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4 Inclusive language teaching

Pauline von Bonsdorff and Aila Marjomäki

Introduction

This chapter explores how language learning in primary school can be enhanced through an approach that affirms the embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended character of language. Here, “language learning” refers not just to learning a new language or expanding one’s command of grammar and vocabulary in any language but to the ongoing process of developing, elaborating, and refining language as a personal means of expression. We believe a holistic, multimodal mode is the default mode of children’s spontaneous communication and adult communication alike. Humans communicate out of a fundamental desire to share and explore. We speak because we have something to say and want to make contact and because we are curious.

While language is an instrument for thought and communication, it is also more: a structure that supports us, an environment we inhabit (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1992, 1969/1995a, 2001; von Bonsdorff, 2015). Moreover, language is not the same as thinking, nor does it provide transparent access to thought. While language provides rich opportunities for expression and communication, it also offers resistance. From this perspective, marks of hesitation, fragmented sentences, breaking rules of grammar, or introducing new, non-normative expressions can be seen as meaningful communicative gestures rather than failures or faults.

Through examples from a Finnish primary school, we shall discuss what a holistic 4E approach can mean in practices of teaching and learning language. This approach is important when working with children and youth because the formation and transformation of self and world through communication are especially pertinent in this period of life. From a platform of phenomenological philosophy and 4E research, we present ways of implementing the 4E principles “embodied, enactive, embedded, and extended” in educational contexts with young people.

We combine philosophical and theoretical perspectives with insights from the classroom. While Pauline von Bonsdorff carries the main responsibility for theory, practice is provided by Aila Marjomäki, who worked as a teacher in special education from 1987 to 2019 with research breaks during 2006–10.

That said, we have influenced each other's thinking through conversations over the years, not least in the research project Spaces for Children (Academy of Finland, 2007–10). After her research break, Marjomäki revised her teaching and developed new methods with teacher colleagues, described in the section titled "Explorations". Our understanding of how a 4E approach can be implemented thus stems importantly from a participatory, dialogic, action research perspective. This leads to a grounded view of how the 4E principles can contribute to school, not just in teaching and learning but also in supporting personal growth in the school community.

Exposition

Here, we present some starting points for a 4E approach to teaching language in schools. We use Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908–61) philosophy of language as a backbone, complemented with more recent research. In our view, this contributes to a deeper understanding of the 4Es, their interrelations, and implications for teaching and learning language.

Merleau-Ponty, best known for his philosophy of perception and embodiment, is often mentioned in theories of embodied cognition and learning. His philosophy of language, although an integral part of his thinking, is less well known. Much of it was only posthumously published (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1969/1995a). Merleau-Ponty discussed language in his philosophy of perception (1945/1992) and in reflections on the individual style of philosophers and authors, and explored language as co-constituting structures and styles of being (1966, 1964/1995b, 2001, p. 65). In addition, he was interested in language acquisition and emphasised the continuity between early non-verbal vocalisations and verbal expressions, pointing out that vocal communicative intentions exist before words (2001, 18–9).

As a first starting point for 4E approaches, language is *extended*. Following Merleau-Ponty, language is a structure of the world as we experience it (the lifeworld), which is formed through cultural practices, knowledge, and belief systems. The relationship between persons, their lifeworlds, and language is intimate and inseparable while also dynamic. Our mother tongue is especially and inextricably part of what we are rather than just a possession, e.g., a sign system, that we use. Moreover, although experiences can be primarily visual, musical, kinaesthetic, emotional, etc., rather than linguistic, we share and communicate them through language, either as such or to complement other media. In that sense, language reaches everywhere and can map our whole world, while that world cannot be reduced to language only. Hence, language is always already an extended system involved in all forms of knowing and communicating. At the same time, it is not the only means of coming to know but operates alongside others.

