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The potentials for citizenship education in English as a Foreign Language - a Swedish perspective

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Intercultural understanding can be seen as a crucial quality of education for global citizenship. The study reported here examines the prospects of developing intercultural understanding through English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Swedish comprehensive school. The intercultural dimension of EFL education is analysed as three discourses, and findings are summarised as opportunities and obstacles for developing intercultural understanding in EFL education. Finally the three discourses are related to each other and a model is presented showing a broad space of interpretation of teaching and learning culture in EFL (Table 1).

Introduction

The study reported here aimed to examine the prospects of developing intercultural understanding through English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Swedish comprehensive school. Though the study is geopolitically limited to a contemporary Swedish perspective and concerns English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for 13-16 year olds, it has a general European message.

The English language is taught as a compulsory subject from the age of seven or nine up to 19: it is considered a necessary tool for international contacts and higher education. In EFL education there is a cultural dimension which is traditionally focused on Britain and the USA. As English is taught as a tool for international and intercultural communication, there is a need for a new approach to the cultural dimension in accordance with the current role of EFL. How is this intercultural dimension approached in research, in curricular documents and among language teachers?

Theoretical framework

One purpose of research is to show alternative views, to question what is taken for granted. The researcher's task is a pragmatic one - to take part in the construction of values, not to uncover or dig up hidden facts. It is 'a search not for truth but for any usefulness that the researcher's 'reading' of a phenomenon might have in bringing about change for those who need it' (Burr, 1995, p162). A school subject is mediated through the teacher: I argue that students have the right to be shown different educational perspectives, as have future teachers, parents, textbook writers and others.

My study draws on the following theoretical perspectives applied to certain key concepts:

- The concept of culture is interpreted as an 'active construction of meaning' (Street, 1993, p 23). In an age of internationalisation we can talk about cultural complexity (Hannerz, 1992). Culture is unstable, changeable and temporary (Thavenius, 1999).

Sjögren (2001) sees culture as an analytic tool being replaced by identity, referring to the increasing group of post-national young people in Sweden. The above culture theories have practical implications for language teachers. Ethnicity, gender, class, age and other variables surpass nation as the main concept to classify otherness.

Intercultural understanding is interpreted as a general ability to understand otherness and to be aware of one's own values. I avoid using intercultural competence, as competence to me connotes technical skills often used as a tool for power and control.

- Critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992) supplies the theoretical and methodological base for the study. Teaching and learning culture in EFL is an area, or order of discourse, where different discourses compete about the 'true' interpretation. The outcome of such a competition, or hegemonic struggle, either changes or reproduces the power relations within the order of discourse.
- Curriculum theory (Englund, 1997) supplies a concept - space of interpretation - which supports Fairclough's theory of hegemony. Englund's tradition researches the contents of education e.g. in curricular documents and in teachers' texts (written or oral). The text offers discursive meanings which result in different pedagogical practice. Education and its contents are seen as a tension between forces. The state has the official power but it is a struggle fought at all levels. Education as transfer of ideologies is constantly changing due to power relations.

An overall model for analysis of the text of three discourses

The three constructed discourses have been analysed responding to five questions:

1. What is the aim of EFL education? (Norm for language teaching/learning.)
2. To what extent is teaching language and teaching culture considered a unit? (Integration within EFL education and cross-curricular work.)
3. How is culture described? (Interpretation of the concept of culture.)
4. What should the student learn? (View of knowledge.)
5. What is the role of EFL in a general educational context in the comprehensive school? (Language teaching/learning related to general educational objectives.)

Research discourse

The research discourse is mainly based on three theorists: Claire Kramsch (1993), Mike Byram (1997) and Karen Risager (2003). They all acknowledge explicitly the intercultural speaker (IS) as the norm for foreign language teaching and learning instead of the native norm (NS). An IS 'has a capacity to discover and relate to new people from other contexts for which they have not been prepared directly' (Byram and Fleming, 1998, p 9).

Byram argues that 'all language teaching should promote a position, which acknowledges respect for human dignity and equality of human rights as the democratic basis for social interaction' (Byram, Nichols and Stevens, 2001, p 7).

Summary of a research discourse

1. The intercultural speaker (IS) is the explicit norm.
2. Language and culture are studied in integration. Language studies are cross-disciplinary and cross-curricular.
3. The discourse takes an anthropological view of culture. Culture is a construction. Nationality is only one part of an individual's identity.
4. The discourse has learner-focused view. Knowledge is subjective and is individually constructed, and intercultural understanding is a process between individuals.
5. Culture learning in EFL acquires a critical dimension. Democracy issues are linked to it. An important aim for the student is to reflect upon her/his own values.

