MOTHER TONGUE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING - A JOINT PROJECT

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The project we present here originated from the Nordic workshop on learner autonomy in Copenhagen 1995. This workshop focused on research in the field of developing learner autonomy, and time was devoted to defining issues of main interest and establishing research teams. Together with David Little of Trinity College, Dublin, we decided to examine aspects of the interrelationship between mother tongue and foreign language learning. The research project was to be carried out in a learning-to-learn setting aiming at developing learner autonomy, a setting where learning processes are made more explicit than what is usually the case.

We want to describe the main reasons for focusing on this field of research and then report on some of our findings. For a more elaborate presentation, we refer to Fenner/Trebbi/Aase (forthcoming)[1].

The reseach interest

Learning of languages: from elitism to general accessibility

Learning foreign languages has become more important over the last decades. Due to internationalisation and globalisation it has become important for everybody to master more languages than one's mother tongue. Language studies that used to be available only to a select group of pupils are now considered to be of importance to all pupils.We are thus witnessing a change of focus in the teaching and learning of languages towards making foreign languages more accessible, an issue which is also a main concern of the Council of Europe.

This is, however, not merely a quantitative, but also a qualitative change. We have developed a new awareness of the nature of languages and language

competence. Language in use includes both cultural exposure and cultural expression. This means that language competence is a social and cultural competence. Accordingly the new perspective of language aquisition is less concerned with the learning prosess as an individual development, and more concerned with the learning process as a socialising one where the learner gains cultural competence which enables him or her to participate in society. This is where foreign language and mother tongue learning meet in the sense that, on the one hand, cultural insight, seen as an intrinsic part of mother tongue competence, may be influenced and broadened through foreign language competence, and, on the other hand, developing cultural awareness through mother tongue competence, seen as text competence, might support the learner in the process of acquiring a foreign language. This qualitative change which is embedded in new requirements of language competence, legitimises the new emphasis on diversity as well as on general accessibility of language competence. Today we encounter new needs for language competence, needs that are closely related to the necessity of cultural competence in society.

A new educational goal

Such a qualitative change is taken into account in the new curriculum of the Norwegian 1997 reform in primary and lower secondary education and is expressed for instance in the following statements:

a. from the Norwegian syllabus, pages 111 – 117[2]:

- The language which the individual develops, determines the limits of his or her understanding and creates limits between communities and countries.
- We use language in order to understand the world around us and in order for others to understand us.
- The individual's language develops through co-operation and interaction (no: samhandling) with others
- Learning a language is among the most social of all human phenomena.[3]

b. From the English syllabus, page 223:

The task of enhancing pupil's overall language competence is common to all the language courses. The aims and approaches of all the language syllabuses are therefor viewed as being interrelated. First language and foreign language teaching are thus based on a shared

view of language, in which foreign language learning is not only viewed as skills training but also as an educational process, involving socialisation and the development of language awareness and cultural awareness. The syllabus in English is based on the language-learning foundations laid when pupils learn their first language, on experience pupils have already gained through contact with other languages and cultures both at school and elsewhere, and on text competence which pupils have acquired through learning their first language.

c. From the German and French syllabus pages 279 and 285:

Learning German/French is one of the school's provisions for enhancing the pupils' overall language competence. Teaching of their first language and foreign languages is based on the same view of language, in which is focused upon not merely skills but also general education, socialising, and the development of language and cultural awareness. The course in German builds on the foundations for language learning which pupils have developed in the learning of their mother tongue and of English, the experience they have already acquired through contacts with other languages and cultures both in school and elsewhere, and on the text competence which they have acquired through their study of Norwegian and English.

As an additional feature and of equal importance, insight into one's own language learning is a focus common to all three syllabi. In the mother tongue syllabus this is formulated as early as the first grade:

As part of the learning process, the pupils will talk about language, its purpose, and how their own language has developed from childhood.[4]

In the foreign language syllabi insight into one's own language learning is formulated as one of the three main objectives (pages 226, 282 and 288).

