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Author(s): Meriläinen, Merja; Piispanen, Maarika

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Context and Pedagogy as Signpoints to Authentic Learning Paths

Merja Meriläinen[a], Maarika Piispanen[b]

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[a] Merja Meriläinen, Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius, Kokkola, Finland
E-mail: merja.k.merilainen@jyu.fi
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1815-947X

[b] Maarika Piispanen, Kokkola university Consortium Chydenius, Kokkola, Finland
E-mail: maarika.m.piispanen@jyu.fi
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3544-4803

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Abstract

In the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Compulsory Education (2014), the conception of language is based on the communal and functional linguistics model of language. From the perspectives of teaching and learning, this requires that learning contexts and pedagogies enable learning in such learning environments, roles, and processes where the pupil can think and act authentically, according to his or her age (National Core Curriculum 2014). Thus, in this article we examine the integration of subject teaching with topic teaching in the frameworks of sociocultural learning, functional linguistics, and authentic learning, in the contextual-pedagogical learning landscape, where the individuality of learners as well as timely learning support (scaffolding) in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) enable the learning of content as part of interdisciplinary learning. The subject Finnish language and literature is defined as a interdisciplinary, practical, theoretical, and cultural subject (National Core Curriculum 2014) that requires cooperation with other subjects. This article will present a interdisciplinary approach to learning, where the thematic context created for learning gives meaning to the subject related content that must be learned, and where the ability to acquire the core content of the subject becomes a prerequisite for the processing of the theme or topic presented through the thematic context.

Keywords:

Functional, Sociocultural, Authentic Contextual-pedagogical, Scaffolding

Introduction

Any sound, any language – they express the same thoughts in different ways. But people do not merely express their thoughts with words, they also believe and feel, know, and want with their words; people's thoughts, their entire rational being moves and lives in their language. How, therefore, could a nation express itself in any other language besides their own? (J.V. Snellman, 1844.)

This nationalistic declaration by J.V. Snellman, published in the newspaper Saima in 1844, underlines the importance of language and verbal communication. Language is like the mind; words are used to express the movements of the mind and to express one's innermost being. In addition, the words of L. Wittgenstein 'The limits of my language mean the limits

of my world' make one reflect on the meaning of language. With language, we express our innermost self and open worlds. Language is an element that carries our culture and history, but it also builds the future.

In the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Compulsory Education (2014), language education is going through great changes as its ideological basis is changing. Now, language usage in different situations is considered the basis of language education – this is referred to as functional language learning, where language is first and foremost seen as a tool for communication. From a functional point of view, what a language learner can accomplish with his or her language skills and what kind of situations, assignments and texts related to language usage he or she manages are fundamental. (Vaarala, Reimani, Jalas and Nissilä 2016, 29.) The functional perspective on language learning puts emphasis on the learners' linguistic needs, on the situations of language use that are meaningful to them, on the way they manage these situations, and on language learning in authentic contexts and based on texts.

From a functional perspective, language learning is organically linked to socio-cultural learning, where language is examined in real-life situations and from the point of view of language use, and the different needs for language use that arises from interactions with the language. The sociocultural framework puts emphasis on the social nature of language as well as a person's participation in communities from the perspectives of language use. The sociocultural conception of learning refers to the social and dynamic activity that takes place in authentic contexts where the roles of others involved in the learning situation is central. According to the sociocultural approach, all human behaviour is socially and culturally transmitted, therefore learning also takes place in social interaction and through the tools, ways, and conventions of a culture (Bruner 1996). As regards the curriculum for compulsory education, this can be detected overall in the learning objectives and competence descriptions for Finnish language and literature. 'Teaching is based on a communal and functional view of language: linguistic structures are studied through age-appropriate situations of language use and texts' (Finnish National Core Curriculum 2014).

The concepts authenticity and context are central in the functional perspective of language because the learner's linguistic needs are defined by authentic situations of language use. On the other hand, the sociocultural frame of reference focuses on the learning process and how it is implemented. In sociocultural learning, timely learning support, scaffolding (Vygotsky 1978), as well as learning in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) are the primary tools for instruction when planning learning processes, situations and assignments that enable learning.

