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Language considerations for every teacher

Josephine Moate

The national core curriculum for basic education in Finland emphasizes language aware education (kielitietoisuus) with each adult a language model and language teacher (FNBE, 2014: 28). This approach recognises pupil diversity and the need to address language as a key tool in teaching and learning as well as for societal integration. In language aware education, the responsibility for pupils' language development is shared across the school community. Discussions around this issue recognise the need to support heritage languages as well as the value of plurilingualism. These are important discussions, but can overlook the ways in which language is already present and used within education. This article critically considers the presence and use of language within the classroom as well as different forms language takes in classrooms.

What is language?

Being language aware involves recognising the different ways in which language is present in education. Language can be understood as a complex system connecting individuals with the social world. As a system, language enables the sharing of meaning and understanding, as well as providing a record and map of past experiences and the material for imagining the future. When an individual uses language s/he participates in a social phenomenon with recognisable signs and structures, concepts and conventions. When a child learns language s/he learns how others use language and what others mean when using language and how to add his/her own meaning. Language, however, can also be understood as a physical, relational, cultural and cognitive phenomenon. Each individual, for example, has a

unique voice based on his/her own physiognomy. The first words a child utters often over-flow from a relationship of caring as a child says the word, "Mum", a word overladen with social and emotional overtones. Whether a child says, "Mum" or "Äiti", however, is a cultural matter depending on the wider context for the relationship, the histories and futures of the participants. Furthermore, language is cognitive with significant implications for how individuals think, understand, interpret, contribute to and interact with the world around them.

What is language in school?

The language of school is often significantly different from the language of home and communities (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Child-adult relationships turn upside-down as the child used to questioning knowing adults finds him/herself the target of questions that interrogate his or her level of (un)knowing. Moreover, the language of school becomes increasing abstract and distanced from the here-and-now as academic learning involves the use of decontextualized language to conceptualise the world 'out there' (Silver & Lwin, 2013).

Language researcher, Deborah Hicks (1996) recounts a telling moment from her longitudinal study on children's literacy development in the early years of formal education. Hicks takes her video camera into a kindergarten and asks a kindergarten pupil to sit in a chair and tell a 'make believe story'. The pupil begins to tell his story about a racing car by getting off the chair to demonstrate how the car races around a track and smashes into a wall. The child is full of enthusiasm and getting into the flow of his story, but as he is out of his seat, the video camera is unable to capture the story-telling. The researcher interrupts the child, asking him to return to the chair because of the camera. The child returns to the chair and continues with his story, pointing to where the crash has just taken place beyond the view of the camera. Although this is an example from a language researcher, it powerfully captures the way in which adults seek to frame and locate children's literacy in ways that do not easily accommodate children's embodied and richly imaginative use of language.

Schools often struggle to recognise the rich literacies of home and different communities, such as generational story-telling (Cazden, 2001) or engagement with religious texts (Lytra et al., 2016). This mismatch between dominant models of schooling and communities potentially disconnects pupils from their heritage and landscape, devaluing homes and families (Rautio & Lanas, 2013). Failing to recognise the literacy resources pupils bring to Finnish schools can undermine educational

potential, resources and engagement which might perhaps explain the literacy gap between first as well as second generation pupils with an immigrant background (Pirinen, 2015). This does not suggest that the resources of a language community are the same as the linguistic repertoires of individual community members (Blommaert, 2010), however, different forms of language require careful consideration. This article continues by turning to the physical, relational, cultural and cognitive considerations of different language forms within the school context. It is hoped that the following points prompt critical reflection and contribute to the development of language aware education in Finland.

