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The Theme:

The multicultural foreign language classroom

An arena for democratic experiences

The theme of the conference and of this issue of *Utbildning & Demokrati* (Education & Democracy), i.e., *The multicultural foreign language classroom: an arena for democratic experiences* indicates that there may be other questions at stake in foreign language teaching and learning today than until quite recently. Research into language pedagogy has usually been considered in terms of language learning and acquisition with its main focus on how the development of linguistic skills could be made more effective, and on how these skills might be assessed and evaluated. Thus, since the main field of inquiry has been skill development, learning and teaching objectives have so far been taken more or less for granted.

However, a shift of emphasis in language pedagogy research is now discernible, internationally as well as among Swedish researchers, a shift that opens up possibilities of multidisciplinarity by bringing to the fore issues of meaning making processes, intersubjectivity and communicative action, and relating language education and its political implications to questions of sociocultural context, identity, personal experiences and democracy. This shift of focus is quite obvious in all the keynote contributions presented here, although they also express voices from different "cultural" contexts and different points of departure. In other words: although the theme of the conference is the focus of all the contributions, it is interpreted in many different ways.

The first contribution, by Sangeeta Bagga-Gupta, with the title *Challenging understandings in pluralistic societies – language and culture loose in school sites, and losing sight of democratic agendas in education?*, problematizes the dominant and selective traditions within education of

categorizing language in linear, relational and geographical terms, thus disregarding the fact that the majority of people in the world are multilingual and that languages tend to be domain specific in the lives of these multilingual human beings, rather than organized in terms of, for example, "Swedish as a second language", "Swedish as a second language for the deaf", "mother tongue" and "foreign language". The language policy paradox of the 20th century, she argues, makes us waste our ethnic language resources while deploring our lack of foreign language proficiency. However, according to Bagga-Gupta, there is also a "cultural policy paradox" to be discussed. This paradox highlights the social practice of focusing on our needs of access to international, cultural resources, on the one hand, and, on the other, understanding the cultural resources within the country as a problem. From her sociocultural research perspective she draws the conclusion that language and cultural categories need to be freed from the constraints of traditional learning theories and traditional ways of understanding development, and that human attributes become meaningful only within the context of everyday interaction.

The next text, by Claire Kramsch, titled *The language teacher as go-between*, discusses some challenges to language teachers and language teacher educators against the background of the multilingual and multicultural environments of the globalized world that we are all part of today. "Gone are the days", she writes, "where teachers could hide behind rules of grammar and the discipline of dictations to get students to learn the language". However, gone are also the days when it was considered enough to rely on the standard national communicative and cultural knowledge of the native speaker, since the symbols of national identity have today become multiple, hybrid, conflictual and changing. Thus, the challenge to language teachers will be that they should become more critical and more socially, culturally and politically aware of questions that concern identity formation, and of how their teaching may be linked to the lives and desires of their students. Furthermore, Kramsch argues, foreign language education today may be conceived of as being at the intersection of the major political issues of our time, i.e. at the often conflict-laden intersection of global and local dimensions of language teaching. This means, among other things, that the teacher must be prepared to ask big questions, to engage world views that may be different from his or her own, and to discuss all kinds of meanings that are expressed through language and discourse. The language teacher as a "go-between" is finally illustrated by an excerpt from a telecollaborative project involving German and American students who were supposed to write to

one another for the purpose of developing their inter-cultural competence. Eventually, the communication between the German girl and the American boy in the excerpt breaks down in misunderstanding and disappointment. With the help of a teacher as cross-cultural mediator, as a go-between, according to Kramsch, some of these misunderstandings would at least have been clarified and perhaps even made educative, although they might not have been avoided.

In the next text, written by Hans-Jürgen Krumm, and with the title *Heterogeneity: multilingualism and democracy,* the European context is the point of departure. Although migration processes during the last 30 years have contributed to increasing multilingualism and to the development of multilingual identities even in "monolingual" countries such as France and Germany, there are clear tendencies towards linguistic hegemony within the European Union. Whereas English and French are the dominant languages, other languages are losing in importance. One of the points that Krumm makes is that if linguistic diversity is made invisible in public or in the educational system, it may lead to suppression and antidemocratic assimilation and to an increased (negative) awareness of the contrasts between cultures and people of different religious, historical and value backgrounds, which, in the end, may lead to the revival of racism. Alluding to the same paradox as Bagga-Gupta, Krumm argues that whereas societies become more international, they seem to lose their ability to deal with difference, foreignness and heterogeneity. In one of his research projects Krumm collected linguistic portraits of children, asking them to colour a silhouette to create a portrait of their languages. Some of these portraits demonstrate the importance of the mother tongue, which is often painted in the heart area with bright and warm colours. However, the portraits also show that many of these children have developed multilingual and multiple identities, that they belong to different language and communication spheres at the same time. Not taking the existing multilingualism in society into account, for example in language education, is a contradiction to our understanding of participation and democracy, Krumm argues. Since Europe is multilingual, both taken as a whole and with respect to individual countries, the sense of belonging to Europe and of participating in its democratic processes depends on the ability to communicate, not only in one language but in many.