As the functional view to language learning highlights the social nature of language and authentic linguistic needs as part of learning, the focus of Finnish language and literature should be on planning and creating learning contexts where language is used in authentic situations and in authentic ways. This way, the situations and ways of language use will become meaningful in the pupils' lives and connected with real-life language needs. However, authenticity – defined by Herrington, Reeves and Oliver (2010) through nine elements (authentic context, context-related authentic tasks, access to expert performance, different options and points of view, communal knowledge building, reflection, self and peer assessment and the verbalization of knowledge and skills, authentic and timely instruction, i.e., scaffolding, and authentic assessment) – is not easy to detect in the curriculum. This is because authenticity is included in the conceptions of learning and language, which form the basis for teaching that enables the pupils to achieve the objectives for each subject.

Learning that is based on needs is also experienced as meaningful. In the curriculum for basic education, the meaningfulness arises from the pupils' experiences that they are unique and important as such. The school obviously has a great role in this, and therefore every teacher should reflect on their work from the point of view of their planning and teaching and enhance learning in the curricular framework. The curricular frame of reference includes the concepts of socioculturalism, functionality and authenticity, as well as the related concepts participation, interest, agency, and individuality.

The integration of subject teaching into topic teaching is linked to the experience of meaningfulness. In the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, the aim of integration is to help pupils learn vast and structured meaningful entities. The aim of integrated learning is to enable knowledge building that is based on the pupils' own experiences. (National Core Curriculum 2014.)

In the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, the basis of the integration is transversal competence, which is examined through seven (7) transversal competence areas. The contents and objectives of each subject are linked to the transversal competence areas, and each subject brings its own perspective to transversal competence. (Kangas, Kopisto & Krokfors 2016, 83-84.)

Transversal competence and interdisciplinarity have given rise to discussion on the mastery and command of the basic concepts of different disciplines. In her study,

Cantell (2017) has highlighted students' concern about whether they will comprehend all central concepts or if their learning remains superficial. (Cantell 2017, 240.) In addition, Koskinen-Sinisalo, Sinervo and Reinikainen (2020) detected similar reflections in their study, where teachers found it challenging to integrate subject-specific objectives and contents into interdisciplinary learning entities. According to the study teachers were worried about whether the subject-related objectives described in the curriculum would be achieved.

According to the National Core Curriculum, Finnish language and literature should be taught so that it is integrated into interdisciplinary learning entities or as part of topics arising from the pupils' lives. In the curriculum, the subject of Finnish language and literature is defined as a interdisciplinary practical, theoretical, and cultural subject that requires cooperation with other subjects. (National Core Curriculum, 2014.) According to the dictionary of standard Finnish compiled in the Institute for the Languages of Finland (2020), the verb 'requires' entails that there is a prerequisite or a condition for something to take place. Therefore, it is vital, even obligatory, to reflect on how the subject Finnish language and literature can be integrated with different subject areas, themes, modules and learning entities. How can different subjects be combined to create learning environments that enable learning in a versatile way and at the same time reinforce the core knowledge of the subject as described in the curriculum as regards objectives and contents as well as transversal competences? How can language and words widen the pupils' world and become a meaningful means of expression for them? How can Finnish language and literature promote the pupils' self-image, self-esteem, and self-efficacy so that they want to set new, conducive goals for their learning and action (National Core Curriculum 2014)? These questions are important, because they help teachers to direct their actions, making use of their professional competence that is based on both subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. Therefore, the teacher is able promote learning of Finnish language and literature in such learning contexts where it is possible for the pupils to experience learning as meaningful, and to utilize such ways, methods and tools of learning that are characteristic of their age.

There is a clear connection between the pupils' well-being, growth, positive self-image, learning and membership of society: while learning, the pupils are building their identity, their understanding of humanity, their view of the world and philosophy of life as well as finding their place in the world. At the same time, the pupils come to understand themselves, other people, the society, the environment, and different cultures. Their language is a part of this process. This shows that the words of Snellman and Wittgenstein mentioned earlier in this article are timeless. They make you understand the importance of language more profoundly, like Saarikivi (2018) who says that there are 'many reasons to argue that man is made of words at least as much as of matter'.

In the next chapter we will examine how the content areas of Finnish language and literature are integrated into authentic learning processes in contextual-pedagogical learning landscapes (Meriläinen & Piispanen 2017), where contexts and pedagogy create an authentic learning context in the frameworks of sociocultural learning and functional linguistics. In this process, timely support, which promotes both learning and the process of learning, is the key factor that helps pupils to develop the skills connected with the key contents of the subject in line with the objectives of good knowledge and skills.

