On the notions of the language learner, student and user in FL education: building the road as we travel

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1 Why is it important to consider beliefs in language teaching?

Using Philip Riley's (2003) metaphor, talking is like weaving a piece of cloth: the patterns in the cloth emerge in the process of weaving it. The cloth takes its shape in the process of weaving, but the weaver needs to have a plan, a view of the outcome, for the cloth to have the desired shape, patterns and colours. In educational "weaving", we create an important part of the reality by the concepts we use for talking about it. We therefore need to be careful about the kinds of warp and weft and the design we use for weaving our professional cloth of language teaching. We need to consider the phenomena of teaching and learning, our beliefs and views of education, and the roles of the participants in the process.

Recent research in applied linguistics has emphasized the significance of the pupils' and teachers' educational beliefs and assumptions for their classroom conduct and ways of relating to each other. Kalaja & Barcelos (2003, 1) define beliefs as "opinions and ideas that learners (and teachers) have about the task of learning a second/foreign language". Beliefs are socially constituted, interactively sustained and time-bound assumptions about the roles and duties of the participants in the interactive teaching–learning process. Being socially constituted, they are modifiable and changeable (at least to some extent), rather than stable and permanent (Barcelos 2003).

Beliefs shape the teacher's perceptions about possible courses of action in a given situation, without the teacher being aware of such hidden sources of influence. To explore his/her teaching and professional identity as an educator, the teacher needs to develop an awareness of his/her educational beliefs and the potential consequences of the use of beliefs in his/her teaching. This is also a question of using educational power in the classroom, and it needs to be considered seriously. (Alanen 2003, 60–63; Wertsch 1998; Kohonen 2001; 2004a; 2005.)

While the characteristics of pupils were discussed in terms of the properties of successful, "good" language learners in the 1970–80s (Naiman 1978; Rubin & Thompson 1982), research interest has more recently shifted to the fundamental role of *any language student* in his/her language study. There has been a significant shift of emphasis on the significance of the *students' own contributions* to their language learning through initiative-taking and active

involvement. Students are a significant resource for their own learning as well as for each other's learning. They need to take charge of their learning in order to enhance their autonomy as students and language users. This shift in the research has brought about a new kind of focus on the students themselves as learners in general and as language learners in particular. Students need to be facilitated to develop a basic reflective orientation to learning by working on their experiences, beliefs and assumptions of language and learning. (Breen 2001; Kalaja & Barcelos 2003; Kohonen 2001, 2004a; 2005; Lehtovaara 2001; Jaatinen 2001; 2003; Little 2001; Watson-Gegeo 2004; van Lier 1996; 2004; Kelly Hall 2005.)

One of the basic conceptualizations in language teaching is surely the very notion of the "learner". How does the teacher see the role of the pupil in the classroom, and what kinds of rights, duties and responsibilities does she attach to her beliefs of the learner? How does the pupil/student see his/her role as a language learner in terms of the rights, duties and opportunities for language learning, both inside and outside the classrooms? As learning and teaching are kind of mirroring each other, with the teacher and the pupil constituting a dyad in the classroom, it is necessary to consider the roles of the teachers and pupils/students together. These questions raise the fundamental notion of the teacher's underlying *conception of man* as the basis for educational thinking and action (Lehtovaara 2001).

And last but not least, research on second/foreign language learning has obvious repercussions for the professional pre-service and inservice teacher education. It is therefore vital to consider how the researchers have conceptualized the notion of learner over the past few decades, and what kind of theoretical concepts and research findings the teachers have been exposed to at colleges and universities. In this paper I will first examine the notions of the "learner" in the light of three recent paradigms in second/foreign language teaching and learning. I base my discussion on Philip Riley's (2003) thought-provoking views on this notion, using three conceptualizations of the language learner:

(1)   **Behaviouristic psychology:** the learner as a *physical organism* and language learning as a branch of physiology*,* extrapolated to human beings from the physical behaviour of rats and rabbits

(2)   **Cognitive psychology:** the learner as a generalised, abstract *model of the learning process* rather than a person*,* as a decontextualized model of information processing common to all learners rather than to any one learner

(3)   **Constructivist, sociocultural and experiential psychology:** the learner as a *person* consisting of a self with a social identity, seen as a member of a culture and a society.

I will first examine briefly the interpretations of the language learner in the behavioristic and cognitive paradigms. I will then explore the notions of learner in the current paradigm of foreign language education based variously on (socio-)constructive, sociocultural and experiential theories of learning, emphasizing the need to see FL teaching as holistic language education. Finally I will consider the notions of existential competence and the language learner/user as a social agent proposed in the influential *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR 2001), and the role of *European Language Portfolio* (ELP) as an important a instrument for enhancing the pupil's personal identity and autonomy as a language learner and a language user.

