Kieliverkosto

(https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi)

Heritage Language Teaching in Finland: Pedagogical Approaches

This study investigates how Heritage Language teachers address teaching challenges. It covers the educational context, key players (learners, teachers, guardians), and compares findings from field practices with survey results from Finnish teachers on their pedagogical methods for overcoming common challenges.

Julkaistu: 14. helmikuuta 2024 | Kirjoittanut: Babel Hajjar

1) Introduction

A heritage language (HL) could be defined as a minority language spoken by a foreign community or by a minority native community in a host country, where its acquisition begins at home and it is associated with the host's language prevalence (Faneca, Araújo e Sá & Melo-Pfeifer 2016). In this context, we primarily use "heritage language" for clarity. Worth mentions that in Finland this kind of teaching is widely known as "Mother tongue teaching", receiving this name by the municipalities that organize them. The term Heritage language, though, emphasizes not only linguistic and cultural dimensions but also the intricate reality of cultural assimilation experienced by immigrants in face of a dominant culture. (Faneca, Araújo e Sá & Melo-Pfeifer 2016).

In Europe, the field of HL increased after the fall of the Soviet bloc and the globalization phenomena during the 1990s, resulting in an increase in the number of multilingual European families (Tallroth 2012). In Finland, though, the mother tongue teaching started way before, when

children of Chilean refugees were taught Spanish in the early 1970s (Piippo 2017). Despite of having a recent history of receiving immigrants, who represent around 7% of the country's total population, Finland is one of the few European countries that has HL in the public education curricula. HL teaching found in Finland a fecund soil for its development, since Finland is officially a bilingual country, with Swedish being the mother tongue of 5% of the population. Other Finnish original minority languages are Finnish Romani, Finnish sign language, Finnish-Swedish sign language, Saami, Karelian and Russian (Viimaranta, 2019), taught as first, second or heritage language according to specific legislations in different parts of the country. Finland has created laws to deal with this multilingualism including one's right to study his or her mother tongue (Finlex 2003).

At public schools in Finland, HL is taught in a two-hours elective class. The mother tongue classes occur after the normal class period is over. As mentioned before, the classes are organized by the municipality. The groups are mixed in terms of age, language level, and origin/spoken variants. The teachers can have different levels of education, and they do not always have a background as language teachers or pedagogues. Most of the teachers are native speakers in the language they teach. The heterogeneity of the groups makes HL teaching quite challenging. There are few methods and materials aimed specifically at HL teaching, and even fewer courses to train teachers in this field. Teachers are free to and expected to develop their own methods and materials (Piippo 2017).

Parents and guardians play a pivotal role in HL teaching, with numerous studies labelling HL as the "language of affection" (King 2000; Faneca, Araújo e Sá & Melo-Pfeifer 2016; Ros, Maijala & Valkamo 2021). Success in HL teaching hinges on the guardians' beliefs and attitudes, as well as the use of the language at home. The transmitted language ideology from parents to children significantly influences the HL's importance in learners' lives, impacting the success of teaching initiatives considerably (King 2000).

2) Pedagogical approaches: literature review

Pedagogical solutions are created in face of a given educational environment. It is noticeable that institutions and legislations of each country influences the class's obtained results. Piippo (2017) mentions that one "cannot give consistent teaching if the goals, contents and

assessment of the teaching are not clear from the beginning". As happens in Finland, the use of the majority language learning outcomes to direct the teacher's efforts towards a HL class seems sometimes unrealistic in face of the challenges that teachers and students used to go through. Moreover, the teacher assumptions and believes towards language teaching and privileged language will be brought to classroom and it will help or disturb reaching the goals, which most important ones could be classified as the study, maintenance, or revitalization of the HL (Valdés 2001; Piippo 2017; Ros, Maijala & Valkamo 2021).

The analyzed papers provided many inputs from different perspectives in terms of pedagogical handling of HL and overcoming of its presented challenges. It is important to mention that none of them explicitly addressed the challenges of teaching at the same time different ages, levels of proficiency and spoken variants, which this study aims to investigate. However, the contributions brought by the research presented are directly related to the underlying challenges faced by HL teachers.

HL practices mostly embraced the 2000s proficiency movement, by using macro-approaches where grammar plays a secondary role on teaching. Immersive environments propose activities based on tasks, contents, genres or projects, meant to provoke global linguistic competences, bringing cultural awareness and awakening bilingual identities and sense of community. Grammar would come as a natural consequence of the process (Dubinina & Polinsky 2020).