The roots of the contextual-pedagogical landscape

Being a teacher is more than the planning of lessons and the selection of books and materials to use. It is creative work with unique material. In Finland, teachers have the greatest autonomy in the world, which is formed in part by culturally related confidence in the teaching profession, but also by confidence in education, and the knowledge and skills gained through it. In the National Core Curriculum 2014, the learning objectives state what a pupil must know or do to achieve a "good "grade. This is awarded as a grade 8 on the Finnish numerical assessment scale (a grade from 4-10 where 4 = fail and 10 = excellent) The objectives state how a pupil can demonstrate "good knowledge and skills" in each content area to achieve the learning objectives. In the curriculum these are described in the assessment targets related to the learning objectives as well as in the competence descriptions. The National Core Curriculum is divided into chapters according to subjects, for the academic world in Finland still emphasizes the division of the curriculum into subjects and disciplines, although it is required and written in the curriculum that interdisciplinary learning must also take place.

The contextual-pedagogical model of learning has been developed in dialogue between research and education, thus putting together historical but still practicable pedagogical points of view and newer questions at the centre of current research, such as phenomenon-based, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary views of the curriculum, generic skills, versatile competences, the pedagogical principles of reformative education as well as society-related and individual perspectives to learning and its contexts (Meriläinen & Piispanen 2017). The approach is closely connected with the viewpoint of authenticity, which manifests itself best when learning takes place in such learning environments, situations, roles, and processes that enable the learner to think and act as

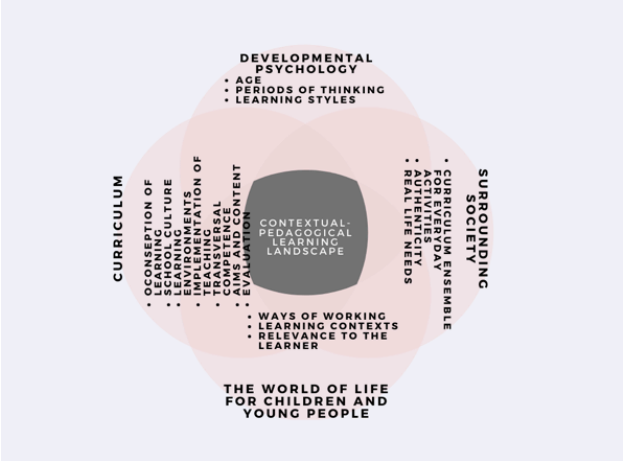
professionals and experts in the field do in real life, or in situations that simulate real-life situations.

In this framework we will provide a model for a learning landscape for teaching the curricular content areas related to poems, aphorisms, and maxims. In this learning process, these content areas of Finnish language and literature are integrated with visual arts and media education to form a interdisciplinary learning entity.

From subjects to interdisciplinary learning modules

When examining a interdisciplinary, integrated learning topic and the related learning assignments that advance the learning process, one may ask where the learning topic originates from and whether its curricular and theoretical basis is firm enough. This question is well-founded. Therefore, in this article we want to examine the curricular framework of the chosen topic but also the theoretical basis of the curriculum; the theoretical basis that steers the conception of learning, the operating culture, the choice of learning environments, and the learning situations and assignments created by the teacher. We call this extensive theoretical framework the contextual-pedagogical learning landscape. The figure below (Figure 1) illustrates the contextual-pedagogical learning landscape (Meriläinen & Piispanen 2017) that forms the basis of sociocultural learning in the curricular frame of reference.

Figure 1.
Contextual-pedagogical learning landscape (Meriläinen & Piispanen 2017.)



When teachers have a solid understanding of the curriculum, their curricular knowledge can help them to explore and identify new learning topics which can create a context for curriculum learning. '[...] integration of subject contents into pupils' life helps them to understand their purpose, increases their experiences of involvement and, naturally, motivates them' (National Core Curriculum, 2014). A learning topic originating from the contextual-pedagogical learning landscape, whether it is a interdisciplinary learning entity or a subject-internally integrated topic, is in principle one that interests the pupils, is related to their lives, and visualizes their knowledge and skills. As the curriculum is divided according to subjects, such a topic is not to be found in the curriculum. When choosing the topic, the teacher's subject-related competence takes a central role, enabling him or her to examine how the core concepts of the subject are reflected in real life. This examination is guided by the following questions: Where do my pupils need this knowledge? How will they utilize this knowledge in their lives? The teacher's ability to detect how curriculum content relates to the pupil's lives, and to plan learning processes and situations according to this framework make learning meaningful from the pupils' point of view.

