

Learning a culture and a foreign language at school – aspects of intercultural learning

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INTRODUCTION

This article is based on the project 'Culture and Foreign Language Learning' consisting of a two years' teaching experiment with Finnish upper secondary school pupils and the action research on the experiment. The research was hermeneutic, its purpose being to understand what occurred in the teaching experiment and how the pupils understood the substance and the learning of it. In accordance with the principles of action research the teachers and researchers were the same persons. It was therefore possible to get closer to understanding qualitatively what may have happened in the minds of the learners.

The research had the following main targets:

1. to understand better the concept of culture and some other relating concepts, such as intercultural learning, intercultural understanding, intercultural communication and intercultural encountering;
2. to plan a teaching experiment in foreign language teaching focusing on intercultural learning;
3. to describe a teaching experiment with accuracy;
4. to report how the individual learners' conceptions of culture have changed during the two years' period;
5. to discuss the teaching methodology appropriate to guiding young people towards intercultural learning of a foreign language at school.

The qualitative research methodology made it possible to explore the learners' understanding of their thinking and intercultural learning process more deeply. The research material was collected in the following ways:

1. The documents of the most important learner outcomes were collected in the two years period. The researchers received various kinds of written materials and video-recordings of classroom work.

2. The teachers kept personal journals of their work and their pupils' work.
3. The pupils kept personal journals of their actions in certain periods and reflected on what they did and learnt alone and in small groups.
4. All pupils were interviewed about their learning process and experiences on intercultural learning three times during the teaching experiment. The interviews were carried out by both the teachers and the researchers.

The conclusions and results presented in this paper are based on the analysis and interpretation of the above mentioned material all of which was at the disposal of the researchers.

BACKGROUND TO INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Educational institutions in most European countries, including Finland, have tried to guide their school children to understand 'foreignness' and dissimilarity in societies. People long ago realised the importance of education to peace and international understanding in all levels of education and in all school subjects. It is in this context that new concepts like 'intercultural learning', 'intercultural understanding' and 'interculturalism' were adopted. The reason was that more and more frequently people meet representatives of other cultures and they stay in a culturally different environment for longer periods of time or even permanently. In many countries intercultural learning is related to situations where people speaking different languages, with different looks, customs and values, live side by side. This is true especially in countries which have problems with immigrants and refugees. In those societies interculturalism is commonplace and concrete in one's own life. The situation in Finland with a rather monolithic culture, has been different during the past decades. For this reason Finns tend to see interculturalism from another perspective be-

"The pupils kept personal journals"



cause they haven't been exposed to great 'foreignness'.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

The school in Finland has also tried to respond in many ways to the objectives of interculturalism by emphasising internationalisation and tolerance. After the lower level of the comprehensive school, studying is based on different subjects, and therefore teaching interculturalism is linked with the objectives of the subject in question and the knowledge and background of the teacher concerned. As regards foreign languages, 'foreignness' has been part of the subject matter.

Languages differ by their nature in many respects. However, paying attention solely to the differences between languages has been approached as a system; vocabulary has been studied by labelling the words of the foreign language with the meanings of the mother tongue; pupils have listened to the foreign language in order to pick up information and so on. In this situation learning has not gone beyond formal learning. Intercultural learning means, however, that the individual should learn to understand the intentions and expectations of the representative of a foreign culture. The learner should realise that linguistic communication is only part of global communication and that in every language there are elements which belong to the automatic, ritual and routine component of a native speaker's behaviour. It is these elements the learner should learn and know how to analyse. In addition to this, he should gradually know how to express his own aspirations and intentions in a foreign language. It makes no sense to limit foreign language learning just to studying, for example, a language system because we are dealing with a very complex learning process associated with social and communicative dimensions. In our research 'Culture and Foreign Language Learning' we have tried to

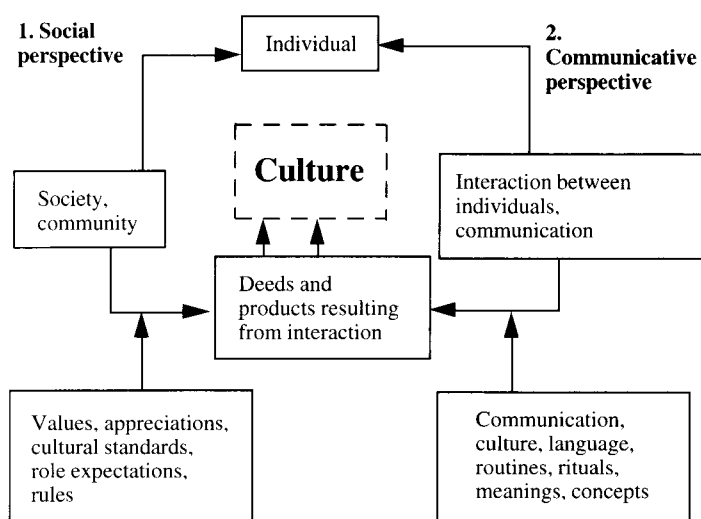
find out whether and how deep this type of learning process can be achieved at school and what the methods would be like.