2. Notions of the learner in three major paradigms of FL education

In this paper I can only suggest an outline of the developments in educational linguistics, psychological, language teaching and evaluation theories, as summarized in Table 1 (Kohonen 2004b).

Theories:

Linguistic	Learning	Lg.Teaching	Evaluation
Traditional, Philology		Grammar-translation	Translation
Structuralism	Behaviorism	Audiolingual theory	Analytic tests
(TG), Pragmatism, sociolinguistics	Cognitivism Constructivism	Functional communicative competence	Integrative tests; self-assessment
Discourse analysis, Dialogue	Humanism Sociocultural/ Experiential learning	Intercultural communicative competence	Authentic assessment; ELP: self-assessment

Table 1. Outline of paradigms in foreign language education.

I wish to emphasise the need to integrate the linguistic and learning theories into a holistic and, at the same time, an internally coherent pedagogic approach to language teaching, learning and evaluation.

    2.1. Behaviorism. In the behaviouristic paradigm learning was essentially regarded as habit formation, the process of making a link between stimuli and responses through reinforcement. External environment served as a stimulus for the processes of learning. Once the link was established it was reinforced, observed, corrected and practiced to the level of automatic routines. The learner's internal processes were disregarded because they were not

accessible to external observation and objective scientific measurement. The subjects' individuality, thoughts and feelings were ignored as being too subjective and thus unscientific and unreliable. As part of the positivistic approach aimed at statistical generalizations, the individuality of the subjects was subsumed under the statistical averages, standard deviations and sophisticated statistical analyses of the faceless, decontextualized quantitative data. As Riley notes, the human learner was seen as a physical organism and language learning as a kind of branch of physiology, and as a mindless extrapolation from the physical behaviour of rats and rabbits (Riley 2003, 239; Johnson 2004, 10–11).

2.2. Cognitive theories. The cognitive paradigm is concerned with the information processing perspective, being more interested in language learning processes than the individuality of the learner. In contrast to the behaviouristic theory, the subjects' own interpretations of the elicited behaviour are taken into consideration (evident, for example, in the grammaticality judgement tasks). The information-processing models make a frequent use of the metaphors of input, output, short-term memory, long-term memory, storage of information, information retrieval, intake, and so on, familiar from computing terminology. Behind such metaphors is the assumption that mental processes are rule-governed; to run such rules one needs a mechanism resembling a computer.

The cognitive tradition also uses extensively generalizations based on the power of statistical procedures and the universality of rule-governed mental behaviours. Evident in the generalizations is the notion of an idealized human being placed in a homogeneous external reality speaking with one voice. While rich in relevant research findings and applications for FL teaching, the cognitive paradigm still assumes a reductionist view of the human learner as an impersonal, decontextualized individual who processes language data in solitude, as a kind of a complex information processor. As Riley points out, such a view bypasses the learner's self and social identity in interaction, referring to human brains rather to a person with an identity in a social context. (Riley 2003, 239–240; Johnson 2004, 11–15.)

2.3. Socioculturally oriented theories: the learner as a person. In sociocultural, socio-constructivist and experiential learning theories the learner is seen as a person consisting of a self with a social identity and as a member of and participant in a society and a culture. He/she has access to knowledge, power and resources and has an identity and a variety of contextual social roles. Philip Riley discusses the notion of individual identity in terms of a distinction between *self* and *person*. *Self* refers to individual, personal identity: what makes "me" as me, as opposed to all other individuals. *Person*, on the other hand, is a question of social identity: what makes this individual like other individuals in terms of shared characteristics, memberships and rights. It is the sum of all the

sub-groups to which the person belongs (e.g., man, woman/ child, teenager, adult, pensioner/ Catholic, Muslim, Lutheran/ Londoner, Parisian/ lawyer, welder, teacher/ speaker of Urdu, French, Arabic/ married, single, divorced/ and so on). The distinction is illustrated in Table 2 (Riley 2003).

Self: individual identity (which individual?)	Person: social identity (what sort of individual?)
Private, subjective	Public, social
Reported as "I"/"me"	Addressed as "you"
The agent of my own actions	A set of roles
Essential individual	Member of groups
Continuity of memory; Diachronic focus	Participant in interactions: Synchronic focus

Table 2. Individual and social identity (Riley 2003, 240).

As part of the social construction of identities, Philip Riley also discusses the notion of role as situationally relevant aspects of social identity. He defines the *role* as a "set of discursive positions, a socially warranted set of rights and duties (as well as responsibilities and competences) to perform certain categories of act" (Riley 2003, 241). A role implies the distribution of rights and duties and of the acts that realize them.