Bilingual practices embracement and plurilingualism – the usage of all linguistic resources as an advantage aiming the communication process instead of focusing on perfecting each student's language - are present on works of Garcia (2001) and Dimitrescu (2001), where they mention successful cases of code switching uses at immigrant communities in USA in the HL teaching context.

The role of community beliefs' influence on language ideology are determinant to the success of the HL teaching, according to King (2000), who studied two Quechua speaker communities in Ecuador. While the more successful experience of HL teaching comes from the city which embraces their cultural tradition, the other group believes that the dominant language proper learning would ensure economic success to their children. The author proposes a community clarification approach of culture and traditions as a way to stimulate a positive language ideology in terms of HL learning (King 2000).

Graça (2021) investigates the use of oral histories in a way to connect students with their heritage, in a project carried out with university heritage language studies in the USA (Portuguese speakers). The author mentions that the method provided the development of knowledge of the content and understanding of the historical context of events, solidarity among speakers and development of language skills (Graça 2021).

3) Methodology

This work aimed to investigate a) how are age differences, proficiency levels, and language variants considered in pedagogical work in HL classes in Finland, and b) which pedagogical approach explains the teaching strategies of HL?

The data was obtained from a semi-structured survey, which was sent to HL teachers acting at the time in the metropolitan area of Helsinki as well in other cities of Finland. The survey was answered between May 15 and June 15, 2022 by 16 teachers.

The group of respondents teaches 13 different languages. 75% of the respondents (12) have declared themselves as women, while 25% (4) as men. 18,8% of the teachers have a bachelor's certificate while 68,8% have a master's certificate. The average length of time of the group working as HL teachers is about 10 years.

4) Results

The teachers answered some yes/no questions about the differences among their students/pupils. The following open question asked the teachers to reflect on how they have overcome the challenges.

4.1) Difference among pupils' ages in class planning

100% of the teachers answered they take the age of their pupils into account when planning classes. The solutions presented by the teachers for dealing with differences of ages in the same class were classified in four groups, as presented below. The given answers could be classified in more than one category.

6 given answers were classified within the group *A) Same content with different activities*. Typical answers from this group are related to the development of materials that are somehow suitable to pupils from different ages. Some examples are: "different levels of same activity" or "Differentiation - tasks with varied answers". Some just named the

method they use as "Differentiation" or "Pedagogical Differentiation". One of the answers mention the care about the "balance" between "social skills and academic skills", showing the importance of "inclusion", concept that overlaps with differentiation, as we will later discuss (Eikeland & Ohna 2022).

6 given answers were classified within the group *B) Bounding ages: different ages in the same workgroup*. This group brought together mentions of mixing ages as a pedagogical advantage, as in the following examples: "…older students read reading texts aloud to younger students", "group work", "team work and open discussions", Some teachers adopted together discussions "during ice-breaking activities, starters and discussions in the beginning of the lesson", going for an age-segregating format later during the class.

The group *C) Different content for each grade/age received 6 answers.* Were allocated in this group the sentences that explicitly mentioned the need of different teaching HL materials according to the age or grade: "Different workbooks and exercises"; "Make plan/teema (theme) based in grades"; "Teaching material should be different. According the ages of the students".

The group *D) Segregating ages: different ages, different groups* reunite sentences were teachers see the need to separate physically students in groups of ages in order to achieve the expected pedagogical goals: "by dividing the students (Level- age-etc)"; "grouping the students according to age."; "The students then move on to age specific activities…"

Figure 1: Pedagogical strategies used to overcome the difference of ages.
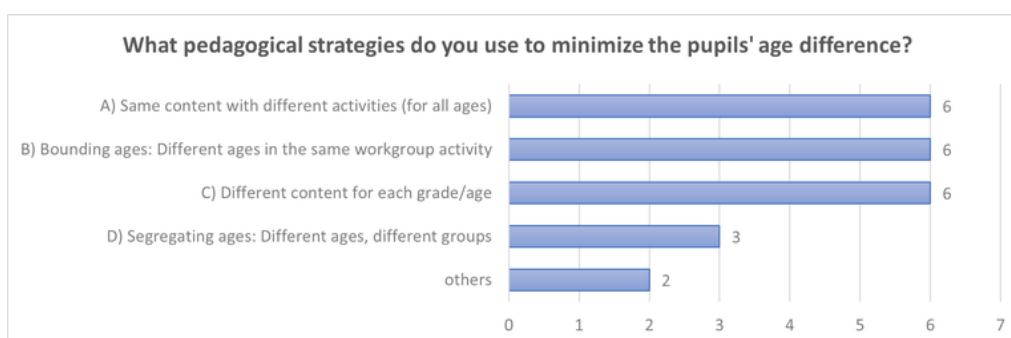
4.2) Differences among language variants in class planning

