

Place?
1980?

RECENT TRENDS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE TEACHING POLICY IN FINLAND
Will be read in English

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Scope of language teaching

In a bilingual country, whose official language (Finnish and Swedish) have very limited or no use in handling contacts with other nations, language teaching obviously must be taken seriously. This national need combined with increasing concern with equality of educational opportunity in terms of curricular offerings has contributed to making second and foreign language studies a natural and substantial part of every pupil's and student's study programme in Finland.

During grades 3 through 6 language teaching takes about 8 per cent of all class time, during the last three grades of compulsory education it takes 16 to 20 per cent of all lessons, and in the academic upper secondary school the percentage of language learning increases to 30 - 45 depending on the study programme. Language teaching will also be extended to all branches of vocational education in the pending reform. Language learning is also compulsory in higher education and it is one of the most popular subjects in adult education.

Need of models in language teaching

There is a growing trend in educational research and in language teaching to view education as a social organization and institution which serves some fundamental social desires, needs and functions (eg. Bidwell et al. 401-430). Language teaching is expanding and this leads to it acquiring more and more clearly characteristics of any institutionalized process. Language teaching is becoming more and more organized, which means that various roles and role relationships within it are specified in greater detail. It is becoming more systematic, which implies that tasks in language teaching are specified also in greater detail. Language teaching is becoming more stabilized, which means that it is not dependent on particular individuals to take place. Language teaching is not only the activity of individual teachers. It is a system of activities at several levels. In order to understand language teaching in all its complexity we must be aware of its various levels and subsystems and their interrelationships. We must also relate language teaching to its broader educational and societal context.

Education and language teaching are so complex as organizations and institutional processes that we need models (1) to help us understand and explain how they function, (2) to guide and inform our thinking, planning and actions without determining them in detail, (3) to help us evaluate their performance without making conceptual errors of levels of aggregation in our analyses and to make required changes, and (4) to help us foresee future problems and developments.

The need for such macrolevel analysis and for a national policy for language teaching became more and more obvious in the 1970's in Finland. Dissatisfaction with frequent, essentially ad hoc, decisions concerning language teaching led to the setting up in 1977 by the Ministry of Education of national commission, which submitted its unanimous report in February 1979.

The Numminen Commission made an attempt to define a number of models in order to get a better grasp of its own role and tasks and also to serve as a basis for subsequent committees and working parties set up to outline more detailed plans and curricula. The commission used a systems approach, since it viewed language teaching as a system of many activities at many levels and by many parties involved in the undertaking.

Firstly, drawing on the models outlined by Stern 1974 and Strevens 1977 and others the Commission constructed a model of the national language teaching system. The model describes formal, school-based language teaching consisting of five levels: societal level (language needs and societal support in the form of language policy), school system level (organization, administration, traditions), curricular level (general approach or strategy), teaching level (tactical implementation of the curriculum) and language learning level (degree to which the curriculum is, in fact, realized). Evaluation data are mainly collected from the teaching and learning levels to provide feedback to all other levels as well.

Secondly, the Commission attempted to outline a model of continuity and progression in language teaching and learning, since one of recurrent problems in language teaching is lack of clear articulation and coordination between various levels and types of schools. This was done drawing mainly on the work done by Wilkins 1978 and Trim 1978 within the Council of Europe unit/credit language teaching system. This description was complemented by describing the role of each type of school in language teaching and the division of tasks between them.

Thirdly, the Commission outlined a model of quantitative and qualitative targets of language proficiency in Finland. This was an attempt - based on need assessments and judgement - to define what proportion of the adult population in the future should know what particular languages and how well. The quantitative target would mean that every adult Finn would in the future have a varying degree of knowledge of two or more languages (average 2,5 languages). Two languages would be the minimum consisting of the other official language of the country and of one world language.

Fourthly, since the Commission saw as its task to provide a general framework for more detailed planning over the next 20 to 30 years, it made an attempt to develop a macrolevel model of a general policy for the development of language teaching in Finland. Starting with a definition of the general aim of language teaching policy (Language teaching must satisfy the needs in modern languages in Finland) it defined what demands are set on language teaching by general social and educational policy (25 demands of the type "Needed knowledge of languages must be produced effectively", "Language teaching must take into account individual capabilities and motivations") and end up with 13 recommendations about means for meeting the demands and realizing the overall aim of language teaching.

References

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