Roles are complementary in any dyad (such as teacher–pupil), with both the partners having their recognized duties in the particular relationship, e.g. the teacher to correct and evaluate pupils' performance. As Riley notes, "it takes two to tango": a teacher can only teach if the other social partners involved (such as the pupils, the school) recognize his/her right to do so and are willing to assume their roles. Pedagogical traditions are deeply embedded in the ways of thinking and behaving. Thus it requires a conscious effort for individuals to become aware of them, to be able to modify or change them. In cases of uncertainty or conflict, the participants need to negotiate their roles and the forms of their enactment.

In big educational changes such as promoting student autonomy, the teachers and the pupils need to redistribute their traditional rights and duties, shifting more responsibility to the pupils/students. As the teacher's and pupil's roles are complementary, it is not possible for one of the partners to make a unilateral declaration of independence as to his a her role; the new roles need to be negotiated and agreed upon. A social change in roles means that there is a change in who does, says, or decides what. The shift involves divesting the teacher of the obligation to perform certain acts (such as assessment of pupil performance) and establishing conditions where they can be performed competently by the pupils (self-assessment and peer assessment). Delegating

educational power to the pupils means that the pupils need to be facilitated to assume the new responsibilities and accept them as part of their evolving role identities. The new learning culture entails that new concepts are developed for classroom discourse in order to share the understandings and talk about the changed rights and duties in the emerging learning culture.

Jennifer Miller (2003, 25–30) discusses the paradigm shift from the cognitivist SLA research to socioculturally oriented research in terms of the shift from "language to discourse". She emphasizes that the discourse approach cannot be viewed in isolation from its cultural and social context. Further, as linguistic relations are social relations, they are also power relations. She points out that language learning entails mastering many languages, or sets of discursive practices involving notions of language, membership, culture and identity. Quoting Gee (1996, 127), discourses are "ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes" (quoted in Miller 2003, 26).

Discourse is a kind of identity kit for our linguistic repertoires to become recognizable to others through our communicative practices. Our knowledge of language is thus far more than a knowledge of words and how to combine them to form grammatical sentences. Through discourses, we construct and negotiate a range of identities to serve specific purposes, memberships and contexts. Miller notes that the discourse approach is in a sharp contrast to the notion of the language learner in much of the SLA theory, in which the learner has been constructed as "a kind of ahistoric stick figure, appearing without a past, existing outside of any social context" (Miller 2003, 27). She contrasts the fundamental concepts inherent in the SLA with the concepts underlying discourse approaches (noting, though, that they are not either/or propositions, but dimensions or continua). I present her comparison in Table 3 (Miller 2003).

SLA research: focus on decontextualized language as a linguistic system	Discourse: focus on contextualized language use as a complex process
1. 'Decodable' meanings	Situated, contextualized, and negotiated meanings
2. Cognitivist/ mentalist orientations	Social and contextual orientation
3. Focus on individual competence	Focus on competence realized socially through interaction
4. Native speaker as an idealized source of perfectly realized competence	Competence realized by all speakers to varying degrees in a range of social contexts
5. Native / non-native binary	Collaboration of all speakers in discourse
6. Standardized language as the goal	Standardized language as a myth
7. Neutral communicative contexts	Ideologically laden contexts with real consequences for participants

8. Focus on formal learning environments	Focus on discourse in a range of settings or social fields
9. Learner as 'subject'	Speaker as a social identity, enacted in particular social situations
10. Search for generalizable rules and methods	Understanding of the contingency of local contexts
11. Lack of an emic perspective	Centrality of participant perspectives
12. Focus on development of communicative competence	Focus on contextual and interactional dimensions of discourse
13. Good language learners can learn	Social hierarchies and structures impinge on learning
14. Difficulties predominate in studies	Consideration of communicative successes and agency; problems viewed as contingent social phenomena

Table 3. SLA research: from language to discourse (Miller 2003, 28)

The paradigm shift essentially involves moving away from the decontextualized figure of the learner (left column) towards a conceptualization in which all speakers and hearers are implicated. The discourse approach goes beyond the notion of the pupil as a deficient learner, to an appreciation that all language use varies and is contingent on social contexts, in increasingly multilingual and multicultural environments. I will discuss this prospect briefly in the following.

2.4. Intercultural learning entails a significant enhancement of the pupil's role identity, opening a new paradigm in foreign language education (see Table 1). It goes far beyond the linguistically oriented notion of communicative competence. Whereas communicative competence relates primarily to the individual's knowledge and skills in communicative situations, intercultural competence also focuses on the language user's personal and social identities and abilities. It emphasises the student's orientation to discourse *as a language user,* relating meaningfully to other persons in different contexts.