Next, language is both *embodied* and *enactive*. Following Merleau-Ponty, these aspects are intimately connected. He emphasises that language, like perception, is dynamic and based in our innate desire to act, explore, and

communicate (cf. Trevarthen, 2001). More than an instrument, and like the body, language is a capacity for action (von Bonsdorff, 2015, p. 107). Consequently, for Merleau-Ponty, language is primarily speech or utterances (*parole*), whether spoken or written, and only secondarily a fixed system of signs and grammar (*langue*). The primacy of speech and the will to communicate is connected to how an infant learns its mother tongue: initially a soundscape with expressive form which gradually, through interactions, becomes structured and internalised as language (Merleau-Ponty, 2001, pp. 17–22). As we indicate in this chapter, an approach that affirms and builds on the desire to communicate is fruitful in the school context.

In Merleau-Ponty, the embodied and enactive character of language is intrinsically tied to its expressive dimension, to the desire to say something and find the right expression. This is about personal intentions rather than correct language and about language as *mine*, my utterances (*parole*), not language as a general system (*langue*). It is precisely in the effort to express something personal and specific that meaning is born, and a self simultaneously articulated (cf. von Bonsdorff, 2015, p. 108). Yet expression for Merleau-Ponty does not come from a supposed “inner” self but is, rather, a modulation of the medium (language) and of the speaker: “a modulation simultaneously of the world and of our existence” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1992, p. 214, 1969/1995a, 2011; von Bonsdorff, 2015, p. 103).

The effort to speak is connected to gesture on many levels. “The spoken word is a real gesture, and it has meaning of its own, just as gesture has”, writes Merleau-Ponty (1945/1992, p. 214). Words are part of our “phonetic gesticulation” in seeking the right expression—a gesticulation that reaches towards memory and imagination (von Bonsdorff, 2015, pp. 106–7; cf. Wittgenstein, 2009). In addition to speech as gesture, bodily gestures play a role in accompanying speech. David McNeill has shown the inseparability of hand movements and speech: gesture and speech are simultaneous and interdependent. Gesture “orchestrates” speech, being more than illustration: it helps the speaker articulate their ideas and find the right verbal expressions (McNeill, 2016). Merleau-Ponty points to the importance of the gestural dimension in shared situations: I participate “in a sort of blind recognition” that precedes interpretation (1945/1992, p. 216).

If there is a close relationship between embodied and enactive, as suggested, there is also one between *enactive* and *embedded*. For Merleau-Ponty, the body “opens me to the world and places me in a situation” (1945/1992, p. 192). Enactivists emphasise the social dimension of learning, including “participatory sense-making” (Dierckxsens & Bergmann, 2022, p. 300). This points to how any individual is part of—i.e., embedded in—groups. Similarly, linguistic meaning is grasped in shared situations and contexts of language use (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1992, p. 209, 2001, pp. 36, 47, 53; cf. Engelland, 2014, Reddy, 2008 and Trevarthen, 2011). In bilingual families, embeddedness can be experienced concretely, as when my toddler son referred to “how Mummy speaks” and “how Daddy speaks” instead of saying “Swedish” and “Finnish”.

The close relationship between one's group and language is also manifested in children's secret, sometimes clandestine, languages.

“*Enactive*” indicates a dynamic direction from the individual to the social and physical world and emphasises the creative character of action. When we speak, we are in a situation and participate in world-making through ongoing processes of change and transformation. In these processes, values are integrated. Dierckxsens and Bergmann (2022, p. 304) argue that ethics is “a process of responding to social affordances and participatory sense-making”. Moreover, “ethical values and norms ... are intertwined with how we feel our bodies in their surroundings”. Yet this is not only the concrete here and now, for language is “extended into the social imaginary” (Dierckxsens & Bergmann, 2022, p. 307.)

Following Dierckxsens and Bergmann (2022, pp. 309–11), storytelling is crucial for the development of critical ethical learning because it provides possibilities for both distancing and participation—sharing with and being influenced by others. In a school context of language learning, storytelling represents a creative approach. The aesthetic and expressive dimension of language is fundamental also in Merleau-Ponty: in elaborations on style as a way of being and gesture as expressive and participatory; in pointing to the inherently hazardous character of language; in foregrounding the imagination and play-acting, we need to learn a language (2001, pp. 77, 29, 48). This implies playing with self-presentations and interpretations that can be accepted or rejected by others. Playful Learning has indeed been established as a concept both in Finland (plchelsinki.fi/) and Denmark (playful-learning.dk/english/). In the next section, we describe how these starting points can be implemented.