CULTURE – A BASIC CONCEPT IN INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Culture being perhaps the most crucial concept in our research, it is necessary to define it the way we have understood it. We have tried to see culture both from the point of view of different disciplines and from the point of view of the learner's everyday life. As a consequence we have come to a wide description of culture which combines both social and communicative aspects and the theory of learning. Culture as a concept derives its strength from the situation where there is communication and interaction between individuals on the one hand, and from the communities resulting from this activity on the other. Communities organised in the form of a state are called societies. In this view we can describe culture as in Figure 1, which shows the behaviour patterns resulting from interaction and communication as well as the meanings which result from common acceptance within a community. The concept of culture should be approached from two angles. First, there is the perspective of the theory of society which seeks explanation for cultural phenomena in the social order of society. Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, Habermas and Munch among others represent this view. Second, we should always study culture from the perspective of action and communication theories. Culture guides the individual's action through the interactive process and offers him orientation in the shape of background expectations and cognitive models. Phenomenology, ethnomethodology and cognitive anthropology represent this viewpoint. Concepts, meanings and communication are not just linguistic activity but they result from wider semiotisation in which there are many more components than just a verbal communication system (Loenhoff 1992). In this way we can see the role of norms, rules, expectations, routines, ritualised behaviour, i.e. the cultural standards of commonly accepted good behaviour within a community including both verbal and nonverbal communication. In addition, one's own and alien view of culture and thereby prejudice, stereotypes and clichés play a role in the reality of society.

Culture is learned in and through communication, in interaction with other people. Similarly, the individual also learns the fundamentals of culture such as language, cultural standards, behaviour routines and communication rituals in interaction with others within a community. It is the question of communication strategies and behaviour norms the members of a community have agreed upon, and which become automatic in their use. Because people act as members of society, culture too has its manifestations in action and language in accor-

Figure 1 The role of culture, community and communication



dance with the agreement of society. It is obvious that the relationship between individual, society, interaction, language and culture is so complex that it is difficult to divide it in small parts.

The individual is always a member of a community, society and its subcommunity. In this community he has a need to interact and communicate with other members. All this goes to make up the kind of activity that we are here calling 'culture'. It is defined by the two factors: community and the need for interaction. The situation gives birth to the use of language (everyday communication, literature, arts as a form of visual communication) as well as to cultural institutions, such as home, family, school, church etc. There would be no culture without the individual, his communication and community. The definition of culture would then be according to Nicklas (1991) and Kaikkonen (1991) as follows:

'Culture is a common agreement between the members of a community on the values, norms, rules, role expectations and meanings which guide the behaviour and communication of the members. Furthermore, it includes the deeds and products which result from the interaction between the members'.

This is how culture can be defined from the individual and community point of view.

PROCESSES OF INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

It is as a member of a community that the individual learns his culture. But even within a community, individuals experience the surrounding world differently. Their interpretation of surrounding reality is different, even though they represent the same community. That is why their learning, i.e. the process of making sense of and possessing the world, takes different forms and meanings. Therefore our starting point in the research is the learner's previous knowledge, experience, beliefs and ideas. Part of the whole picture is the fact that the learners are Finns and their mother tongue is Finnish. Their picture of the world is influenced by Finnish society, its cultural standards and the Finnish language. We were conscious, when starting the project, of the fact that their experiences of 'foreignness', foreign countries and people were not similar. In the process of intercultural learning the learner constantly compares new experiences with those of his mother tongue, and new information with old information etc. In other words, intercultural learning is a process where the learner's picture of culture grows wider, with the help of new information about foreign culture and language, increasing at the same time the consciousness of the special features of one's own culture and language.

According to the basic idea of our research, teaching should form an entity where the learner's picture of the world labelled by his own culture develops into a multicultural picture of the world. Of course we understand that, from the learner's point of view, none of the stages are in unbroken succession but analysing them separately clarifies the process. We have tried to create learning situations where all the stages were present. There are four stages which are to be taken into consideration in interculturally oriented language learning (Figure 3):

1. The learner should be sensitised to those phenomena we are interested in, especially foreign phenomena.
2. The learner should be instructed to observe foreign culture and its phenomena, and made to compare the observed foreign phenomena with those of his own culture.
3. The learner gets information about the foreign language and foreign cultural standards and compares them with the functioning of his own language and his own cultural standards.
4. This is the process where new meanings get a shape, building on the basis of the first three stages, and this eventually leads to a successful communication and interaction with the representatives of a foreign culture.

A further important process in our study is the making of observations. We understand that the learner, when making observations, anchors them

" their experiences of 'foreignness', foreign countries and people were not similar"

Figure 2 Widening of the learner's picture of culture and its components

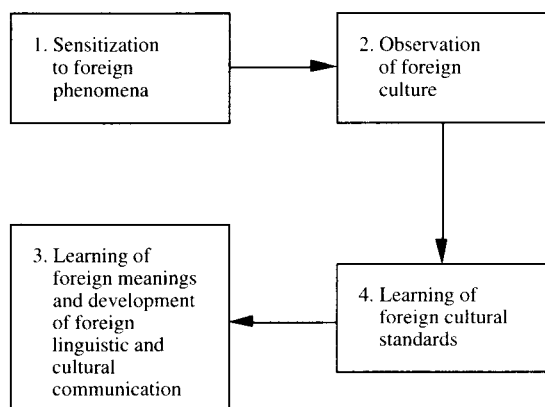
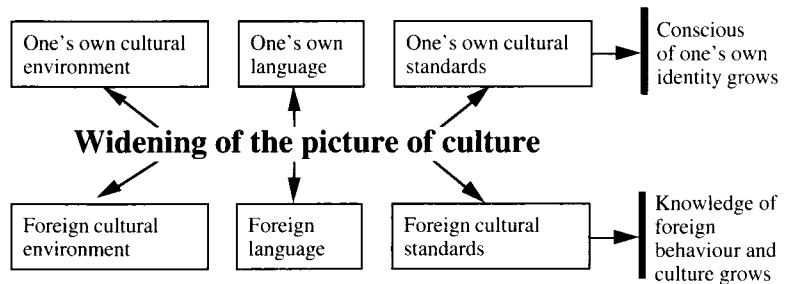


Figure 3 Different stages of intercultural learning