Pauli Kaikkonen (2001, 64–65) uses the metaphor of a *cultural shell* to discuss the personal significance of intercultural learning. As a result of the *socialisation process* in our own culture, we have all acquired certain, culture-specific beliefs, ways of categorizing the world around us. This also affects the ways in which we think of ourselves and relate to others. Such cultural patterns set certain limits to our behaviour, making us live in a kind of cultural shell. In view of the restrictions due to such a shell, Kaikkonen (2001, 64) points out that the "most important goal of foreign language education is to help learners grow out of the shell of their mother tongue and their own culture". This is a question of sensitising them to the diversity in languages and cultures and facilitating

them to make conscious observations about the native and foreign language and ways of behaving in cultural contexts.

Intercultural communicative competence is an action-oriented concept, suggesting the importance of assuming the courage to relate to otherness and foreignness in human encounters. To do so, we need to accept the ambiguity inherent in intercultural contacts and develop a respect for cultural diversity. As cross-cultural encounters are also a question of deep-rooted attitudes and emotions, becoming an intercultural language user clearly emphasises the central role of the affective elements in foreign and second language education. Intercultural learning thus entails an element of *personal growth* as a human being and as a language user (Byram 2003; Kaikkonen 2001; 2002; 2004).

2.5 Dialogue: identity development in interaction. In terms of the applied linguistic views of language and language use, Mikhail Bakhtin, a Soviet linguist and researcher of literature, emphasises the crucial role of *dialogue* in language development. Dialogue entails interaction. Bakhtin (1984, 293) notes that life by its very nature is dialogic: "To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask a question, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds." The individual's language and knowledge thus develops essentially in the social processes of human interaction whereby the child receives words, forms and tonalities, everything that pertains to him or her (Bakhtin 1986).

Mental knowledge is generated in the interaction of the child with the environment. Through this interaction the child receives information about the physical and social world around him. He/she has an *active role* in the process of constructing personal knowledge and meanings. The meanings are thus personal and subjective rather than absolute and objective. The individual construction of the meanings is shaped by the quality of interaction between the participants. Dialogue essentially entails an openness to and respect for the other person, encountering him or her as a unique person and being ready for genuine interaction and sharing of meanings. It also means openness to the subject matter at hand, aiming at understanding the diversity of views and opinions.

A dialogic interaction is about constructing common meanings in a relationship of *respect of otherness*. It means encountering the other as a genuine person and a subject, not as an object. This difference is discussed by Martin Buber (1923/1958) through two kinds of relationships: "I - Thou" and "I – it". The former is a relationship of mutuality between subjects as equal partners in conversation that embraces both *I* and *Thou,* while the latter refers to a relationship in which the other is treated as an object. In the process of objectivation, the individual is only identified with some socially assigned

typification and is apprehended as nothing but that type. This is the philosophical question of our conception of man: how we see the nature of man.

2.6 Experiential learning means the process of extracting personal meanings from experience through reflection. The basic tenet in experiential learning is that experience has a significant role in learning. Learning becomes *transformative* when an individual revises his or her beliefs, assumptions or expectations into qualitatively new ways of seeing the world. The process is *emancipatory* in the sense that the person feels free from forces that have constrained his or her options or have been taken for granted or seen as beyond control. Critical reflection is a key to learning from experience.

In experiential learning, immediate personal experience is the focal point for learning. As pointed out by David Kolb (1984, 21), personal experience gives the "life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts". At the same time it also provides "a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process". Experience alone is not, however, a sufficient condition for learning. Experiences also need to be processed consciously by reflecting on them. As Leo van Lier (1996, 11) points out, learning something requires that one *notices* it in the first place: "This noticing is an awareness of its existence, obtained and enhanced by paying attention to it. Paying attention is focusing one's consciousness, or pointing one's perceptual powers in the right direction, and making mental 'energy' available for processing". Learning is seen as a cyclic process integrating immediate experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and action. (Kohonen 2001; 2005.)

Experiential learning techniques include a number of interactive practices (such a personal journals and stories, portfolios, drama, visualisations, group discussions etc.) whereby the participants have opportunities to learn from each others' experiences, being actively involved in the process. They contain a common element of learning from immediate experience and engaging the student directly with the phenomenon, rather than hearing or reading about it.

A central tenet in experiential learning is that learning involves the pupil/student as a *whole person,* including the emotional, social, physical, cognitive and spiritual aspects of personality. Emotional state affects the pupil's capacity to learn. When we function as whole persons we have connection to ourselves, connection to other people and connection to a spiritual source of purpose and meaning in life. Prior learning is a resource for current and further learning. The capacity for learning increases when pupils understand themselves better as human beings. Such an understanding is fostered through collaboration and social interaction between the participants in a supportive community (Arnold 1999; Kohonen 2001; 2004b; 2005).