The planning of the contextual-pedagogical learning process presented in this article was guided by the following content areas (marked as C in this article) in the syllabus for Finnish language and literature:

- C1 Acting in interactive situations: The pupils practice means of expression in different communication and performance situations.
- C2 Interpreting texts: The pupils practice reading different texts fluently, including literature, non-fiction and media texts that combine images and texts, and using text comprehension strategies and thinking skills that are suitable for the situation and the goal.
- C3 Producing texts: The pupils produce diverse fictional and non-fictional texts based on their personal experiences, observations, thoughts and opinions and other pupils' texts.
- These content areas are accompanied by the objectives of instruction, which describe both the teacher's and the pupil's action to achieve the goal, as well as the cognitive processes and level of thinking related to the objective (Krathwohl 2002). In this interdisciplinary learning module,
- the pupils' knowledge and skills related to Finnish language and literature from the perspective of the objectives and contents in the syllabus can be described as follows:
- Understands: The pupil understands the meaning of an oral and written message.
- Applies: The pupil chooses a method and applies it when performing an unfamiliar task.
- Analyses: The pupil identifies the elements of the situation and uses them to form a coherent whole.
- Evaluates: The pupils evaluate a product according to external criteria and standards.

- Creates: The pupil produces an original text in accordance with the assignment.
- The pupils demonstrate this knowledge and these skills in line with the assessment targets described in the syllabus in the following ways:
- by using means of expression
- by developing social interaction skills
- by analysing and interpreting texts
- be expressing one's experiences and thoughts
- by verbalizing one's thoughts and using different text genres.

The National Core Curriculum for Compulsory Education (2014, 18-23) defines the objectives of transversal competence that are shared by all subjects. These transversal competence areas are Thinking and learning to learn, Cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression, Taking care of oneself and managing daily life, Multiliteracy, ICT competence, Working life competence and entrepreneurship and Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future. The transversal competence areas are included in the objectives of each subject, and they also steer the planning of instruction as regards teaching and working methods.

Our learning process model involved four (4) objectives that were related to the following transversal competences arising from the descriptions of transversal competence areas in the curriculum:

- The pupils are guided to know and value cultural heritage and to participate in maintaining and renewing it. The pupils are given opportunities for experiencing and interpreting art and culture.
- The pupils are guided to work with various media, which visualizes the meanings the media create and the reality they convey.
- Pupils are encouraged to find suitable means of expression and to utilise ICT in the documentation and evaluation of their work and products. The pupils are encouraged to utilise ICT in implementing their ideas independently and together with others.
- The pupils are guided to perceive the significance of ICT in the society and to practise the use of media as a means of influencing.

The integration of a subject into topic teaching, whether intradisciplinary or interdisciplinary, requires that the subject-specific core concepts that are essential for the topic are defined and understood in the curricular framework before the planning of the topic teaching module can begin. The description of good competence must be concretised into a learning experience that motivates the pupils and is meaningful to them.

When subject contents are integrated into interdisciplinary learning modules, the core of learning does not consist of individual facts but general knowledge, mastery of different skills, application of knowledge, and realization (Piispanen, Leppisaari & Meriläinen 2015, 11). This requires examining the subject-specific objectives and contents as well as transversal competences from outside the curriculum, from the society and from authentic situations. It also requires knowledge of the pupils, of age-related learning and of how the topics learned are connected to the pupils' everyday lives and contexts. The goal is not to replace disciplinary-based teaching, but instead to introduce new and broader perspectives to learning and to the creation of learning wholes. In the contextual-pedagogical sociocultural approach, authenticity is essential, because authentic situations of language use determine the actual linguistic needs and linguistic skills.

According to Herrington (2010, 19, 21), an authentic learning environment provides content and a context that reflect the ways knowledge is used in the real world. Therefore, an important question when planning a learning module is, whether the learning environment and context form such circumstances, where knowledge will be used, and which make the knowledge meaningful to the learner. In addition, one should ask if the learning environment and context are flexible in such a way that the learner may make his or her own choices when proceeding in the learning. (Piispanen et al. 2015, 15.) These questions are important, because an authentic context is created only when learning becomes personally meaningful for the learner (Rule 2006).