56% of the teachers answered they consider the language variants in their class planning, while 38% said it isn't relevant, and 6% answered "I don't know". The answers were grouped within 5 groups, and sometimes in more than one category:

The category *A) Material from different variants* reminds the need of materials to teach different variants to the same group. 3 of the teachers' answers mentioned it, as in the sentences "I try to search for materials in the different variants."; "I have to use the appropriate material for the group"; "Material(s) connect it".
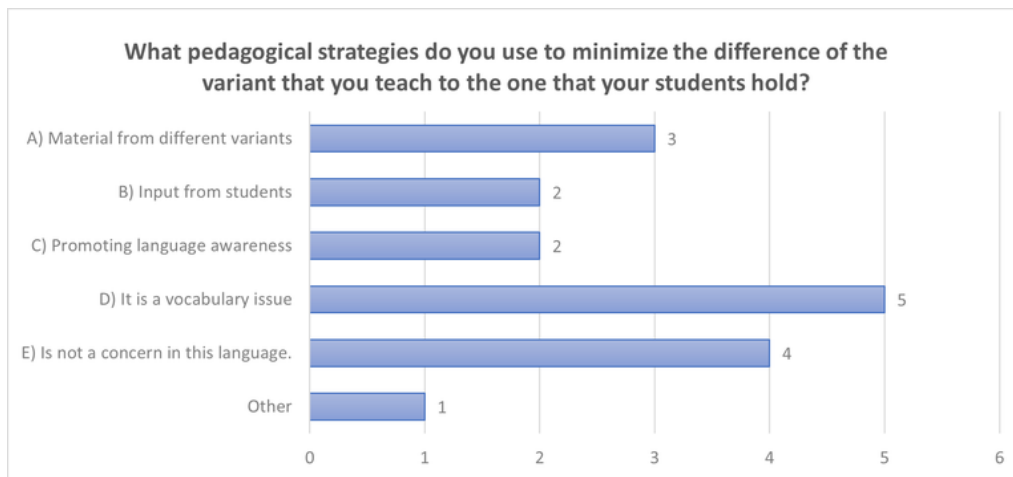
Group *B) Input from students* brought together statements that show concern or at least acknowledge the inputs from pupils in terms of linguistic variants: Only 2 answers filled these criteria: "I also ask the students to bring ideas and content to the class." and "The differences are very minor, if any. They do not require special planning but simply discussing and instructing the students if any such word comes across during lesson."

In group *C) Promoting language awareness* 2 answers showed that teachers have concerns about the theme, but not always explicitly and mostly focusing on the grammatical aspects of the awareness: "… specifying different expressions from different regions that have the same meaning."; "Making students aware of different spelling strategies and vocabulary."

The category *D) It's a matter of vocabulary* contains 5 speeches that show a practical approach on the linguistic variant question, as in "The different (difference) is more like how to say some letters and words."; "Using more neutral vocabulary"; "The differences are very minor, if any."

The category *E) Is not a concern in this language* shows that 4 teachers believes that different variants don't exist or aren't important to their languages, as in: "There are not many linguistic differences in *X language* (there are only different dialects that today's young people no longer speak)."; "It is not so relevant in *Y language*"; "We don't have a language variant.".

Figure 2: Pedagogical strategies used to overcome the difference of variants.

Figure: What pedagogical strategies do you use to minimize the difference of the variant that you teach to the one that your students hold?

4.3) Differences among level of proficiency in class planning

100% of the respondents answered to consider the level of proficiency when planning a class, while 81% said they conduct formal proficiency level assessments. The speeches were categorized in 3 groups, and the answers could figure in more than one group.

A) Same content with different activities (for all levels) showed 5 answers where the same material would supply the class heterogeneity of proficiency level, as for example in: "The same approach pedagogical differentiation is useful here."; "I have some materials that are differentiated into easy, medium and harder levels.", "Common theme but different exercises".

Figure 3: Pedagogical strategies used to overcome the difference of levels of proficiency.

