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Preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive pedagogy in multilingual and multicultural settings

Authors: Dr. Eija Aalto and Dr. Sanna Mustonen

All learners are individuals and all classrooms diverse, but the increasing diversity and mobility of societies has significantly contributed to recognizing language and literacy development in all learning (e.g. Gibbons 2006; Nikula et al. 2016; Walqui 2006). A growing number of learners are participating in instruction through their second or additional language. This challenges teachers to consider their practices in supporting the knowledge construction, both in the language of schooling and with the rich multilingual resources brought to classroom interaction by the learners. Involving all learners in quality education of academic skills is considered crucial for the development of citizenship and agency in society (Kibler et al., 2015). Implications for teacher expertise are clear: Future teachers need to be prepared for linguistic and cultural diversity in classrooms and be enabled to facilitate learning across curriculum, regardless of learners' language proficiency or background characteristics. In all subjects it is crucial to create a space for learners' knowledge construction and identity development. This requires inclusive pedagogical approach that fosters the inclusion of all students in the learning of the classroom community but does not stigmatise some learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Mustonen, 2021).

In this blog entry, we focus on the language aspect of inclusive pedagogy since language serves as a main mediating tool in learning and social interaction. In the literature, this approach of inclusive pedagogy has been referred to as, e.g., language-aware pedagogy (Moate & Szabó, 2018) and linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy (Lucas & Villegas, 2013). Moreover, we discuss how language-aware pedagogy is promoted in teacher education through pre-service teacher collaboration.

At the University of Jyväskylä, we have been developing a study unit focusing on language-aware pedagogy for all pre-service teachers since 2006, long before it was manifested in the National Core Curriculum (EDUFI, 2016). As the study unit is concise, we have chosen to focus on the intertwined nature of language and content knowledge, and on how they are learned in parallel. The key principles addressing the development of academic skills in different subjects recognise particularly the following aspects (see also Aalto, 2019):

1. valuing learners' prior knowledge, skills and experiences and building on them,
2. engaging learners in meaningful and challenging disciplinary meaning-making practices, and
3. enhancing learner agency and autonomy through providing scaffolds and strategies for participation and interaction in learning situations.

These aspects require teachers' ability to identify learners' (multilingual) language skills, to perceive language and literacy practices within their subject field, and to develop pedagogical activities that foster both language growth and content learning. In our model, pre-service teachers are provided with a context for professional collaboration, as they are invited to develop their understanding of the topic and pedagogical skills across subject borders (e.g., PE – Finnish language; natural sciences – foreign languages; music – IT). The aim is to proactively supervise them in developing school culture: pedagogical culture schoolwide should promote learning communities in which practices are developed via teacher collaboration across disciplines. The material used to model the language-aware pedagogy is available online (see, Aalto et al., 2019: https://monikielisenoppijanmatkassa.fi. Please, note that a section with animations in English will be published soon).

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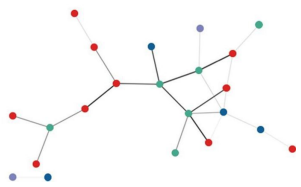

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Our studies on pre-service teacher collaboration in developing language-aware practices (Aalto, 2019; Aalto & Mustonen, 2022) showed the complex nature of student teacher collaboration. It required many joint phases and collaborative elaboration of ideas towards more concrete pedagogical practices. Clearly, the student teachers could not internalise and make full use of all resources provided in their pedagogical studies; rather, different ideas became connected gradually over time (Spratt & Florian, 2015). However, the cross-disciplinary collaboration and varying expert roles has enriched the collaboration and led pre-service teachers to fruitful negotiations by requiring them to deepen their understanding and to develop their expertise. Nevertheless, structured supervision and meta-level conceptual discussion connecting theory and practice is needed (see e.g., Kuusisaari, 2013).

Our pre-service teachers suggested that they held high aims in their teaching interventions:

> *I'd like to hold on to the idea that teaching language and science really is integrated in a way that they cannot be separated from each other during the entire lesson. No 'Finnish parts and science parts' but a unified whole. So that we really would cross the subject boarders and think creatively.*

However, our analysis revealed that it was difficult for them to see how knowledge was constructed through language and to see language patterns typical to their own subject. Pre-service teachers seemed to perceive content knowledge as separate from disciplinary language and literacy practices. Prospective subject teachers tended to focus on vocabulary and terminology. Meanwhile, they seemed to lack skills of teaching reading and writing the disciplinary texts. Markedly, spoken language as a meaning-making tool remained largely an implicit and unconscious resource although it is essentially intertwined with other multimodal resources (e.g. visualizations, action-based experiments, group work) in all activities.

Moreover, pre-service teachers found it challenging to perceive learners' current proficiency in the language of schooling and to make use of their multilingual resources in content learning (e.g., parallel use of different languages). Apparently, learners' language proficiency seemed to be given a different role and meaning in a group peculiar to migrants as compared with a mainstream group where migrants are the minority. In migrant education, learners' limited skills in language of schooling easily become a decisive factor in pedagogical planning (deficiency approach). In contrast, in a heterogeneous group with a small minority of migrants, teachers may not have pedagogical practices to support all learners and therefore, language skills are more easily taken for granted and the need for support may even be ignored.

Deficiency approach involves a risk that learners are not treated as intelligent and imaginative, and are not seen as legitimate participants (Cummins, 2001; Flores, 2020; Walqui, 2006). They may easily feel that they are not expected to contribute with their current resources and may not be given full access to situations of mutual meaning making. If language use and complex texts are avoided because they are considered difficult, students' learning is inhibited. It is important to realise that language skills develop in parallel with content knowledge, i.e., through language use.

Larger structural inequalities in society, namely socio-economic hierarchies, are entwined with language skills in how they are perceived and supported. The pedagogical approach that values all learners' resources (regardless of students' linguistic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds), supports language development (both language of schooling and multiple multilingual resources), and promotes equal participation in educational paths; helps in transforming the unjust structures and set-ups in society.

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