Explorations

We shall describe two courses of teaching Finnish, the Reading Circle, and the Reading Lamp, developed in a Finnish primary school through the cooperation of class teachers and a teacher of special education. Both courses are about developing reading and storytelling skills among peers by proceeding from speech to texts, affirming the primacy of expression and communication as outlined earlier. To understand the significance of these formats, a few words should be said about Finnish special education as it is practised in language teaching.

Normally, pupils are identified as in need of special education based on learning difficulties. These are measured using exact parameters, such as speed of reading, reading comprehension, and spelling. Special education is provided in small groups outside the normal classroom, focusing on identified problems. The aim is to help the pupil attain a minimum competence as defined by curricula. As a result, pupils become increasingly aware of their shortcomings. In the worst-case scenario, these even become defining features of personal identity, emphasising one's difference (being a “special child”) as compared to peers.

Lately, inclusion has become more popular. Instead of separating pupils with special needs from the class, teaching is provided in class through teachers' cooperation, and observing pupils' individual needs. The Reading Circle and the Reading Lamp are examples of inclusion. Both courses ran for four to six weeks and were taught jointly by the class teacher and the teacher of special education, sometimes with the help of a school assistant. Three parallel classes from grades 1–6 participated (70–80 pupils per grade, aged 6–13). The groups included pupils from different ethnicities and/or recent experiences of immigration, as well as native pupils with learning challenges. Teaching was provided in the class (20–25 children, 2–3 adults) without separating pupils with special needs.

The Reading Circle (two to three weekly hours) started with a presentation of literary genres adjusted for children's age. Each child chose a genre that interested them, wrote it on a paper, and added their name on the other side. Consequently, groups were formed anonymously and based on personal taste. Groups first studied the genre on the city library's web page and then chose a book and checked its availability. While waiting for the book, they shared expectations based on title, cover, and blurb. They then set up a reading schedule. Before each meeting, everyone prepared three questions based on their reading. In weekly roundtable meetings, groups discussed their readings while drawing characters, places, events, and details from the story on a Reading Circle Cloth (see Figure 4.1). Each child had their own area of the cloth, sometimes joining with another pupil. The aim was not to create a unified picture, and artistic quality was irrelevant. The teachers circulated in the room but did not interfere with the groups. In another weekly meeting, groups prepared a PowerPoint presentation on the author, plot, events, and characters of the book for the Literature Conference that ended the course (in the final year, this was replaced with a Book Fair where sixth graders gave reading tips for grades 4 and 5). The atmosphere at these events was excited and attentive. Sometimes groups brought food servings typical for the book from home or an object related to the story.

Stimulating curiosity and imagination and facilitating storytelling on pupils' terms were the aims of the second course, the Reading Lamp (two weekly hours). Based on an introduction by the teacher, often including image, sound, movement, drama, or objects, pupils wrote words in their booklets. They then chose one word to share with the others, which could be a word already mentioned. This made it easier to participate. A detail of the introduction was then picked, and children were asked to write about it, allowing their minds to flow freely. The idea was to create materials for the story. Next, they shared one sentence. In the lower grades, stories were usually finished in class, sometimes through a compilation of children's sentences, whereas older children created individual stories and could continue at home. Each writing process ended with a reading event. The venue was a windowless room, where chairs formed a half circle around an armchair and a table with pupils' booklets and a lamp. Upon entering, the only light was from the corridor. When everyone was seated, the lamp was lit, and children read their stories in random order, according to how the booklets happened to lay on the table. No one had to read, and they could ask a friend or an adult to do it for them. After each

