Teachers’ Attitudes, Knowledge and Skills in Respect to the Language Awareness Approach

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ABSTRACT

This article will present findings from the DELA-NOBA project. During the project, quantitative and qualitative data from the participating teachers from pilot schools in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Sweden were collected to investigate the participating teachers’ attitudes, knowledge and skills and experiences of using language awareness activities in teaching. Based on teacher cognition as theoretical and methodological framework, the authors will present data from the teachers’ survey at the beginning of the project, the teachers’ interim survey and the focus group interviews at the end of the project.

KEYWORDS

Baltic Countries, Language Awareness, Nordic Countries, Plurilingual Awareness, Plurilingualism, Professional Development Project, Students’ Learning, Teacher Cognition

INTRODUCTION

Within educational research, there is a consensus that teachers are the main key to student learning. This of course also applies to the field of plurilingual education. Haukås, for instance, claims that “the language teacher is the key facilitator of learners’ multilingualism” (Haukås, 2016, p. 2) and Lasagabaster and Huguet emphasize in respect to learners’ attitudes towards language diversity:

Language attitudes are learnt and, therefore, educators play a paramount role in their formation to such an extent that attitudes formed under educator influence may be extremely difficult to change (Lasagabaster & Huguet, 2007, p. 1).

This article will present findings from the three-year Nordplus Horizontal Project Developing the Language Awareness Approach in the Nordic and Baltic Countries (DELA-NOBA, 2013-2016; for a detailed presentation of the project see Daryai-Hansen, Layne & Tonello, 2018). In the DELA-NOBA project, the Language Awareness Approach is defined as one of three main approaches within the field of plurilingual education. In French the approach is called “Eveil aux langues” (Candelier, 2003). In English, different terms have been proposed, among others “Awakening to languages”, “Plurilingual Language Awareness” and “Language Awareness through a pluralistic approach”. In this article, the term Language Awareness (LA) is used, but the authors stress the fact that in this
project the pupils’ language awareness is not developed based on a singular approach, “taking account of only one language or a particular culture, and dealing with it in isolation” (Candelier et al., 2007, p. 7). E.g. Standard French in the French classroom. The DELA-NOBA project developed the pupils’ language awareness through a pluralistic approach, i.e. “using teaching/learning activities involving several (i.e. more than one) varieties of languages or cultures” (Ibid.). In the project a diversity of languages that normally are not taught at schools were included, among them the students’ first languages (for a more elaborated definition of the LA approach see Daryai-Hansen, Layne & Tonello, 2018, and Candelier & Kevran, 2018).

The project established a collaboration between nine researchers and thirteen primary and secondary school teachers from schools in the seven participating Nordic and Baltic countries. The participating teachers and schools were chosen by the researchers. In the first year, the teachers implemented and evaluated existing LA teaching activities in their lessons. Based on their experiences, they created in the second year new teaching activities for the Nordic/Baltic context in order to increase their pupils’ language awareness through a pluralistic approach (the project’s teaching materials are collected on the project’s website: http://www.delanoba.com). As regards the teachers, the DELA-NOBA project can be characterized as a longer professional development project, i.e. “a process by which, alone and with others, teachers ... acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice.” (Day, 1999, p. 4; Borg, 2015).

The DELA-NOBA project collected data from both students, parents and teachers, and in this article the focus is on the teacher data. During the project, quantitative and qualitative data from the participating teachers were collected through the use of written questionnaires and focus group interviews. Based on teacher cognition as the theoretical and methodological framework, findings from the teachers’ pre-survey, interim survey and focus group interviews at the end of the project are presented in order to investigate the participating teachers’ attitudes, knowledge and skills with regard to the implementation and development of LA activities. The following questions are addressed: What was the teachers’ starting point? How did the teachers’ attitudes, knowledge and skills develop based on their experiences during the project, and how can the interplay between the students’ learning and the teachers’ professional development be characterized?

In the following sections a discussion of how the field of teacher cognition was applied in our project is presented along with an explanation of the research design and methodological approach. This is followed by a discussion of the main findings from the prequestionnaire, the interim questionnaire and the final focus group interviews.

**TEACHER COGNITION**

The field of teacher cognition, the groundwork for which was laid in the late 1990s (Borg, 2003), directs the attention from teaching practices (What are teachers doing?) and students’ learning processes (Is this working?) to the “complexity of teachers’ mental lives” (Borg, 2003; Henriksen, 2014). The field is, as Borg points out, substantiated by the assumption that “teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs” (Ibid., p. 81).

In his ground-breaking article from 2003, Borg reviews 64 studies and concludes that “the study of teacher cognition is generally characterised by a multiplicity of labels” (Borg, 2003, p. 83). The “definitional confusion” in Eisenhart et al.’s (1988, as cited in Borg, 2003, p. 83) terminology, is still striking today, even in respect to the main research interests within the field. In 1997, Borg recapped nine central concepts: teachers’ “beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, metaphors, conceptions, perspectives” (Borg, 1997, as cited in Borg, 2003, p. 82). In 2015, the list is reduced: Borg and Sanchez talk about “teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Borg & Sanchez, 2015, p. 188) and cement the main research questions of the field as follows: “What
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