning by doing* (exercises and tasks) and *learning by collaboration* (small groups, traditional group work, cooperative learning, project work, workstations and learning games).

Contextual pedagogy, and transformative pedagogy as well, call for a different professional identity of teachers. It is moving from a transmitter of knowledge to a promoter of learning. It involves a transformation from a figure with ´all´ the answers to a participating learner, from a neutral transmitter of knowledge to an emotionally and ethically involved participant. Collective action can play a significant, though sometimes hidden role in a teacher´s and students´ work.

**Cultural Aspects**

It is important to make sure that teachers are conscious of cultural dimensions. Moreover, they need empathy and knowledge of foreign cultures to be able to take positive measures in accepting diversities and in intercultural understanding. Language skills are not enough: the teacher is to act as a cultural interpreter as well. (Nissilä 2003; 2002; 2009)

In Finland teachers‘ reserved attitudes towards multicultural learners appeared in a couple research reports. They showed that the lack of common language and culture made teachers afraid of increasing workloads. Secondly, they lacked knowledge of foreign cultures, immigrants, and the Finnish culture. (Talib 1999; Hekkala and Nissinen 2001)

Language is the first step towards common understanding. Language skills are not enough unless the deep connection between language and culture is understood. Sometimes positive attitude must replace the common language at the outset of cross-cultural teaching.

**What is culture?**

According to Kaikkonen (1993) a distinction can be made between intercultural competence, understanding and communication. He sees them as cumulative, successive processes.

The functional definitions see culture as the systems of behaviour. They certainly help the learner to understand the phenomena of another culture. Cross-cultural understanding presupposes becoming aware of the self-evidence of another culture. This often happens through conflicts between two cultures.

The cognitive definition of culture observes the individual and his mental processes. The focus is on the way how he analyses and interprets the experiences. Consequently, culture is not a material phenomenon, but is made up of patterns or models of material things, behaviour and feelings existing in a person´s memory. The mental processes behind the phenomena should be understood, for culture is always connected with the individual conceptions of the world. Culture is connected strongly with individual emotional experiences. (Robinson 1988, Nissilä 2009).

While cognitive cultural anthropology focuses on information processing and its mechanisms, the symbol-oriented researcher sees the product, the meanings more important. The experiences, meanings and reality are dynamically connected. The meanings given to symbols inform the interpretations. They direct the next experience, which provides new contents to the meaning. This process is deeply individual.

Besides individual, culture can also be observed as a social phenomenon. Kaikkonen (1993) states that unique, geographically defined cultures are disappearing in Europe. Within nations there are diverse cultures, social groups differ from each other, and people are moving between groups and cultures. The more national, social and other cultures are mixing with each other, the more diverse also individual cultures are getting.

**Learning cultures**

Within the framework of experiential learning it is possible to understand changes in teachers. Learning is seen as a cyclic process of integrating concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation into balanced and holistic understanding. The changes do not take place automatically: they require courage to encounter problems, solve them and evaluate personal action, preferably with colleagues (Niemi et al 1995).

Teachers´ personal growth can be defined as changes over time in behaviour, knowledge, images, beliefs, or perceptions. The roles have proved stable and inflexible and are hardly touched by well-intentioned course-work or innovative ideas about tolerance and intercultural communication. That is why it is important to make teachers´ implicit conceptions explicit and to facilitate the ability to learn from experience and theory through systematic reflection. For this both time and space are needed. (Tynjälä et al 1997; Nissilä 2006)

The following aspects are important in intercultural work:

1) Understanding the concept of culture; 2) Cultural aspects in a language classroom; 3) Sociocultural competence, e.g., understanding non-verbal culture; 4) Personal development in cultural awareness; (Nissilä 1997)

**Intercultural communication**

Schein (1987) classified intercultural communication into three levels. These levels of awareness seem to be hierarchical. *On the surface* there are artefacts and creations, technology, art, material culture, language, and perceivable behaviour, corresponding to the behaviouristic definition of culture. *The second level* includes values, attitudes and norms which can be explicitly described to show the reasons for and form the background of the phenomena of the first level. This corresponds to the functional definition of culture. *The deepest*, unconscious, and invisible *cultural level* includes fundamental assumptions such as people´s relationship to environment, nature, other people, time, space and even their position in the universe. The mastery of the third level is expected from specialists in the field, e.g., from language teachers.

Aiding the learner to recognise the features included in levels one and two, in other words culture-oriented behaviour, and to act on its terms can create a danger. Binding language and culture, language and behaviour together can create false conclusions, if the observer interprets foreign behaviour from his own cultural background (Robinson 1988). Safer is to observe the four steps of cultural growth (Nissilä 2009):

1.The first step is the *level of knowing.* Teachers know, e.g., that religion is the factor which determines people´s conceptions of life and of its different aspects in most cultures.

2. The level of *feeling and empathy*. Teachers understand that only after being informed about philosophical and culture-oriented habits and attitudes, can they understand foreigners and create friendly contacts genuinely from person to person. Knowledge helps them feel empathy. This is a mutual need.

3.The level of *doing.* After knowing and feeling empathy it is possible to take concrete measures in education. In multicultural groups teachers should know the traditional rules which have influence on everyday life. They should have good will and take practical measures to do something for mutual understanding.

4. The level of *values internalisation.* The teachers who had worked in multicultural contexts proceed usually to evaluating their own behaviour. It seems that only through experiences can they develop their sensitivity and understanding of foreign cultural values and those of their own nation as well. This is how real intercultural communication and understanding develops (Nissilä 2009).

**Conclusion**

To sum up, it seems that teachers´ foreign conceptions depend on several factors, on their intercultural experiences, understanding cultural aspects, language skills, the opinion of their reference groups in the mother country, their personal, professional ethos and general atmosphere.

Seen from a wider perspective, pedagogical skills, target language and subject mastery, as well as communicative competence are important in teaching activities. Teachers ‘hidden conceptions like mental models and the differences between practical and theoretical thinking reveal the gap between explicit and implicit thinking. The mindset changes slowly, but teacher education will surely find the proper ways to promote the change in language/ other subjects teaching.

**Resumé**

V článku autorka prezentuje svoje zistenia na základe dlhoročného výskumu v pedagogickej oblasti. Skúma rôzne koncepty a teórie (od J. A. Komenského po 21. storočie) a dochádza k záveru, že pedagogická činnosť budúcich učiteľov závisí od mnohých faktorov, ktorými sú napríklad interkultúrna skúsenosť, kultúrne aspekty, komunikačné jazykové činnosti a stratégie, osobnostné a profesijné predpoklady na výkon povolania, atď. V rámci širšej perspektívy, Sädis-Pirrko Nissila berie do úvahy aj pedagogické zručnosti, cieľový jazyk, ovládanie aprobačného predmetu a komunikačnú kompetenciu pri výkone povolania učiteľa. Sú to práve skryté mentálne modely a rozdiely medzi praktickým a teoretickým uvažovaním, ktoré nám odhaľujú medzeru medzi implicitným a explicitným. Nastavenie mysle sa mení veľmi pomaly, avšak v závere článku vyvstáva nádej, že pedagogicky orientované smery majú potenciál nájsť cestu ako inovovať výučbu jazykov a iných predmetov.

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