Authority discourse

The Swedish National Curriculum (Skolverket, 1994) draws on international agreements, conventions and recommendations - UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the European Union - concerning human rights, European citizenship education and international understanding. An international perspective for all school subjects was proclaimed by the national curriculum in 1994 with reference to increased internationalisation, and an international perspective aiming at intercultural understanding underpins all non-statutory documents and the national curriculum. They highlight key concepts like democracy, solidarity, attitudes, identity formation, human rights, and peace education. There is an obvious kinship between the overall perspective for a common value base in the national curriculum and the above research discourse. However the guidelines for EFL belong to another discourse.

Summary of an educational authority discourse(EFL national guidelines)

1. Implicit native speaker norm. The difference between norms is not problematised.
2. Language and culture are studied within the borders of a school subject.
3. Culture is connected to nation, to English speaking countries. The concept of culture is not questioned.
4. The students' metacognitive skills and self-reflection only refer to language acquisition, not intercultural learning. Intercultural competence is not defined: it is to be assessed but there are no assessment criteria. Attainment targets concerning culture refer to factual knowledge.
5. Overall aims and objectives of NC and the attainment targets of EFL do not correspond.

Teacher discourse*Background*

Previous European studies of language teachers' perceptions of the intercultural dimension of foreign language education (Byram and Risager, 1999; Sercu, 1999; Lázár, 2000, Guilherme, 2002) show that

- the role of English as a *lingua franca* is stressed but ‘culture’ is connected to nation
- the concept of culture is not problematised
- a critical approach to teaching culture is non-existent
- quantitative assessments guide language teaching practice towards measurable products.

No national studies of language teachers’ perceptions of the field had yet been published when my study began. My aim was to answer the research question: Which prospects to develop intercultural understanding are evident in a teacher discourse? This overall question was answered after researching two subordinate questions: (a) How can the practical theories of some teachers be exemplified? (b) How does the social practice of a teacher discourse appear as obstacles and opportunities for teaching?

Method and design

The research interview as a tool for constructing knowledge (Kvale, 1996) implies that there is no fixed meaning but a creative interaction between two active parts. The interview is a continuous process of meaning.

Ten qualified and very experienced teachers of English (teaching the ages of 13-16) were twice interviewed individually. All interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and returned to informants who were asked to comment upon and clarify certain issues (respondent validation).

An open interview guide covering the following aspects was used:

- how does the teacher relate to the intercultural dimension of EFL?
- which obstacles and opportunities for EFL education with an intercultural perspective are expressed by the teacher?

Findings of a teacher discourse

All the teachers said that intercultural understanding was important, but very few saw it as an explicit task for the foreign language teacher. The fact that the national assessment does not assess intercultural understanding sets the norm for what is considered important and valuable knowledge, even to those teachers whose accounts showed a personal commitment to citizenship education, solidarity, tolerance etc.

Summary of a teacher discourse

1. Implicit native speaker norm; the difference between norms is not problematised.
2. Polarised conceptions. The majority expressed a focused view of school subjects; one teacher explicitly stated cross-curricular preferences. The need for integrating communicative competence and intercultural competence was only expressed by one teacher.

3. Culture was connected to nation, to English-speaking countries, by all teachers but one. The concept of culture was not questioned. Culture was ‘how other people think’. Factual knowledge was part of the teaching, but the teachers wanted their students to understand that ‘there are alternative ways of thinking to ours’. Some talked about readiness for a multicultural society. Two teachers mentioned ethnic minority students as a resource for the language classroom.
4. An implicit learner-centred and constructivist view. On a general level the learner shall be educated to live in a internationalised society. Only one teacher discussed the implications for the language teacher’s role.
5. Two teachers represented polarised views The others took up positions between instrumental and democratic motives.

Conclusions

I see the present order of discourse as a result of power relations. Research is general, abstract and, concerning the intercultural dimension, very little known in Sweden. Therefore the research discourse has little power.

The national guidelines for foreign languages reproduce in current EFL a former discourse for culture as factual knowledge. The curriculum is not up-to-date with current research, but does use certain current concepts (intercultural competence, intercultural communicative competence, intercultural understanding). It emphasises the need for assessment and progression of intercultural understanding, but these guidelines are little more than lip-service as no criteria and tangible proposals are available for teachers.

Teachers have power: they are in charge of contents and actual classroom pedagogy. As official guidelines are vague and contradictory, it is safe to stick to earlier practice. Interviewees did not use the opportunities for making independent interpretations of the intercultural dimension in their local plans.