Although mother tongue and foreign languages are separate school subjects, the curriculum underlines that the subjects should together contribute towards a more general educational goal: the development of citizenship in a global world. The joint contribution of all language subjects towards this goal consists of developing insight into the nature of languages, language learning processes, communication and culture, and also developing ability to participate and communicate across cultures. In our perspective, the new curriculum emphasises the relevance of our research topic. Language teachers need to deal with fundamental questions such as: What is a language? What is language competence? What does developing language competence mean?

The answers to such questions constitute a basic understanding of the subject taught and learnt.

The answers to these questions form the platform of any curriculum, and can be expressed quite precisely therein. Sometimes the lack of explicit verbalisation of these matters indicates that it is considered obvious how such questions are to be answered. This consensus, however, rarely creates new ideas and is a less beneficial work document than a more specifically profiled curriculum.

The new Norwegian curriculum has a very explicit perspective on these questions. Language is described as functional and dynamic in contrast to formal and static. It states that language is learnt and developed in social contexts through language in use. Behind a linguistic description is a wide definition of language competence, which includes cultural as well as rhetoric competence. In other words: to master a language is to participate in social situations with one's cultural capital. To be able to do so one needs to understand the different cultural forms and their functions, and the learner must venture to put forth some of his or her thoughts and ideas, and somehow reveal who he or she is. To master a language is to master its functions in social contexts, both orally and in writing. In other words, language always exists in a context that influences both the form and the content of the text performed as well as the way in which it is perceived. Context of culture gives the general framework of texts in our society: why, how, and where we talk and write, and what are considered worthwhile ways of using language. The relationship between the communicating parties and the purpose of a particular communication will appear in the text in overt as well as in more hidden forms. Thus awareness of the function of human forms of communication is not a secondary qualification in language learning, it is definitively a primary competence. The language learner makes use of his or her understanding of both *context of culture* and *context of situation* (Halliday 1985) when creating meaning.

A renewed interest in the interrelationship between mother tongue and foreign language

Development in language learning theory has brought about new perspectives on the mutual relationship between mother tongue and foreign language learning. Traditionally the way of regarding this relationship has been based on psycholinguistic theories, mainly concerned with developing perspectives as analogies of language acquisition in mother tongue and foreign language. Interlanguage theory (Selinker 1972 and Corder 1967) is closely linked with psychlinguistic theories and error analysis. Research in this field has

concentrated on Chomsky's communicative performance (Chomsky 1965). As a result of such theories, teachers have focused on errors and mistakes the learner makes, which can be traced back to his og her native language. It has enabled us to interpret and understand the reason for some mistakes made, but it has not necessarily made a positive impact on the way teachers regard and assist the individual's learning process. Research in contrastive analysis has mainly been concerned with the linguistic aspects of communicative competence, not the learner's text as a structure of meaning and discourse. Rather than using interlanguage theory to assist the individual's learning, most research has focused on the shortcomings of the student. Because interlanguage focuses on errors in words and sentences in the learner's text, it is not very useful as a tool if we want to analyse the learner's text as a whole.

Today, however, a renewed interest in the relationship is no longer restricted to either a purely psychlinguistic concern or to investigations about how mother tongue influences foreign language learning. The assumption is rather that *mutual* influence takes place, consciously or unconsciously. In mother tongue learning and teaching as well as in foreign language classrooms, there is an increased interest in what kind of relationship we are dealing with and how *learning*, in respectively mother tongue and foreign language, can be mutually beneficial.

If we choose to see the pupil's text, not only as a manifestation of competence in grammar structures and vocabulary, but as manifestations of the struggle to create meaning, we will, in addition to discovering connections between the mother tongue and the foreign language, be forced to reconsider our understanding of what language is and how it is learnt and developed.

