



Relationships and linguistically sensitive teaching: Developing teacher practicum at Åbo Akademi University

Project “Linguistically sensitive teaching in all classrooms” (Listiac) aims to make an impact on initial teacher education systems in Europe through action research. In line with European policies, the seven partner countries including Finland, Spain (the autonomous Basque country and Catalonia), Belgium, France, Slovenia, Lithuania and Portugal work together in providing competences and skills needed for handling linguistic diversity in our schools. Diversity education has been regarded nearly everywhere as an isolated ‘add-on’ course or study module (EC 2017). Thus, it has remained insufficiently mainstreamed as an integrated component of teaching practice. Listiac addresses this imbalance by redefining teacher education curricula towards linguistically sensitive multilingual pedagogies in mainstream classrooms and providing reflection tools for initial teacher education.

Julkaistu: 13. toukokuuta 2020 | Kirjoittanut: Mari Bergroth ja Jenny Haagensen

Listiac project includes experimenting with concrete measures that have the potential to be translated into policy or practice in education and training systems in the short/medium term. This type of action research seeks to answer the following questions “what are we doing?”, “do we need to improve anything?”, and “if so, what do we have to improve and how should we improve it?” (McNiff, 2017). It also involves teachers and teacher educators systematically gathering data about their teaching in order to make informed decisions about their future practice. Action research provides teachers and teacher educators with a more thorough understanding of their profession and of their professional identity. This kind of data collection during an innovative teaching experiment is the starting point for the development and research process described in this article.

Åbo Akademi University (ÅAU) has a strong research profile area on minority research (<https://www.abo.fi/en/minority-research>) that naturally embeds linguistic sensitivity in teacher education. One of the concrete measures is to develop the contents of teacher practicum so that it better supports the student teachers' ability of noticing and promoting different kinds of linguistic varieties and diversities in the school. In this article we explore specifically *which relational aspects, if any, mainstream student teachers associated to linguistic diversity as a part of an observation assignment during their second teacher practicum.*

This focus was chosen because linguistic sensitivity is a prerequisite for such essential concepts as trust and positive social relationships in education, both being highly valued in the Finnish education. The quality of the pupil - teacher relationship is directly connected to the pupil's academic performance and wellbeing (Topor, Kean, Shelton & Calkins, 2010). Yet, research shows that student teachers do not feel adequately prepared for the relational challenges they face in the profession (Skibsted & Matthiesen, 2016).

Preparing the student teachers for observing linguistically sensitive school environments

The Listiac observation protocol was piloted at ÅAU in autumn 2019. The pilot was done in connection to the course *Practice II: Field practice* for third year mainstream student teachers. The field practice is the only practicum for class teachers held outside of Vasa Övningsskola and the student teachers can apply to any primary school in Finland that has Swedish as the school language. The practicum consists of four weeks, full time.

Before the field practicum, two information seminars were held by Jenny Haagensen, the teacher responsible for the practicums, and also a Listiac field worker, together with the practicum coordinator at ÅAU. During the first seminar the students were informed about how to apply to field schools and about the course requirements. On this occasion, Listiac was not mentioned. The second seminar was held one month later, and the students were introduced to the tasks connected to the practicum, including the observation protocol. During this seminar the Listiac project was also presented.

The students were instructed to fill in an observation protocol during their practicum. The protocol was accompanied by a handout with additional support on what to observe. The categories were 1) *The languages in the school environment*, 2) *Good relations and student well-being*, 3) *Linguistically sensitive classroom interaction in the school language (Swedish)* and, 4) *Linguistically sensitive classroom interaction in other languages*. The students were asked to bring the filled-in protocol to the seminars held after the practicum. They were also encouraged to contact the teacher at ÅAU if any questions arose during the practicum. Some questions were indeed asked: the students asked for example what they should write if they did not see any language sensitive activities in the schools. The students were then reminded that they should write down also these observations and instead give examples of how this could be improved in the future with linguistical sensitivity in mind.

Student teacher voices and insights

The seminar following the practicum was arranged by both authors. The students filled in a consent form for research purposes and were asked to discuss the protocol in small groups for one hour, preferably 15 minutes/category. They were asked to present the observations that they found most interesting or surprising. A total of nine groups were audio-recorded (46 students).

For the purposes of this article we transcribed sections where students discussed *Good relations and student well-being*. Most of the groups started the discussion by stating that this was the most difficult and the vaguest (sv. *flummig*) theme. For example, in one group a student asked *Were the pupils feeling alright?* and the question was met with a lengthy silence, before another student replied:

It feels they are; I mean well-being and languages, it feels they are a bit different things, I mean, yes. I cannot say anything about the well-being of the pupils, or how I could connect it with languages.

This shows that for the most parts, the student teachers had difficulties in making the connection between linguistically sensitive teaching and how it relates to pupil well-being. This could also be seen in how much they relied on the instructions. For example, in the handout it was mentioned that *it can also be about encouraging students to express emotions and feelings*. As a result, most of the groups made observations about expressing emotions:

They had in the classroom, you know posters [=with expressions for emotions] and the class teacher tried to use just those 'oh, maybe you were annoyed', 'I was sad then' so that even the pupils know them later.

This shows that third year student teachers still need hands-on advice on what kinds of things can be connected to linguistically sensitive teaching.