The contribution of Leo van Lier, titled *The semiotics and ecology of language learning – perception, voice, identity and democracy,* outlines the principles of an ecological approach to language learning, relating it to the promotion of democratic learning processes in the classroom. Since

language is always about something, it might as well be about something of consequence to the learners, van Lier points out (cf. Tornberg's text, this volume). Furthermore, the development of a "dually compatible identity" that links the self to reality requires a voice in that language, as well as having both the right to speak and the right to be heard. Drawing on Basil Bernstein's work on pedagogical discourse and his distinction between macro and micro levels of pedagogical systems, van Lier places the ecological perspective of learning at the micro end of the pedagogical scale since it concerns democracy building from the bottom up, focusing on the personal and interactional level within dialogical processes of action and learning. The ecological perspective, being a world view rather than a particular model of research or teaching and leaning, is concerned with the ways in which we conduct our lives and relate it to others and to the environment. It includes a non-passive relationship between the language user and the environment where the development of political perspectives is part of the learning process. Van Lier arrives at the conclusion that a focus on ecological processes in the classroom may awaken in students and teachers a spirit of inquiry and reflection that in the end may lead to joint democratic actions in the community.

In the text by David Little, titled *Democracy, discourse and learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom,* three pedagogical principles related both to learner autonomy and democracy, are the focus of discussion. These interdependent principles – learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use, i.e., communication in the target language only – are demonstrated through three very different examples of language pedagogy, where, nevertheless, a fourth characteristic may also be found. Little points out that at the same time as the learners' individuality is fully acknowledged, each of them also contributes to the learning of peers, individual knowledge explicitly becoming part of the learning resources for the whole group. In other words: the development of individual autonomy in language learning and use is a consequence of engagement in reciprocal discourse. Here Little finds a connection with John Dewey's pedagogical philosophy and the particular social ideal that he brings to the fore. Although there is a certain circularity in the statements that learner autonomy implies a political challenge and that democracy in education implies participation, exchange and empowerment, Little argues that Dewey's concept of democracy and learner autonomy both have their origin in human nature, in our need of connectedness and reciprocity and our inborn capacity for intersubjectivity and dialogue. Democracy in education, then, has to do with respect for the individual's

rights and freedoms and implies reciprocity and interdependence. Thus, Little concludes, the pursuit of learner autonomy and the pursuit of democracy in education are one and the same. Furthermore, by developing learner autonomy in language classrooms, we may also develop the foundations for educational, cultural and social exchange both within a community and internationally.

The last text, "*Multiculturalism" – a dead end in conceptualizing difference, or an open-ended approach to facilitating democratic experiences in the foreign language classroom?*, is written by Ulrika Tornberg. Taking the theme of the conference as a point of departure, Tornberg argues that different conceptions of multiculturalism and culture may have different implications for contingent, multi-vocal communication and deliberation in the language classroom. If culture is understood mainly in ethnic and national terms, cultural differences will be reduced to something that people "have" and be limited to their background experiences. By conceiving of culture as on-going processes of narratives and negotiations about identities, respect and equality across and beyond all kinds of cultural borders, a third, discursive space may be constituted where the hybrid co-construction of a shared interest allows for deliberative communication to take place and democratic experiences to be made even in a language classroom. This, however, challenges a selective tradition within language pedagogy, i.e., that languages first have to be learnt before they can be used, resting content with communicative exercises for the time being and postponing all "real" communication to an uncertain future. However, language is always about something (cf. van Liers' contribution in this volume) and may as well be about how to co-construct a space of shared interest through the involvement of a plurality of cultural identities and their narratives. This implies, of course, that language learners are viewed as speakers in their own right even as they develop the language they are learning. The multicultural condition, Tornberg concludes, may be seen as an aspect of the human condition in which, according to Hannah Arendt we are all unique newcomers to the world, with the capacity of taking the initiative and, thus, by beginning something anew through communicative action, contributing to change.

Ulrika Tornberg