2.7 Sociocultural theory. The process of knowledge construction has also been discussed recently in the sociocultural theory of learning with an emphasis on interaction between the participants (Lantolf 2000; Breen 2001; Alanen 2003; Watson-Gegeo 2004; van Lier 2004). Lev Vygotsky (1978), an early precursor of the theory writing in the 1920/30s, emphasised social interaction as the basis for the development of higher-level mental activity of the individual. Through social, *interpsychological* action the individual is mediated to move to the individual, *intrapsychological* plane. He described this process of development using the metaphor of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), referring to the zone between the individual's actual and potential planes of development. Learning begins with what the child already knows and proceeds through social interaction.

In his definition of this highly influential concept, Vygotsky states that the ZPD is the distance between what a person can achieve when acting alone (actual development plane) and what the same person can accomplish when acting under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (potential development plane): "what a child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (Vygotsky 1978, 87). The tasks that pupils can do on their own are within their area of *self-regulation*. The development in the zone thus proceeds from *other-regulation* to *self-regulation,* from tasks carried out with the help of others to increasing self-regulation and autonomy (Wertsch 1991; van Lier 1996; Lantolf 2000; Alanen 2003).

The teacher has a significant role in *mediating* this development, but it can also be mediated by more capable peers in social interaction. Leo van Lier (1996, 192–94) makes an important observation, however, by pointing out that the progress of self-regulation is a complex phenomenon. It involves a variety of resources: (a) assistance from more capable peers or adults, (b) interaction with equal peers, (c) interaction with less capable peers ("learning by teaching"), and (d) inner resources (such as knowledge, experience, memory, strength, engagement). He suggests the notion of "multiple zones of proximal development" to describe the issues involved in the ZPD.

The process of facilitating the pupil to assume a more active role is also discussed by the American developmental psychologist Jerome Bruner (1983) through another influential metaphor, the notion of *scaffolding,* which is closely related to the ZPD. Bruner defines scaffolding as "a process of 'setting up' the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it." This is a question of the teacher doing appropriate pedagogical interventions to rectify the pupil's ineptitudes, and then removing the scaffold part by part as the reciprocal structure can stand on its own. (Bruner 1983, 60.)

Bruner's notion provides the dynamism of working within the ZPD. The teacher's scaffolding interventions provide specific contextual support for the student. The teacher structures them so as to create a safe (but still challenging) environment within which the pupil's participation is encouraged without being forced (and within which errors are allowed). The emphasis is on *mutual engagement,* and the teacher (or the parent) observes the child closely and watches for opportunities to hand over parts of the action to the child as soon as he or she shows signs of being ready for them. The actions are intertwined so that the interaction flows in a natural way. It is essential to develop a learning community in the class that enables the participants to open up their thinking to others in a dialogic process. The learning process is thus closely connected with the properties of dialogical interaction. (Alanen 2003; Bruner 1983; van Lier 1996, 194–96; 2004; Lehtovaara 2001; Little 2001; 2004; Kohonen 2004b.)

3 The CEFR as a resource in FL teaching

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR 2001) has laid a consistent emphasis on a broad learner-centred orientation in foreign language teaching aimed at plurilingualism, pluriculturalism and student autonomy. Closely associated with the CEFR, *The European Language Portfolio* (ELP) provides important concepts and tools for translating the new goals into pedagogic action. I will discuss these possibilities briefly in the following sections.

3.1. A note on the role of the language learner in the CEFR. The CEF presents an *action-oriented* notion of communication based on the language user's underlying *existential competence* whereby the language user is seen as a person. It suggests a view of the language learner as a whole human being who uses cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the wide range of abilities to achieve desired aims in communication. The individual identity of the learner is constructed through a complex social interaction, promoting student development as a whole personality in response to the enriching experiences of otherness in intercultural encounters.

Similarly, student autonomy is seen as developing in the interactive, dialogical process of learning to learn and learning to use language for authentic communication. The CEFR further emphasises the importance of initiative and social responsibility, seeing the language users as *social agents* who form personal relationships in social groups. As members of society, they have tasks to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action (CEFR 2001, 1–10).

The notion of *plurilingual and pluricultural competence* involves a complex, multiple language competence on which the language user may draw upon in

intercultural communication. Building intercultural communicative competence has a clear *socio-political* dimension in foreign language education: fostering student autonomy and *democratic citizenship* education. To promote such goals, modern language teaching should aim at developing working methods which will strengthen "independence of thought, judgement and action, combined with social skills and responsibility", as pointed out in the Second Summit of Heads of State (CEFR 2001, 2–4; Byram & Beacco 2002).