The aim of the study has been to examine the prospects for developing intercultural understanding through English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Swedish comprehensive school. The intercultural dimension has been analysed as three discourses, research discourse, authority discourse and teacher discourse. The conclusion is summarised as opportunities that promote, versus obstacles that prevent, education for intercultural understanding in ELF teaching.

Opportunities that promote education for intercultural understanding

- There is a developed theoretical base available (e.g. Byram, Kramsch, Risager). These researchers explicitly build onto the norm of the intercultural speaker, and their theories are in full agreement with the overall educational perspective for the Swedish school, the common value base.
- International non-statutory agreements and the national curriculum prescribe that understanding of otherness shall be visible in actual practice across the curriculum.
- The national syllabuses for all foreign language education have introduced the concepts intercultural understanding and intercultural competence. The official

commentary supplement uses the concept of intercultural communicative competence.

- Intercultural understanding should be assessed.
- The fundamental attitude of the interviewed teachers was that it is important to develop students' understanding of both otherness and self.
- The increasing number of multicultural students in Swedish schools can contribute to alternative perspectives.

Obstacles that prevent education for intercultural understanding

- Current research does not reach teachers.
- The national syllabus is not anchored in theory; it contradicts international and national overall educational aims; the text narrows the perspective towards factual knowledge, its concepts are vague and there are no assessment criteria.
- National tests do not assess intercultural understanding; teachers are guided by quantitative criteria; language proficiency dominates teaching.
- Secondary school organisation, focused on specific subjects (e.g. ELT) as taught by language specialists, obstructs cross-curricular thematic education.
- Teachers lack time and supervision for didactic reflection and development, which leads to an uncritical attitude to new concepts in central guidelines; traditional culture studies dominate.
- External circumstances in a local micro context are classified as main obstructions.
- There are teachers who see students' lack of ability to take the perspective of the other as a major obstacle.

The prospects for developing intercultural understanding in EFL will change if hegemonic power and dominance within the order of discourse of the intercultural dimension is changed.

The above discourses are summarised and related to each other in order to show a space of interpretation of teaching and learning culture in EFL (Table 1).

To me it is a moral and ethical obligation to fully use the opportunities for citizenship education in teaching English as a Foreign Language in compulsory schooling in Sweden. The aim of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is to question 'truths' that are taken for granted. Intercultural understanding has been highlighted as a 'floating significant' within an order of discourse where a hegemonic struggle is taking place. My task has been to problematise 'the battlefield' and to question its concepts. My study has tried to turn something apparently objective and taken for granted into something political. This has been done with the purpose of stimulating the national debate about the aim of the intercultural dimension of EFLT/L and showing its potential for global citizenship education.

Table 1: Space of interpretation of teaching and learning culture in EFL

<p>NORM FOR TEACHING/LEARNING ENGLISH</p> <p>English as a national language. The student shall</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * achieve a near native cultural competence * get to know an Anglo Saxon cultural heritage. <p>Ideal: native speaker.</p>		<p>English as a tool for international contacts. The student shall</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * act as a mediator between cultures * learn to question his/her own views * value alternative perspectives. <p>Ideal: intercultural speaker.</p>	
<p>VIEW OF INTEGRATING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE AND VIEW OF CROSS-CURRICULAR WORK</p> <p>Focus on the subject..</p> <p>Distinct boundaries between school subjects and different parts of the subject.</p> <p>A focused view of school subjects.</p>		<p>Focus on social education.</p> <p>Cross curricular work.</p> <p>Integration within the subject.</p> <p>FLT/L is part of NC international perspective, overriding curricular aims and guidelines.</p> <p>A holistic view of everything that goes on at school.</p>	
<p>PERCEPTION OF CULTURE</p> <p>Culture as essence Culture as a homogenous concept.</p> <p>Culture as products.</p>		<p>Culture as a signifying process - an active construction of meaning</p> <p>Culture is continuously changing</p> <p>Culture as process.</p>	
<p>VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE</p> <p>Fact-based learning encouraged.</p> <p>Teacher-centred.</p> <p>Objective.</p> <p>Transmission.</p> <p>Reproduction.</p> <p>Knowledge about a homogenous 'majority culture'.</p>		<p>Affective, experiential learning encouraged.</p> <p>Student-centred.</p> <p>Subjective.</p> <p>Knowledge as a social construction.</p> <p>Readiness for a heterogeneous multi-cultural existence now and in the future.</p>	
<p>AIM OF CULTURE STUDIES</p> <p>Give maximal chances in a competitive international job market.</p> <p>Instrumental and rational motive</p>		<p>Offer personal development towards active global citizenship. Increase critical cultural awareness Develop a deepened solidarity. Discover and repudiate ethnocentrism. Cultural learning is part of general citizenship education.</p> <p>Democratic motive</p>	

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