



Workshop on language awareness in subject classes: why to participate?

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The ECML -project called « Developing language awareness in subject classes » will have its first workshop in Graz, Austria 16-17 November 2017. The workshop is targeted at teachers and teacher educators working with 12/13-year-old migrant learners. The aim of the workshop is to gather experiences and best practices from teachers coming from different educational contexts but having in common the need to find ways to support students who have learning problems due to their insufficient skills in the language of schooling.

Some case studies have already been carried out within the project. The aim of these has been to collect some background information and material, which could then be used as a basis for the November workshop. To illustrate the nature of information and teacher experiences the workshop is looking for, a short summary of a small-scale case study is listed below. The study was conducted in five Swedish-speaking schools in Finland and consists of six teacher interviews. The teachers (5 females, 1 male) were asked to orally discuss the questions presented in the online questionnaire (<http://languageinsubjects.questionpro.com/>) taking examples from their own classes.

Summary of the Finnish case study

The interviewed six teachers' work experience varied between 4-16 years. They were all working as class teachers, i.e. in general they taught all school subjects, except sports, music, visual arts, and handicrafts. They all had only sporadic experience with migrant students in their own classes and they therefore felt that they would need a lot of guidance to prepare for the possibly changed situation in the future. One teacher gave as an example a 'Five steps' guidebook, which could be useful to get started.

In the Swedish speaking schools in Finland, there are no preparatory courses for immigrant students. The students have, however, a possibility to get two hours individual language tutoring per week. As approximately half of the interviewed teachers' students were from Swedish and Finnish speaking families, both languages were used during the school days. In lessons, Swedish was to be preferred; during the breaks, students also used a lot of Finnish to interact with peers. Consequently, the students could draw on more than one common language in their learning, which was certainly a resource also for the teacher.

What were the main language difficulties?

The students' main problems were, according to the teachers, in reading comprehension. For example, in a longer history text, the purpose of the text may remain unclear even though the student could read out the text quite fluently. Comprehension problems are difficult to detect as the student may, for example, speak fluently with their classmates.

The students' language difficulties became apparent particularly in understanding longer texts and when asked to summarize the text in own words. The teachers reported that it might be easy for the students to use concepts in speech without really understanding their meaning. One teacher mentioned, as an example, that as a result of not understanding the meaning of a concept students may connect concepts with certain subjects and then, in another context, use the concept in an erroneous way. There are also some differences between subjects. For example, in mathematics, some concepts are repeated year after year thus becoming easier to understand (e.g. to add, to multiply). In history, by contrast, there is not so much repetition as the texts progress in a more chronological way.

In addition to reading comprehension, language problems also appear in writing. The students' texts may be quite free of errors but still lack 'depth' because the vocabulary they use is quite basic, consists of simple words, and lacks nuances. In examinations students may sometimes notice that they cannot express something in the language of schooling but have to use their stronger language (in this case Finnish).

Problems in speaking appear above all when the student should produce something orally quickly and spontaneously. In conclusion, the teachers interviewed thought that problems in speaking and writing are generally noticed right away while those in understanding are harder to detect.

How to support the students with language problems?

To start with, the teachers stressed the importance of having at least one common language, for example English. Gradually, learning becomes easier by doing things with the language. For the student, it is important to feel secure and to be able to express their feelings also through the language of schooling. Also for the teacher it is a kind of 'safety factor' to know that the students ask every time they do not understand something.

One of the cornerstones in all learning is to learn and understand subject specific concepts. For example in mathematics the tasks consisting of a text are considered difficult because there are many concepts, which are not necessarily used in everyday language. Therefore contextualizing a word is important; one should not use words one does not fully understand.

To introduce new concepts, the teachers usually make lists of words and then explain the concepts in their own words and using synonyms. This is usually done before the new text is even introduced. When working on a new text, the teacher may then check the level of comprehension by asking simple questions about the text. In the next phase, the words may be contextualised through the students' own phrases. Sometimes pictures are a valuable way to make things clearer if there is no common language. Students are also eager to search for difficult words in the Internet and in dictionaries. Sometimes referring to a corresponding word in another language may help to open up the meaning of a new concept.

In Finland, special study materials have been developed for migrant students. This material which is in plain language is, according to one teacher, often almost too simple, not only in relation to the language but also to the content. That is why the teacher may sometimes rewrite chapters in the mainstream textbooks by trying to make them linguistically easier. S/he may also ask other students who have good language skills to do so, thereby allowing him/her to get also more practice in subject specific language.

It is important to keep in mind that not only academic concepts may cause problems but also words like 'at least', 'in particular', 'as a matter of fact', may be difficult to understand. Another thing is that not only is the language a problem, but also the culture. The students' cultural background may make it difficult for them to understand certain concepts. One teacher gave as an example the words 'beefsteak' and 'hunting', which may have different cultural meanings. Difficulties in understanding may be due to the fact that the students' skills in L1 are also weak.

At the level of the school, it would be important to promote cooperation between teachers. One could, for example, have the same theme addressed simultaneously in various school subjects.

Role of the home and family

One big problem according to the teachers is that parents cannot always support the student's language development at home because of their own lack of skills. In addition, the student may rarely use the language of schooling outside the school if he/she does not have other opportunities, such as hobbies, to use it.