When Finnish language and literature is taught in the contextual-pedagogical learning landscape and as part of topic teaching, one can perceive how authenticity and connections to the society and to pupils' everyday life with its modes of action and its working methods reflect the communicative and functional conception of language as well as the social nature of learning. This is supported and reinforced by the principles of assessment in the curriculum, according to which the teacher and the pupil need to have a clear conception of the objectives of the assignments, of how the assignments will proceed, of the individual ways to carry out the assignments, and of the different ways the assessment criteria can be met. (Finnish National Curriculum 2014.) In the contextual-pedagogical learning landscape, authentic learning is emphasized by focusing on the learning assignments. This is also supported by a study made by Lappalainen in cooperation with the

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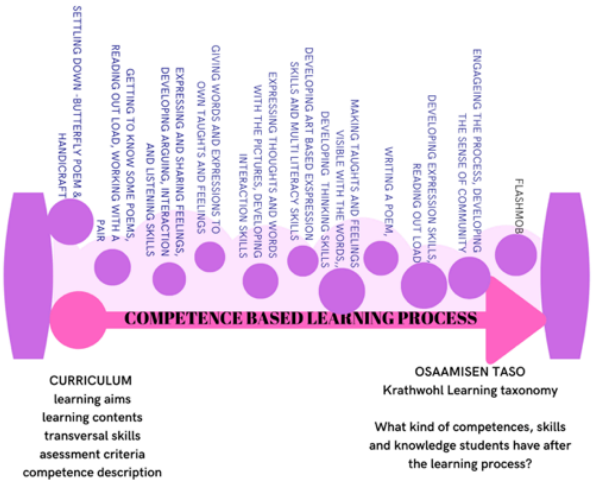
Finnish National Agency for Education, according to which text skills should be practised more in natural contexts related to the pupils' everyday life, such as from the point of view of their hobbies and lifeworld. In his study, Lappalainen emphasizes the use of current technical tools and media texts and versatile pair work. (Lappalainen 2010: 39– 40 40, 70– 71.)

Contextual-pedagogical learning process as a practical tool for planning

In our model for a interdisciplinary learning process, pupils' text skills were reinforced with a Flash Mob event. Preparing for the event made it possible to learn the content and achieve the objectives described above, so that the level of knowledge and skills was as described in the curriculum and the transversal competences related to the objectives were also developed. The Flash Mob event provided an authentic learning environment stemming from real life. Planning, organising, and carrying out the Flash Mob event as well as the Flash Mob event itself created such working methods, assignments and learning environment for the learning process which supported and helped the pupils to achieve the objectives at the level of good competence.

Figure 2. illustrates the contextual-pedagogical learning process where the content areas of Finnish language and literature, defined earlier in this article, were integrated to create a learning process where the pupils planned, prepared for, and organised a Flash Mob event. To make learning goal-oriented and fruitful, the focus must be on the creation of a interdisciplinary learning module.

Figure 2.
Contextual-pedagogical learning process. (Meriläinen & Piispanen 2017.)



The model for the planning of a contextual-pedagogical learning process (Meriläinen & Piispanen 2017) presents the learning process involved in the Flash Mob case, which is examined in the framework of the syllabus in Finnish language and literature and as part of a interdisciplinary learning whole. The skeletal outline of the learning process is formed by content (subject-specific knowledge and skills, syllabus) and objectives (syllabus) as well as transversal competences related to the content and objectives that guide the planning of the learning process together with the purpose of the subject and evaluation (curriculum). Together, these determine what kinds of learning situations and assignments the learning process will involve so that it will enable the demonstration of knowledge and skills according to the objectives and levels described in the curriculum (Krathwohl 2002). In concrete terms this means reflecting on what kind of tasks which naturally stem from an authentic assignment best help to achieve the learning objectives and demonstrate one's knowledge and skills. It is also important to consider that the pupils should have the possibility to utilise their existing knowledge and skills. In addition, it is essential that it is possible for the pupils to achieve the assessment criteria (descriptions of competence) set for the learning assignments and situations: when starting with the assignments, the pupils must know that they are able to achieve the learning objectives at least on the level of good competence.

The Flash Mob event learning process included eleven learning situations and assignments through which the pupils proceeded towards the learning objectives and content-specific knowledge related to them (Figure 2). The learning situations stem from the topic and helped to systematically forward the process towards the learning objectives set for the learning whole. When planning the learning whole, the assessment of learning as well as the demonstration of knowledge and skills went hand in hand with other planning, so that it was possible for the pupils to achieve the goals at the level of good competence during the learning process. The planning of the learning situations and assignments was guided by the competence descriptions that the pupils were aware of when the learning process began.