Although the student teachers experienced it as a challenging task, they had managed to identify and reflect upon multiple actions that they could connect to linguistically sensitive teaching and good relationships. Interestingly, many of these could be categorised as issues related to classroom management, discipline and disputes between the pupils. However, there were also examples of bringing in other languages, most often Finnish and English, which were the languages the teachers were familiar with. Especially Finnish-speaking pupils were mentioned to receive much support for learning both Finnish and Swedish, while pupils with other languages were mostly mentioned to have the right to sometimes read stories in their own languages instead of Swedish. The category of Linguistically sensitive classroom interaction in other languages was also connected rather strongly with various projects, such as "being polite week". Even in those cases, the languages were not necessarily the languages spoken in the classrooms. A specific trait for the Finnish-Swedish context seemed to be the frequent reflections on the dialectal use of Swedish and the role the use of dialects can have on teacher-student relationships as this was discussed in all the groups.

In many of the groups the student teachers simply agreed and accepted that if there were no pupils with other languages in the classroom, then they felt there was no need for linguistically sensitive teaching. Some student teachers concluded that linguistically sensitive teaching *could not be done as they were all Swedish speakers*. They also discussed how one might have plenty of great ideas about linguistically sensitive tasks as a new teacher, but how these ideas, and perhaps even ideals, might be forgotten in the busy lives of the teachers. As one of the student teachers put it, she had never felt like she was not needed in the classroom, and she wondered how one teacher is supposed to manage it all by herself. This shows that at least some student teachers were aware that they should be linguistically sensitive, but if all the pupils, more or less, shared the same mother tongue in the classroom, it was not experienced as a high priority to prepare the pupils for the diversity outside classrooms. This, naturally, gives initial teacher education a difficult task to tackle. How to succeed in promoting linguistically sensitive teaching in all classrooms, even in the on-surface linguistically homogenous classrooms?

Lessons learned and the road ahead

In action research the spiral of planning, acting and reflecting needs to be followed up by re-planning, acting and reflecting (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014). The policy measure in the Listiac project is to redefine teacher education curricula towards linguistically sensitive multilingual pedagogies in mainstream classrooms. In this case it was coupled with developing practicum with the help of the observation protocol as a reflection tool. The success of any reflection tool is expected to lie in the methodological approach, which is firmly grounded in the bottom-up processes, with the target groups having a strong agency and support. However, in terms of 'success' and 'reflection', one needs to be cautious. As pointed out by Luttenberg, Meijer and Oolbekkink-Marchand (2017), uncertainty and unpredictability are inherent in reflection and may cause tensions and have a counterproductive effect. In the case of this study, the experienced difficulties may result in resentment towards the task. In order to diminish these potential counterproductive effects, the student teachers were given a chance to give feedback on the task after the group discussions.

As the observation protocol was the first task connected to linguistically sensitive teaching for these student teachers, they found it challenging to know what to observe and how to verbalise the things they had seen. In their feedback, they requested content related to linguistic sensitivity in other courses before the practicum to be better prepared for the observation task. We were also aware that the information seminar where the task was presented was too information-heavy. Students also reported that the protocol was challenging to fill in. However, they also reported that *after the group discussions* the purpose of the task was much clearer, and they stated that they had learned much from it.

Our conclusion was therefore that the observation protocol should be followed by joint discussions and sharing reflections. A major aspect in the feedback from the student teachers was that it was hard to know in which category to place the observations. They felt that the categories overlapped. This highlights the need to remind the students that overlapping is not a

problem as linguistically sensitive teaching is something that connects several activities in school. The most important is therefore not where the observation is placed on the protocol, but that it is identified, observed and in the best-case scenario, further developed.

During 2020 the observation protocol is being tested by the other partners. The simple design makes it easy to use by student teachers during their practicum, but it can be also be used by teacher colleagues observing each other or by researchers and teacher educators observing student teachers or in-service teachers. After analysing the shared findings across Europe, the Listiac research team hopes to be able to provide a new, enhanced observation protocol for wider use, as well as to give policy recommendations to the European Commission about ways of supporting mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies in initial teacher education.

Mari Bergroth, Docent, PhD, is Senior Research Associate in Åbo Akademi University.

Jenny Haagensen, MA (education), is a project assistant/university teacher in Åbo Akademi University.

References

- European Commission (2017). *Preparing teachers for diversity. The role of initial teacher education: final report – Study*. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b347bf7d-1db1-11e7-aeb3-01aa75ed71a1> (<https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b347bf7d-1db1-11e7-aeb3-01aa75ed71a1>)
- Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R. & Nixon, R. (2014). *The action Research Planner. Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*. Singapore: Springer.
- Luttenberg, J., Meijer, P. & Oolbekkink-Marchand, H. (2017) Understanding the complexity of teacher reflection in action research, *Educational Action Research*, 25:1, 88–102, DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2015.1136230
- McNiff, J. (2017). *Action research: all you need to know*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Skibsted, E. & Matthiesen, N. (red.). (2016). *Relationskompetencer i laereruddannelse og skole*. Fredrikshavn: Dafolo.
- Topor, D. R., Kean, S. P., Shelton, T. L. & Calkins, S. D. (2010). Parent involvement and student academic performance: A multiple mediational analysis. *Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community*, 38(3), 183–197.

Artikkeliin viittaaminen

Bergroth, M. & Haagensen, J. (2020). Relationships and linguistically sensitive teaching: Developing teacher practicum at Åbo Akademi University. *Kieli, koulutus ja yhteiskunta*, 11(3). Saatavilla: <https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi/journals/kieli-koulutus-ja-yhteiskunta-toukokuu-2020/relationships-and-linguistically-sensitive-teaching-developing-teacher-practicum-at-abo-akademi-university> (<https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi/journals/kieli-koulutus-ja-yhteiskunta-toukokuu-2020/relationships-and-linguistically-sensitive-teaching-developing-teacher-practicum-at-abo-akademi-university>)