One consequence of this is that learning a foreign language in school is different from learning a foreign language outside school. While we were previously concerned with improving foreign language teaching by making it resemble learning situations outside school, we now emphasise the fact that language learning in school is more than mastering skills. It has to do with understanding language and communication, and understanding how we use language differently in different situations. Thus it becomes a contribution to the total educational project of socialising. Foreign language teaching plays a very special and important part in this ambitious project. Communicating in a foreign language creates cultural encounters. Such encounters with "otherness" provide a mirror for oneself because one's own thinking and understanding are challenged by the other. Meeting a new language can, and probably will, provide a broadened understanding of both linguistic and meta-linguistic aspects of language merely through new ways of understanding and using language. Thus the foreign language learner might gain a revised understanding of his mother tongue as well as knowledge of the target language simultaneously. Gaining knowledge of another language enhances

the understanding of possibilities for using language in communication. This is due partly to the language itself, its structure, vocabulary etc., and partly to the ways in which the language functions in use. If language learning *is* cultural encounters, it is not just because the learner gets to know foreign customs and ways of living, it is due to the texts, in other words the combination of the linguistic system, the context and the meaning expressed. It is closely connected to the possibility of shifting from *langue* to *parole.*

Communicative competence

The definition of communicative competence is still an urgent topic of discussion in the language classroom. We have been witnessing a narrow understanding of the concept that puts limitations on both the understanding of communication as complex human interaction and on teaching and learning situations in language classrooms.

Communicative competence is oral as well as written competence and it is often developed through correspondence between these two traditions of language in use. Oral communication manifests itself in a number of different genres, informal and formal with varying functions, and so does the tradition of writing. As participants in society we are perpetually confronted with this complexity of text and the complexity becomes even more obvious in the process of internationalisation. We communicate with other people and with texts and we take part in textual traditions by reading, writing, talking, listening and observing. Communication is interpretation and interaction and we also have to deal with this in foreign languages and foreign cultures.

A redefinition of communicative competence is necessary for two reasons. First it is important to broaden the concept so that it includes all lingual-cultural forms. This reduces the danger of defining language learning as a utilitarian and one-dimensional activity. Secondly it is not enough to widen the definition of the concept. We also have to reconsider the objective of language learning as being exclusively related to communication. An important function of language learning is to be found in the connection between language and thought. Thinking is to a great extent a linguistic activity and thus we form our thoughts and meanings in language. Speaking or writing, therefore, is not merely a result of previous thinking, it is shaping thoughts. This, consequently, means that language forming is also an activity of thinking, and that we develop our thinking through the same process as we develop our linguistic competence. Developing speaking and thinking can thus be regarded as simultaneous and interdependent processes. This simple point is generally understood in mother tongue teaching, but is traditionally given less consideration in foreign language teaching.

Communicative competence is not solely a question of a relationship between the text and the recipient of the text, it is as much a question of the relationship between the sender and the text. The struggle of communication has to do with the lack of control we have over language. Words mean something, independent of what our intentions may be. We may easily say less or more than we intended. The conventions of language may connect our text to systems of meaning that we are not consciously aware of. We might in other words risk expressing something different from what we wanted to express. To communicate can never be a skill learnt once and for all, it is a risky activity always connected with insecurity and uncertainty. It is a competence that develops through use during participation in the arena of human interaction. To gain communicative competence is, therefore, a continuous process of experience and investigation in the landscape of language and meaning.

When Henri Holec (1996) maintains that learning language, including foreign languages, is to construct one's own language, he seems to take into account that language always has a context. But teaching conventions that still flourish in many foreign language classrooms, tend to overlook this fact.

Our working hypothesis

1. A foreign language learner has already developed a text competence in his mother tongue that will have important impact upon his text production in the target language. On the other hand, learning a foreign language also means developing text competence that can enhance the understanding of language and culture in general. This may reflect positively on text production in mother tongue. Understanding this reciprocal relationship is of vital importance to the language teacher.
2. The good language learner is capable of employing the benefit of knowledge and insight achieved, both in mother tongue and foreign languages, to further develop competencies in the first language as well as in other languages. A great number of pupils, however, are unable to do this unless this is made an explicit issue.
3. Developing learner autonomy through self-directed learning seems to work better in open learning situations, where the teacher withdraws from controlling the learning - here regarded as both activities and outcome - than in conventional settings. Open learning situations lend themselves better to explicating how pupils go about learning a language. They open up for the learners' production, based on their own learning projects and personal potential, rather than trying to live up to external demands and expectations, and they give teachers the necessary space to investigate learning processes.