Figure: What pedagogical strategies do you use to minimize the differences of level of proficiency among students?
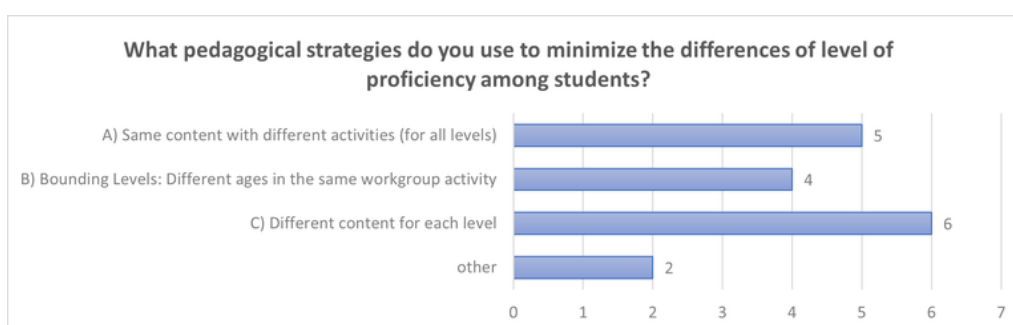
5) Discussion

The survey confirmed the findings of prior research on the diversity among HL students, particularly in education levels, ages, spoken variants, and proficiency levels. Pedagogical differentiation, emphasizing personalized teaching to accommodate age and proficiency level differences, emerged as a common strategy, as part of

an inclusion strategy that would embrace many formats inside the classroom. Pedagogical differentiation, according to Moreira (2021), is an approach that, aiming to provide to student democratic access to education, should focus on personalization of teaching. Students should have different alternatives to reach their potential, being those expressed in different contents or same contents with different difficulty levels, also considering and using the heterogeneity of the groups as an asset instead of a problem. This approach fits HL teaching environments for the reasons given before. That's a less traditional teacher-centred approach.

Although many speeches showed preference for a more personalized and student-centred approaches such as promoting differentiation within the same content and creating heterogeneous work groups, a considerably part of the answers opted for more traditional, teacher-centred segregating approaches, involving different content or separating groups by levels, grades, or ages. It is important to notice though that the teachers mentioned alternating between what we here called *bounding* and *segregating* approaches based on group needs. Concepts such as gamification, personalization, tutoring, oral storytelling, and group/pair work were cited as effective strategies.

Regarding language variants, only 56% of teachers considered them relevant. Some teachers made clear that linguistic variants are not a concern for them or for their taught language. That is an interesting observation of this study and it would need further investigations. Although teachers who deal with major languages such as Portuguese, Spanish or English, deal as well with huge linguistic variations from country to country or even city to city, on the present study teachers showed that they care less about such aspects. Many reasons could be speculated for that, from historical and political aspects regarding the country and its relations with the language maintenance - and Language Ideology would explain some attitudes toward the teachers' beliefs and practices – to the lack of training that could properly address the issue. Being HL a language of affection and intimacy (King 2000; Faneca, Araújo e Sá & Melo-Pfeifer 2016; Ros, Maijala & Valkamo 2021), the lack or presence of terms that could represent this affection to a pupil can be one of the determining factors for failure or success of the teaching. The methods to overcome these challenges ranged from incorporating student inputs to raising language awareness.

6) Conclusion

The heterogeneity of HL groups represents a major challenge to this type of teaching. Added to this, challenges arising from public policies, such as the constant increase in the minimum number of students to create a class and the imposition of an HL assessment based on the dominant language are factors that must be taken into account when thinking about pedagogical choices of this type of teaching.

Teachers often rely on pedagogical differentiation and other inclusion strategies to address age, and proficiency levels, although it requires a lot of time. The teacher-centred approach offers a quicker but less inclusive solution. Teachers experiment with various methods to find what works best for them and their students.

In comparison with age and level of proficiency, linguistic variants were less considered by the teachers as an important issue, being the main argument for that the lack of importance or existence of those differences in some languages. The reason for this lack of interest on the variants should be better studied and it should consider comparisons between languages and how the variants are dealt within them. Teachers who have concerns about language variants search to promote language awareness, by using materials and contents from different variants; by embracing inputs form students; and by discussing and teaching differences of pronunciation and grammar in classroom.

Babel Hajjar is a Portuguese Mother-Tongue language teacher at City of Espoo, Finland since 2018 and at City of Vantaa, Finland since 2022. He is also a Developer teacher (Kehittäjä) for mother tongue teachers since August 2023.

He holds a bachelor degree in social communications (FAAP, São Paulo, Brazil) and a Master's in Social Change and Political Participation (University of São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil) where he studied how the media portrayed the Syrian war. This work is based of his pedagogical qualification's final work at HAMK (2022).

References

Dumitrescu, D. (2001). Language Contact Among Heritage Speakers of Romanian in the United States. In Peyton, J, Ranard, D., McGinnis, S., (Eds.), Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource. Language in Education: Theory and Practice (270-271). [Washington, D.C.]: Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse, https://eric.ed.gov/? id=ED458809 (https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED458809)

Rosa Maria Faneca, Maria Helena Araújo e Sá & Sílvia Melo-Pfeifer (2016) Is there a place for heritage languages in the promotion of an intercultural and multilingual education in the Portuguese schools?, Language and Intercultural Communication, 16:1, 44-68, DOI: 10.1080/14708477.2015.1113751 (https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2015.1113751) https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14708477.2015.111375 1 (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14708477.2015.11137 51)

Finlex (2003). Language act 403/2003. Constitution of Finland (2001). Retrieved from https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2003/en20030423.pdf (https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2003/en20030423.pdf) on August 8, 2022.