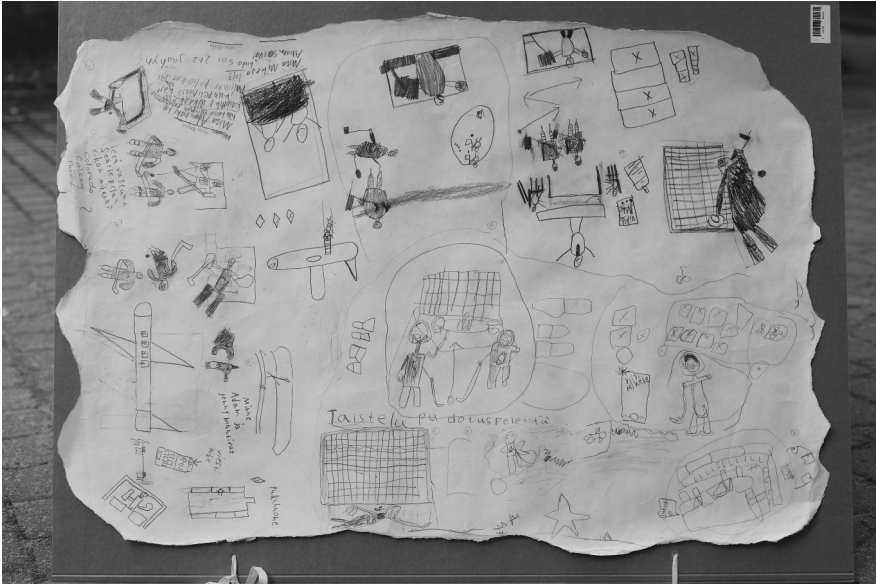


Figure 4.1 Reading Circle Cloth drawn by a group of second-grade pupils (8 years old).
Photograph by Heikki Hanka.

reading, there was time for questions and comments. Teachers neither read nor corrected the booklets and provided help only when asked to. While sharing words, sentences, and stories created collective experiences in an atmosphere of freedom and respect, sharing was not compulsory. On the one hand, children were allowed to borrow from each other; on the other, they were the owners of their narratives. They could change their stories while reading: animate, specify, add details, or skip unnecessary parts.

The courses shared certain pedagogical and design principles. Both had a recognisable structure. As annually recurring creative practices with articulated form, they became familiar to the pupils who eagerly expected next year's course, as shown by questionnaires about their willingness to participate in a similar course again. The structure comprised themes and variations, prepared parts and improvisations, starting points, and closures. This provided a clear yet varied rhythm. Both courses started with stimulating curiosity and imagination, continued with variations between individual work and sharing experiences, and ended with performative events. Learning environments were adapted to the activity at hand: The courses spread in the school building beyond the classroom. As the role of the teachers changed, so did power relations. The special education teacher was no longer a personal trainer for children with problems but worked holistically and with every child. Language challenges were treated as technical problems that could be solved. The Reading Lamp accepted purely oral storytelling: booklets were not read by teachers except on request. In the Reading Circle, parents or teachers could help pupils by reading for them.

Discussion

Our observations and insights are based on an experienced special education teacher's work during six academic years. They indicate what a holistic 4E approach can yield in terms of learning and growth when applied consistently. We now pinpoint some principles and outcomes of the courses, and how they relate to the 4E. We foreground aesthetic, playful, and expressive ingredients because they prompted spontaneous, self-motivated aesthetic agency (von Bonsdorff, 2018) in pupils performing as experts and narrators, thereby strengthening linguistic competencies. The children's ownership of the process, in planning, steering, and presenting their group work, and in crafting and narrating their individual stories granted them genuine authorship and created mutual recognition. Thus, the courses' outcomes include ethics and personal growth.

Children spontaneously adapted their language to context, realising and practising its *embeddedness*. While drawing, chatting was colloquial, with incomplete sentences and exclamations—i.e., verbal gestures—complemented with visual means and *bodily* gestures—i.e., “she was dressed like *this*”. Yet in the conference, they used complete sentences and accurate vocabulary, taking the role of experts. It was also here that bodily gestures were most prominent, possibly a sign of belonging in the world of literature. Presenters were confident in the situation and dared to articulate interpretations and insights in the moment before an audience, *enacting* their role as conference speakers while manifesting how engaged thinking goes hand-in-hand with gesturing.