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The research material

In our research work we focused on pupils' texts of English and French, age group 12-16 years. The research foci were multiple. We wanted to analyse the texts as a unity of form and meaning and to interpret the results of the tasks carried out as a means to understanding what the conditions for text production in the class are. In other words, we thought it possible to deconstruct pupils' texts and discover something about cultural competence, linguistic and meta-linguistic competence, and something about the models pupils use in writing different texts. Our interest was mainly focused on macro structures of the texts and on the pupils' strategies for text production. Thus error analysis in the conventional sense was not our concern. A deeper understanding of how students interpret writing tasks in which they engage, and how they go about producing the texts, might give the teacher a more solid basis for working in order to develop language awareness.

Findings

The youngest pupil in the material (aged 12) had never written a text in English on his own, previous tasks being restricted to writing anwers to questions given by the teacher or the textbook. We recognised his writing strategy as mainly dependent upon the text competence already developed in his mother tongue. The other texts showed the same tendency and shed light on various aspects of the interrelationship between mother tongue and foreign language . In one text we found an example of how a text full of linguistic errors, can still be relatively advanced if analysed on a discourse level rather than a linguistic level of words and sentences.

We found examples of how model texts influence the learner in different ways. In one example the learner chose the model text himself and used it to support his own text production. He used the model text for interpretation and negotiation. Thus the learner as reader and writer enters into an intertextual communication with the model texts and creates his own meaning. In another example the pupil was going to write an English version of the model text, a well known fairy tale. His struggle with this task was not a simple question of translation. His text competence in Norwegian included a sense of style and atmosphere in the fairy-tale, and he struggled to recreate this in the foreign language. In other words, the different levels of text competence in mother tongue and English became a cultural problem for him. He wrote two versions of the text, one he discarded as being boring, the other one he turned into an epic poem in a humorous style that might express part of what he could do in mother tongue.

In one text we found an example of how scope to interpret and personalise a task gives the learner a possibility of using and demonstrating fairly advanced text competence. In the pupil's short story we observed a complex dialectic relationship between mother tongue and foreign language. We were faced with a piece of writing where cultural competence was an integral part of text competence. In the double role as reader and writer, the learner both interpreted and questioned meaning. And the process of writing in a foreign language made the pupil aware of the fact that understanding both the foreign culture and one's own is a matter of interpreting language and trying to create meaning. The joint project of developing text competence in mother tongue and foreign language was in fact understood by the pupil.

In all the texts we observed the learners used the scope available to create their own personal tasks and contexts. Through their personalised products they showed different aspects of text competence. They all based their projects on a fundamental understanding of language as meaning. It is of vital importance that we, as teachers, take such an understanding seriously, and try to see what the learner's intention is. In order to achieve this, we need to regard texts on higher levels than the basic linguistic level where we are often blinded by mistakes.

Without drawing a substantial conclusion in this brief report, our findings seem to underpin the assumption expressed in the working hypothesis. In the light of theoretical didactics the findings make us rethink the notion of what is difficult in foreign language learning. These young pupils may be unexperienced as regards grammar and language systems, wheras they are quite experienced as readers and writers. Being inside one language already, they master to a large extent the more composite, complex language. We have to look upon pupils, not only as learners, but also as language users in their own right.

On the other hand, we noticed that learners do not easily see the conventional aspects of their own mother tongue. In one example, the learner chose to compare a French and a Norwegian version of a text well known to her. When doing this, the pupil found herself induced to reconsider the meaning of the French text. She experienced how words open up for different connotations in different languages. Hopefully, this discovery about the nature of understanding a word in context is transferable to the nature of understanding in her mother tongue as well.

One implication of our findings is the view that the teacher is not in a position to sanction the learner's language use. The teacher's task is rather to assist the learners in their strive to make optimal use of their language and their learning potential. On the basis of this, mother tongue and foreign language learning should be dealt with as a continuum of complementary and cross-referential learning experiences.

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Notes

[1] Fenner, A-B.: "Text competence and interrelationship between mother tongue and foreign language",
Trebbi, T.: "Mother tongue and foreign language learning - some aspects of a mutual relationship",
Aase, L.: "Writing strategies in mother tongue and foreign language learning - a few examples from pupil's work".

[2] Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen, utgitt av Det kongelige kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, Oslo 1997.

[3] Our translation

[4] Our translation