Such goals clearly involve a paradigm shift in FL teaching, moving from a mastery of languages in isolation to developing a person's plurilingual and pluricultural competence in which all languages interrelate and interact. As noted in the CEFR (2001, 5), the goal of FL language education can no longer be confined simply to the attainment of a given level of proficiency in a particular language at a certain point of time. The paradigm shift means a new significant challenge for language teachers to facilitate the students/language users to enhance their personal identities and their capacity for intercultural communication and cooperation as a lifelong pursuit (CEFR 2001; Byram 2003; Sjöholm 2005; Kaikkonen 2004; Kohonen 2004a). As the CEFR points out, the goal of language education is profoundly modified by such a prospect, and the "full implications of such a paradigm shift have yet to be worked out and translated into action" in FL education (CEFR 2001, 5).

3.2 The ELP as a tool to foster student autonomy. In accordance with the goals of the CEFR, he ELP is aimed at deepening mutual understanding among citizens in Europe, respecting the diversity of cultures and ways of life. It has two educational functions: (1) as a *pedagogical* tool*,* to help the students to organise, monitor and reflect on their FL learning processes and assess their proficiency using the criterion-referenced descriptors, thus facilitating them to become more skilled and autonomous language learners, and (2) as a *reporting* tool, to provide an instrument for reporting language proficienc*y* and intercultural experience to the relevant stakeholders. This distinction between the pedagogic and reporting functions of the ELP is vital for understanding the potential of the ELP for enhancing foreign language education.

In accordance with the goals of the CEFR, the ELP values the full range of the language user's language and intercultural competence and experience regardless of whether acquired within or outside formal education. It is intended to promote plurilingualism and pluriculturalism as well as learner autonomy, being the property of the learner. To work towards the aims, it encourages the student's self-assessment and the recording of assessment by teachers, educational authorities and examination bodies (Principles 2000). These aims entail that teachers facilitate their students to develop a stance of socially responsible language learning. Responsibility needs to be handed over gradually to the students, and they need to be encouraged to reflect on and assess their

learning and share their experiences. This means new roles for the teacher and the pupil/student, as noted by Riley (2003),

Through its dual function, the ELP opens a rich prospect for developing foreign language education. In this paper, I discuss only the role of the ELP in fostering the student's autonomy and personal engagement in learning. I will reflect on the main findings of the Finnish ELP pilot project (1998–2001) in terms of increasing students' ownership of their language learning. By introducing the students gradually to the reflective work and using it as a regular part of the ELP-oriented work, the project teachers and researchers aimed at strengthening their understanding of the new concepts and the meta-language of communication and self-assessment. The findings indicate that this approach was both feasible and possible in the Finnish context. The central finding of the project was that an understanding of the ELP goals and principles is prerequisite for promoting student ownership of their learning and their ELPs. (Kohonen 2002; 2004c; 2006.)

To promote student autonomy and engagement in learning, the language teacher needs to explain why she asks the students to assess and reflect on their learning and communicative skills and why she encourages them to assume an increasing responsibility for their work in the social classroom context. In the course of the three-year project, the teachers gave their students a large number of curriculum-related learning tasks that were open enough to leave space for real choices, as appropriate with respect to the students' age, learning skills and the level of proficiency in the given language (e.g., "My family/ home/ interests/ home town"; "My favourite music/ book/ movie" etc). Seeing options and reflecting on the processes and outcomes and making new action plans were essential components for developing increasingly autonomous learning and student ownership in ELP-oriented language learning.

Negotiating (at least part of) the curriculum aims, contents and processes with the students helped them to assume more responsibility for their learning, incrementally, in small steps. Having options entails personal choices about how to set the aims and make the action plans. The plans need to specify the time frame for the work to be done: agreeing on the deadlines for consulting and turning in the completed samples of work; agreeing on the contents to include in the reports, and on the expected outcomes, possibly with (minimum) requirements for acceptable work (e.g. in terms of the length of the report and the range of topics to be dealt with, the quality of the language and the ways of presenting the work, whether written or spoken). (Kohonen 2002; 2004c; 2006.)

The ELP-oriented work gave students plenty of opportunities to assume responsibility for their work. They learned to set their aims, make choices about the contents, monitor the work and assess the outcomes. Assessment was done both individually and as peer-assessment whereby the peers provided comments

and assessed each other's samples of work in small cooperative groups. The findings indicate that a large number of students were gradually assuming more responsibility for their learning and also contributed positively in the group sessions. Their experiences of being able to do so were personally important learning outcomes, supporting their engagement and increasing their ownership of the work. However, there were also some students who clearly preferred more teacher-directed teaching, resisting the whole idea of autonomy and self-assessment. They saw it as a waste of time and besides too laborius and time-consuming to do (Kohonen 2004c; 2006).