Garcia, K. (2001). Language Awareness, Exploration, and Appreciation in a South Texas Border Community. In Peyton, J, Ranard, D., McGinnis, S., (Eds.), Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource. Language in Education: Theory and Practice (269-270). [Washington, D.C.]: Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED458809 (https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED458809)

Graça, L. (2021). A história oral como estratégia didática no ensino de português língua de herança. Revista Entrelinguas, Araraquara, v. 7, n. 00, p. e021037, 2021. DOI: 10.29051/el.v7i00.15462. Retrieved from https://periodicos.fclar.unesp.br/entrelinguas/article/view/15462 (https://periodicos.fclar.unesp.br/entrelinguas/article/view/15462) on August 8, 2022.

Ingunn Eikeland & Stein Erik Ohna (2022) Differentiation in education: a configurative review, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy, 8:3, 157-170, DOI: 10.1080/20020317.2022.2039351 (https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2022.2039351)

Judith Ansó Ros, Minna Maijala & Nelli Valkamo (2021): The role of the teacher in heritage language maintenance courses in Finland, Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development. DOI: 10.1080/ 01434632. 2021.1906692 https://www. tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01434632.2021.1906692 (https://www. tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01434632.2021.1906692)

Kendall A. King (2000) Language Ideologies and Heritage Language Education, International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 3:3, 167-184, DOI: 10.1080/13670050008667705 (https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050008667705)

Kisselev O, Dubinina I and Polinsky M (2020). Form-focused instruction in the heritage language classroom: toward research-informed heritage language pedagogy. Front. Educ. 5:53. doi: 10.3389/ feduc.2020.00053. https://www.frontiersin.org /articles/10.3389/feduc.2020.00053/full (https://www.frontiersin.org /articles/10.3389/feduc.2020.00053/full)

Moreira, E.V. (2020). Práticas de diferenciação pedagógica com alunos de PLH. Língua e Cultura, a Revista Eletrônica sobre o PLH, 4, pp.75-106. http://www.lincool.org/uploads/1/9/9/0/19905033/vaz_moreira_lincool _4.pdf (http://www.lincool.org/uploads/1/9/9/0/19905033/vaz_moreira_linco ol_4.pdf) (Accessed February 12, 2024)

Piippo, Jarna (2017). Näkökulmia oman äidinkielen opetukseen: kuntien kirjavat käytänteet. Kieli, koulutus ja yhteiskunta, 8(2). http://www.kieliverkosto.fi/article/nakokulmia-oman-aidinkielen-opetukseen-kuntien-kirjavat-kaytanteet (http://www.kieliverkosto.fi/article/nakokulmia-oman-aidinkielen-opetukseen-kuntien-kirjavat-kaytanteet)

Tallroth, Paulina (2012). Multilingualism in Finland: A Legal Perspective. Global Perspectives on the Language of Law Vol. 1 (2012). DOI 10.14762/jll.2012.n4. Retrieved from https://www.languageandlaw.eu/jll/article/view/5 (https://www.languageandlaw.eu/jll/article/view/5) on July 30, 2022.

Valdés, G. (2001). Heritage Language Students: Profiles and Possibilities. In Peyton, J, Ranard, D., McGinnis, S., (Eds.), Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource. Language in

Education: Theory and Practice. [Washington, D.C.]: Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED458809 (https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED458809)

Viimaranta, J. (2019). Russian and its speakers in Finland. In Mustajoki, A., Protassova, E. & Yelenevskaya, M. (eds). The Soft Power of the Russian Language: Pluricentricity, Politics and Policies., 15, Studies in Contemporary Russia, Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 175-182. https://doi.org/10.4324/9 (https://doi.org/10.4324/9)

Artikkeliin viittaaminen

Hajjar, B. (2024). Heritage Language Teaching in Finland: Pedagogical Approaches. *Kieli, koulutus ja yhteiskunta,* 15(1). Saatavilla: https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi/journals/kieli-koulutus-ja-yhteiskunta-helmikuu-2024/heritage-language-teaching-in-finland-pedagogical-approaches (https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi/journals/kieli-koulutus-ja-yhteiskunta-helmikuu-2024/heritage-language-teaching-in-finland-pedagogical-approaches)