Teaching and learning were *extended* in the school far beyond the classroom, adding to pupils' engagement and *embedding* learning in memorable ways. In the Reading Lamp, the performative *enactment* was being a storyteller. The audience sat in the dark and listened to a voice from the direction of the light. The shared, attentive listening created an intimate and safe atmosphere. Children with reading or writing challenges could be recognised as brilliant narrators—not despite but irrespective of challenges. When teachers and children were no longer identified through problems, a space opened for being oneself with others in manifold ways.

Pupils were recognised as readers, writers, and storytellers with individual interests instead of being subject to assessments according to predefined criteria. Their interest in reading and writing grew with their will to share interpretations and stories with peers. Drawing facilitated the exchange of impressions and interpretations as pupils gave visual form to them, multimodally exploring and adding to the world of the work. Facing each other rather than a teacher supported equality and dialogue: children listened with curiosity and attention to each other, accepting disagreements and showing the fundamental *enactive* force of communication. This again proved the arts as a fruitful arena for civilised disagreement (von Bonsdorff, 2013). *Embedded* and *extended*, literary discussions spread to informal situations in school. There were cascades of new ideas and interests, such as reading the rest of a book series or writing a novel or a sequel to a story. The understanding of relationships between storytelling in different media, such as film, theatre, dance, etc., increased.

Ethical growth and learning concerned teachers as well as pupils. The teachers' roles changed from directors or conductors to producers, facilitators, and co-readers (they, too, read the books chosen by pupils). To give up authority and share responsibility with pupils required courage and flexibility. The diminished role of adults was graciously compensated by children taking on more responsibility. In the Reading Circle, they assessed the suitability of a book for their age group, perfectly capable of ethical deliberation without adult interference.

Conclusions

The courses showed how pedagogical formats that trust the capacity of pupils to self-organise within a given structure and to work individually and in groups might be conducive to learning outcomes that by far exceed the threshold separating the “special” and the “normal” child. Starting with the interests of children and trusting their will to explore and exchange can lead to unexpected, positive outcomes. This, however, demands that the teacher is willing to fully use their pedagogical skills and share responsibility with pupils. In regards to language learning, the courses affirm that oral storytelling vs the literate skills of reading and writing are different but that giving room for the former can nurture positive interest and development in the latter. This is especially the case if we allow the fundamental desire to communicate to proceed with hesitations, gestures, and multimodal practices of sharing and group feedback. Grammar and spelling must be taught in school, but they are not ends in themselves. Giving more space, and time, for children's creative and explorative language use fosters both learning and responsibility—learning that is for life rather than for school only.

Recommendations

If education aims at supporting the overall development of children, language teaching should include creative, experimental, playful, and open engagements with language, building on children's natural desire to share, interact, and communicate. We recommend that teachers engage seriously and creatively with the principles of the 4E approach and suggest the following principles:

Embodiment

Language is not just in the mind but in the whole body, and we express ourselves in many ways, including with verbal and embodied gestures. Play-acting, drawing, singing, and moving affirm this dimension and help articulate verbal meaning.

Enactivism

We speak because we want to address other people; we act with language. Mechanical drills are relatively pointless compared to doing something in and

with a peer group. There is no private language, and language as “mine” is always also “ours”.

Embeddedness

Language is part of situations, and the more it is positively embedded in these, the deeper it touches and engages its learner. Pleasurable social experiences contribute to a sense of ownership and to identifying with the language as both “mine” and “ours”.

Extension

Language is everywhere; it structures our world. Teaching that leaves the classroom can show this concretely.

Finally, we recommend teaching formats that give room for bottom-up rather than just top-down initiatives. For the teacher, reflectiveness, flexibility, and dialogue are important principles that can be implemented in many ways.

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