



Choosing an A2-language and language education from teachers' point of view

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Language education policy consists of multiple levels, all the way from the European Union to teachers in local schools. Bearing in mind that even teachers have a role to play in language education policy our bachelor's thesis aimed to create an overall picture of what knowledge do primary school teachers and headmasters in the Jyväskylä area possess relating language education matters and more specifically the A2-language. The study also examined the situations in which the teachers would or would not recommend the A2-language to a pupil. How the teachers act in the process of choosing the A2-language was also the focus of this study. This article affords a glance to our research and its results.

Teacher as an ambassador of language education

The guardians' perspective of the A2-language and the process of choosing it was examined by a questionnaire in spring 2014. By the time of writing our thesis the results had not been further analysed. Yet, the responses revealed that guardians felt they had not received sufficient information and support about the A2-language matters from the classroom teacher, English teacher or headmaster. This was only the guardians' point of view and there was a need for a deeper understanding of the situation. Therefore, this present study sought to examine the teachers' perspective in this matter and to find the reasons behind the perceived lack of support from their part.

Our theoretical background focuses on language policy which influences language planning. These themes are ever present in the Finnish educational system. Especially today as globalisation makes countries more and more multicultural and multilingual, language planning becomes a crucial part of the educational sector. Though language policy can be defined nationally and municipally, at its simplest, a teacher is affecting language education policy when instructing pupils in their language choices (Saarinen, 2010).

Another major topic of our theory concerned the preconceptions of learning. It can be suspected that teachers have some preconceptions regarding their pupils' talents and skills. People tend to think that performing well in foreign languages means doing well in other subjects as well (Johnson, 2013, 117). All teachers have expectations towards their pupils based on the pupils' previous classroom performance (Dusek, 1975). This is consistent with the results of this study as the respondents would recommend the A2-language to those who already do well in school, assuming them to do so in the A2-language as well.

The familiarity of language education among teachers

Our research is based on a questionnaire. We created an online questionnaire in Webropol which included both open-ended and multiple choice questions. The multiple choice questions inquired general issues such as the professional status of the respondent, the A2-language groups in the respondent's school while the open ended questions focused more on the personal opinions and attitudes of the respondent. The questionnaire was sent to all primary school teachers and headmasters in the Jyväskylä area of whom only 23 responded. Out of these 23 respondents, 12 were classroom teachers, 7 were language teachers, 2 were headmasters and 2 were both classroom and language teachers.

Two thirds (16) of the respondents claimed they know what language education is. Those who responded that they do not know what language education means, were classroom teachers (7). Language teachers (7) who took part in our study were familiar with language education. As the teacher is the primary connection between the pupil and language education (see Saarinen, 2010; Kaikkonen 2004, 123; National Board of Education, 2014, 28), it is rather alarming, in the light of language education, that the number of those, who do not know what language education is, is so large. Based on the open-ended responses it can be argued that the teachers are uncertain of their knowledge regarding the A2-language.

Teachers in general may be unaware of their role in language education policy. The new national core curriculum for basic education states that every teacher is a language teacher (see National Board of Education, 2014, 28). Bearing this in mind and the importance of language education to Finland's future (see Kaikkonen, 2004; Kangasvieri et. al., 2011, 21-22), it can be argued that all teachers should be made aware of their role in language educational matters. The project Kielitivoli (see Tuokko, Takala, Koikkalainen & Mustaparta, 2012, 137) found that teachers can possess a great influence in the choosing of an A2-language and it is often the teachers' and headmasters' actions that block effective language education implemented on the comprehensive school. Furthermore, the legislation (see Basic Education Act, 628/1998, 2§; Equality Act, 1325/2014, 5§) obliges teachers to give equal opportunities to all pupils. This can hardly take place if teachers themselves have different amount of knowledge on educational matters. In our study, there were two respondents who felt the A2-language choice is not their responsibility.

It was found in the questionnaire that those who felt they have enough information had acquired it independently. The reasons for the need to gather information independently can only be speculated on. Whether this is because the information has not reached the individual teacher for some reason, or the lack of interest of the teacher towards language education, remains unknown. The positive side found in this study was that some of the respondents (3) had indeed acquired information independently and not stayed uninformed of the A2-language matters.