To clarify the use of educational power in the classroom, it is useful to make the distinction between two kinds of classroom rules: *codes of behaviour* and *ground rules* (Brandes & Ginnis 1986, 197–200). The former are traditional School Rules, containing sanctions and threats of punishment. Such orders and rules are spelled out by words like *must, should* and *do not.* They are usually implemented without any consultation or negotiation with the students. By contrast, *ground rules* refer to the rights and responsibilities that are negotiated and agreed upon between pupils and staff, and they apply to all participants alike. They provide a basis for reminding everybody about their agreements, and they are also open to change (and exceptions) if necessary. They establish trust between the participants and are usually expressed in positive terms, referring to the kind of behaviour that is agreed upon (e.g. *"In this school we listen to each other"*).

In ELP-oriented pedagogy teachers negotiate the ground rules with the students concerning such matters as the working procedures, requirements for acceptable work, cooperative group work, appreciation of everybody's work, deadlines, and assessment criteria and procedures. In making the decisions the teacher gives space to the students' ideas, initiatives, interests and expectations, within the frame of her own course/lesson plans and the site-based curricula. She encourages and invites active student participation at all stages of the work. In negotiated learning students feel that they have an element of choice, control and initiative in the decisions concerning their work – in Bakhtinian words, they have a "voice" in the classroom. Having a voice also means the feeling of being heard and seen in the class, being treated as a person. Developing students' voices involves consistency, integrity and respect, and the recognition of their achievements (van Lier 1996, 19; Kohonen 2002; 2004b; 2006).

The ELP pilot project brought up the importance of social learning when the students presented their individual samples of work to their peers in groups and gave and received comments. Students generally found interactive learning motivating and helpful. The interplay of such *socially mediated motivation* and the development of student autonomy is also emphasised by Ema Ushioda (2003) in her theory of motivation as a socially mediated process. She argues

that motivation must basically come from within the student and be self-regulated rather than regulated by others. Social-interactive group processes play a crucial role in encouraging the growth of *intrinsic* motivation, suggesting the importance of the quality of the interaction between the individual and the social learning setting. Belonging to a group creates a sense of social relatedness that promotes student autonomy. The findings of the Finnish ELP project provide evidence of the importance of involving the students as responsible partners in the social learning process. Involvement and engagement clearly support the feeling of ownership of one's learning (Little 2001; 2004).

Promoting students' ownership of their learning is a question of finding a suitable balance between the different individual and contextual factors – and realizing that such a balance is a variable property from one student to another. Further, ownership also changes as students grow up, become more skilled as learners and make progress in their language proficiency. This means that the teacher needs to develop a knowledge and understanding of students as individuals, and adjust the balance of her scaffolding efforts as far as possible within the constraints of frequently big language classes.

The teachers in the Finnish ELP project noted that the ELP tasks and working procedures gave them opportunities to get to know their students better as persons with their individual home backgrounds, interests, hopes and expectations in life. Such knowledge helped them to motivate and guide their students better and comment on their specific progress on the basis of the concrete evidence at hand in the portfolio. Students found the personal tutoring moments and individual comments by the teacher very useful and important. The personal contacts with the students were often rewarding experiences for the teachers as well. As noted by an upper secondary teacher, the tutoring moments were "pearls in the ELP-oriented work". The teacher's personal commitment to the ELP was very important to the students and supported their engagement in the work. (Kohonen 2004c; 2006.)

4 Discussion: building the road as we travel

The educational beliefs of the participants shape their role expectations in school. Being unconscious and covert, such expectations and beliefs easily remain unnoticed and are kind of taken for granted. In this sense they can exercise a powerful *invisible influence* on the learning/teaching culture in the social contexts of foreign language education. By learning culture I understand the shared assumptions and understandings about the ways things are done in an institutional context.

The kind of discourse we use in discussing salient concepts in language teaching affects our perceptions and thinking about of the phenomena in

important ways. In the middle of the busy daily events we may not be able to take the time to think about the underlying implications contained in the professional concepts. We may be unaware of their impact on our conduct in the classrooms. Our perceptions tend to shape the ways in which we relate to the phenomena in our classrooms. Through our educational practices, our beliefs of language teaching and learning will inevitably shape our pupils' images of language teaching and learning.

As teachers we need to realise that our *conception of man* is inherent and embedded in our educational practices whether we are aware of it or not. Our lesson plans and methods inevitably presuppose some perspective from which we view learning, our teaching and students, the human beings to whom we teach languages. Our teaching methods are an inseparable part of our conception of man. As Jorma Lehtovaara points out, our methods are our *philosophy of praxis*. He argues further that we need genuine contemplative thinking based on a lived and personally experienced open dialogue in the spirit of a humanistic-scientific approach. We need to clarify our educational stance and make our implicit conception of man more explicit by asking questions such as: what is it – being human? What is the meaning of that for *me?* How can *I* approach a person's way of being-in-the-world so that I let it be what he or she experiences it to be? To what extent can and dare another person manifest himself or herself as he or she inherently is in *my* presence? (Lehtovaara 2001, 157-58).