Spoken language

Within the classroom, spoken language serves different purposes bound to the *cultural* context with discernible patterns of talk such as question-answer formats (see Moate, 2011 for a more comprehensive review of different talk-types in education). Whereas teachers' spoken language is usually based on pedagogic purposes such as directing attention, guiding activity, supporting understanding and modelling appropriate language use, pupils' spoken language is to support and demonstrate learning. As Barnes (2008: 5) observed, "When young people are trying out ideas and modifying them as they speak, it is to be expected that their delivery will be hesitant, broken, and full of dead-ends and changes of direction. This makes their learning talk very different from a well-shaped presentation...". As pupils use spoken language, they can 'trial' different understandings and forms of language. In other words, spoken language is a *cognitive* activity that involves thinking and a *performative* activity as pupils share or demonstrate what they have learnt or how they are learning. This cognitive activity is *relational* as the classroom is a public place with multiple participants sharing various relationships. This has an impact on the *physical* experience of speaking aloud in a classroom. If a pupil speaks in front of the class, this spoken language may be accompanied by a shot of adrenalin or a rush of blood to the face as the attention of the teacher and the class turns to an individual. This *physical* experience of spoken language has significant implications for pupils' educational experience and requires teachers to be sensitive to the public nature of talk and the need to develop a community that supports different forms of participation through spoken language.

Listening

Listening is also a public affair. Within the *cultural* context of the classroom, pupils are expected to learn to listen from their early days in school as a sign of respect for teacher and peers, as well as means to access important information. This cultural activity is, therefore, also *cognitive* in that pupils should discern what is important in what is said and be able to remember what is relevant in order to participate in different activities and to build understanding. By listening to others it is hoped that pupils have the opportunity to see and learn from different perspectives. As with spoken language, listening often takes place within the real-time of the classroom and the *physical* experience of actually hearing what is said can be supported or undermined by the environment. For example, if teachers turn to the board when talking or sit behind the computer screen on the desk, pupils can no longer read the lips of teachers. This can make a difference to what is heard and remembered. If a child feels uneasy, unsafe or distracted, the ability to listen is often impeded. To listen well, a pupil needs to be able to concentrate; to be able to concentrate a pupil needs to feel safe within the *relational* context of the classroom. Arguably a classroom community that fosters trust, supports membership and acknowledges individuality simultaneously creates the space for learners to listen and to engage with what is heard more profoundly.

Reading

Reading is a highly *cultural* activity from the sign system (letters, syllables, characters), the direction of reading and role of the printed word. Within Finnish education pupils are socialised into textbook-based practices from preschool introducing pupils to cultural norms that are foundational for their educational career. As a *cognitive* activity reading involves engaging with an arbitrary sign system and understanding that it contains meaning. Reading is also highly *relational*, as baby books in the Finnish 'babybox' demonstrate suggesting that parent-child reading is as fundamental in baby care as clothing, bedding and nappies. In school, reading becomes an increasingly private, albeit assigned, activity that continues to be relational although over time the relationship is no longer between readers but between the reader and the read, with printed material providing a window on the wider world. Despite the change from paper-based to digital materials, reading continues to be a *physical* activity that involves the eyes and/or touch, the handling of material as well as posture of the reader.

Writing

As a *cultural* activity, writing is often a 'rite of passage' from the *physical* requirement to hold a pencil in a particular way to the cultural sign of academic progress once a pupil accomplishes cursive writing (no longer required in Finnish education). As traditional media are increasingly replaced by digital tools less physical engagement is involved although multiliteracies bring in new forms of text. Written language, however, continues to be an important means to exchange information, to express understanding and expertise. It is written language that is most often assessed in (Finnish) education - a long journey from childhood gestures 'that contain the child's future writing as an acorn contains a future oak tree' (Vygotsky, 1978: 107). As a *relational* phenomenon writing allows for an increased distance to an audience, changing the way in which language is used. As a *cognitive* activity writing involves double processing as linguistic signs are used to manage and express complex ideas.

Concluding remarks

This review highlights physical, cultural, cognitive and relational considerations connected with different forms of language. In education different language forms often combine. As teachers speak, pupils listen, write notes, answer questions, and read further. A significant amount of language in education is part of a careful socialisation process that crosses grade and subject boundaries. First generation immigrant pupils might by-pass the initial stages of language socialisation in school or come from significantly different educational cultures and find the gap disorienting. Learning through an additional language has significant ramifications for how quickly a text can be processed, how much can be remembered, and the range of options for expressing understanding. Second generation immigrant pupils might have language repertoires that differ to conventional language repertoires expected by Finnish educators with neither party aware of the difference. Although the current discussion around *language aware education* recognises the challenges of diversifying pupil populations, this discussion needs to go further. As language researchers, teachers and policy makers we should be increasingly aware of the path we have followed and the path we are seeking to forge with and for all pupils.

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