There is an inconsistency between what the respondents claim and what one can sense from the data as a whole. There can be detected a slight uncertainty towards the respondents' feeling of their knowledge regarding the A2-language matters. It was also inquired whether teachers discuss the language issues among colleagues. The responses revealed there is hardly any discussion concerning the A2-language. It can be argued that sharing the knowledge one has would benefit the whole community.

Teachers' opinions of a qualified language learner

Several of the respondents (9) would recommend the A2-language to those pupils who perform well at school in general and especially in the pupil's first language and in English. Respectively, the A2-language is not recommended to those who struggle with the mentioned subjects or who have general learning difficulties. Thus, there was consistency in the responses which adds the validity of the results. We had suspected something like this to rise from the responses in advance, based on the stereotypes

teachers have regarding learning foreign languages (see Dusek, 1975; Siegle, 2001; Weber, 1999, 185-187).

It can be argued that suggesting additional languages only to those who perform well at school is not legally or morally acceptable. Offering the same opportunities and information to all pupils should be obvious to all teachers. The responses confirmed the fact that teachers tend to judge their pupils based on their previous performances. It was controversial as to what the respondents held as good performance. One respondent saw good performance and skills as having the best grades (9 or 10) whilst another explained that one does not have to be the best in everything.

It was clear that the respondents would recommend the A2-language to those pupils who show interest and are motivated to study languages. It was considered necessary that it is the pupil who wants to choose the additional language and not the pupil's parents. Yet, one respondent did feel that a third-grader is too young to make such a decision on his/her own and that parents should make the choice for the pupil. The A2-language was recommended to those who showed interest towards languages and not recommended to those who lacked the motivation. Though it was mentioned that the choice should not be made based on the parents' wish, the role of home was seen important in general. Sufficient support from the family was held significant when choosing the A2-language.

One of the issues the respondents brought up was the amount of pupils' free time and/or time management skills. The A2-language lessons are most likely held in the early morning or the last lessons in the afternoon, this way extending the school day. There was a concern the school day would become too demanding. Furthermore, those pupils who are kept busy by their hobbies or who spend a lot of time with their present homework are not recommended to choose an additional language. It may be seen from these kinds of responses that in general the respondents consider the A2-language as an extra weight for the pupils. Hence, the pupil's perseverance in school work was regarded as an essential characteristic in order for the respondent to suggest the pupil to choose an additional language.

Practical ways used to market A2-languages to pupils

The responses to the practical ways in which the teachers use to market the A2-languages to their pupils also revealed something of the respondents' own attitudes towards foreign languages. Though several of the respondents (7) had only

given out the necessary notes concerning the A2-language choice, there were those who had integrated languages to the school days informally. Some teachers (3) told there have been elder pupils in their classroom to share facts about studying the A2-language and to do language showering to younger pupils. Other individual ways to market foreign languages that were mentioned were a language fair (within the school), greeting pupils in foreign languages and discussions with the pupils of the importance of languages.

Those who had made an effort in marketing languages to their pupils can be assumed to be more interested in languages and value language skills in general. This is further supported in the responses to the question on the teachers' opinions of the language supply in their school. The responses revealed disappointment to some degree towards the narrow language supply and that there are not enough pupils to choose the A2-language in order for the groups to be formed.

Knowledge and opinions vary among teachers

The results suggest that the teachers' knowledge of language issues varies a lot. It was rather common that the knowledge had been acquired independently whilst others felt it is not their responsibility to seek more information. This suggests that those interested in language issues wish to promote languages in their classrooms and are willing to do extra work for it.

It was clear that those pupils, who perform well in school and especially in English and the native language of the pupil, are recommended to choose the additional A2-language by their teachers. In comparison, those pupils, who are not encouraged to choose the A2-language, have some difficulties in the mentioned subjects and school in general. These responses imply that the teachers believe the additional language requires more effort and adds to the workload. It can be speculated though what kind of a division we would have had if there had been a greater amount of respondents. Furthermore, this questionnaire was only sent to the Jyväskylä area and had it been sent to the whole of Finland, the results could be rather different.

All in all, the responses suggest teachers do not have knowledge because of their profession; rather, the acquisition of deeper knowledge is left to their own responsibility. Furthermore, it is obvious the A2-language is recommended to those pupils who show motivation towards languages and perform well in their first language and English.

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