The competence descriptions related to the Flash Mob process were in relation to the objectives of instruction, where the targets of assessment are the development of social interaction skills, the analysis and interpretation of texts, the expression of experiences and thoughts, the verbalization of one's thoughts, and the use of different text genres. The planning of the learning situations related to the Flash Mob event was guided by these assessment targets. The knowledge and skills related to the objectives were clearly described through the assignments included in the learning process, and so the pupils were constantly aware of their progress in line with the objectives.

During the interdisciplinary learning whole Flash Mob, knowledge and skills were demonstrated in the following ways:

- The development of social interaction skills: Share your poem with another pupil and listen to poems of other pupils(s). Tell your schoolmate what you thought of his or her poem and what you especially liked in it. Participate in the rehearsal of the show and if you have an idea regarding the show, share it with the others.
- The analysis and interpretation of texts: Familiarize yourself with the following types of poetry: haiku, naani and cinquain (quintain, quintet) as well as aphorisms. Choose one of the types and write your own poem or write a free verse poem.
- The expression of one's experiences and thoughts: Write a poem based on your feelings.
- The verbalization of one's thoughts and the use of different text genres: Participate in the Flash Mob show where you recite your own poem. Take part in planning the show by sharing your ideas and/or supporting the ideas that you consider good.

These criteria of assessment guided pupils' work, which also involved scaffolding, the support provided by the teacher, which made it possible for the pupils to proceed in their knowledge and skills in line with the objectives. In contextual-pedagogical learning processes, defining the learning assignments clearly and describing the knowledge and skills related to them are the corner stones of timely learning support. The way the teacher plans and instructs the different stages of the process and the related learning assignments and situations and directs the support towards the wanted competence are key factors in making it possible for the pupil to achieve good competence with different approaches and levels of support. The core of learning is that the teacher and the pupil share a common, explicit, and concrete conception of what kind of knowledge and skills are pursued during the process and how the pupil can demonstrate his or her knowledge and skills.

According to Herrington et al. (2010), the nature of the learning assignments is the key factor when one wants to support authentic learning. This kind of support involves timely learning support (scaffolding), which is a prerequisite for the process towards the knowledge and skills pursued. Although the teacher has decided on the assignments beforehand, the assignments are open and loose, allowing the learner to make choices as regards completing the assignment in a way that he or she finds motivating. (Herrington et al. 2010, 44–48). Learning assignments should require long-lasting concentration on the matter and offer opportunities for cooperation, self-assessment, and peer assessment as well as self-reflection (Herrington 2010, 21– 22).

The contextual-pedagogical learning landscape and the learning processes taking place in it together serve to combine the curricular learning objectives and contents of different subjects in a way that respects the central concept structures of each discipline. The contextual-pedagogical learning landscape forms learning paths that enhance learning and help the pupils proceed towards the transversal competences that are common to different subjects. The pupils' age and everyday life require that different learning contexts and cooperation between subjects are considered to find a favourable landscape for the topics studied. Contextuality helps to create situational and cultural learning spaces where there is room for all lingual expressions and texts. Without context, linguistic structures and entire texts remain disconnected. Language always comes into being and lives in a context; it cannot be separated from its surroundings. (Shore 1992, 34–35.) Luukka (1995, 23) notes that meanings are born in the bidirectional interaction between language and its context; language creates the structures of the society, and the society creates language.

Conclusion

Integrating different subjects is like a jigsaw: the topics stem from real life. This time the topic was Flash Mob, tomorrow it may be the opening of an art exhibition and next week the municipal elections - each content area of the Finnish language and literature curriculum has its own jigsaw piece within these topic areas. How the jigsaw is pieced together is for the teacher to decide. Teaching a subject as part of topic teaching helps the learner to understand the essence and meaning of the subject. This requires that the teacher has strong substance competence and the ability to find connections between the learning landscape and the pupils' lifeworld. In addition, the teacher should be willing to take the pupils to this learning landscape. The meaningfulness of learning motivates the pupils, thus providing a fertile ground for learning. Unwrapping the curricular content areas to create interdisciplinary topic areas that stem from everyday life requires not only willingness to renew one's thinking and to throw oneself into a new way of teaching but also strong competence in one's discipline and - as regards linguistic education - comprehension of functional linguistics. Integrating subject teaching into topic teaching invites teachers to explore the curriculum, its core concepts, objectives, and transversal competences, and to see how these relate to everyday life and the pupils' lifeworld. By doing this, the teacher is responding to the curricular demands of meaningfulness, involvement, motivation, and active participation, which are also factors that inspire the children and adolescents of today and enable them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

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