Dialogue in teaching means thus meeting the pupil as a partner in a reciprocal relationship, accepting and respecting his/her individuality and otherness while aiming at shared understandings and common meanings. In such a pedagogical stance the teacher aims at authenticity in human encounter, relating to the pupils as persons with their own identities and being himself/herself a genuine person. The teacher who has assumed such a relationship encourages his/her students to strive for authenticity in their language learning experiences. This involves consistency, integrity and respect, and the recognition of their achievements (van Lier 1996,19; Lehtovaara 2001; Jaatinen 2001; 2003; Kohonen 2004a).

Using the familiar image of orienteering, we need a map to guide our physical exercise, indicating where we need to go – and we must also be able to read and interpret the map with understanding. If there is a mismatch between the map and the terrain (e.g., due to a dated map) we must be able to recover from the information gap and trust our interpretation of the terrain. We need to be able to make sensible choices of alternative routes and courses of action; and we must have persistence and physical fitness to complete the task.

Language students also need the big picture, or a map, of their learning tasks to guide the work of putting together the pieces in the different disciplines

and across the curriculum. This is a question of negotiating the curriculum contents and processes with the learners and helping them to grasp the educational goals for themselves. In terms of language learning, it is helpful for them to realize where they stand in relation to the goals of the different language competences (CEFR 2001), what progress they have made, and what are some of the next steps to take on their long journey. They need to see optional courses of action and make personal choices, taking responsibility for the decisions. Seeing options, making choices, reflecting on the consequences and making new action plans are essential elements for the development of autonomous language learning.

As language teachers we have an important role in what kind of a journey our student have in their language learning efforts, how they experience their foreign language learning in our classes. Their experiences, in turn, shape their views of their roles in the language teaching–learning process. The ways in which we organize classroom learning, in turn, are likely to impinge on the outcomes of language learning, in a wide sense of the notion. Students are a significant resource, a prerequisite, for self-directed, responsible learning aimed at student autonomy. This is why we need to be mindful about the language we use for talking about language learning and how we guide the use of the student resource in pedagogically wise ways – or, to speak with Riley (2003), what kind of "cloth" we are weaving together in language education.

Talking about the language "learner" entails, for me, a notion of deficiency and shortcoming in relation to the learning task: learner language is seen only as an insufficient and deficient version of the native speaker's competence. It suggests a kind of rainbow view of language learning whereby the goal is somewhere there, over the rainbow, glittering at the far-away end of the rainbow. By having persistence, the learner should some day be able to reach this goal and enjoy communication in the target language. Besides, the notion also seems to entail a reduced view of the human being struggling with the intimidating task, as an object of more or less teacher-centred teaching, with reduced rights and obligations. We need to recognize the significance of the students' own contributions to their language learning and facilitate them to take charge of their learning, in order to enhance their autonomy as language students and language users. Through the use of the notions of *language user, pupil, student* and *participant* (and also the *learner,* in relation to a learning task at hand), we can gradually depict a new kind of picture of the "learner" as language student and a language user, and as a human being who has a voice and personal identity in our language classrooms and SLA research.

The paradigm shift I have outlined in this paper suggests that autonomous language learning needs to be based on an interactive, dialogical approach. It integrates dialogical, experiential and sociocultural theories of learning and

aims at building a community of the participants. It entails a purposeful design and facilitation of human growth that touches the student as a whole person. It emphasises meaningful learning that is based on personal experience and reflection. I use the term *foreign language education* to refer to such a pedagogical approach. It involves the following principles (Kohonen 2001; 2004a):

1. The student's own goals and autonomy
2. Personal engagement in learning
3. Student initiative and responsibility
4. Meaningful learning as a whole person approach
5. Emphasis on reflection, interaction and self-assessment
6. Integration of social and affective learning with cognitive goals

The ELP offers a significant pedagogical tool for enhancing foreign language education in terms of both the learning contents, processes and the outcomes of learning. It helps to make the learning processes more concrete and observable, and thus, more comprehensible, transparent and visible to the students, teachers and stakeholders of school. Visible aims are negotiable and accessible to conscious monitoring and reflection. This is a question of facilitating students to become more reflective about their learning processes and outcomes in connection with their ELP tasks.

Beliefs can be seen cultural tools and mediational means in teaching, providing a link between an educational action and the socio-cultural context in which such action occurs. Through our educational discourse and our stance as educators, we build the road of language learning as we travel along it together with our pupils and students. To engage them in their journey, we might encourage them to see themselves as language users right from the beginning, just as children do when they acquire their first language as a means of their self-expression and making sense of the world around them. Beliefs on language teaching and learning are powerful in mediating and guiding student learning in our classes. As teachers we might use our understanding of them in helping out students progress towards the goals of autonomous language users and a social actors in the contexts of their working lives and private lives.

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