

KJELL RINDAR

ON LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

My intention with this article is to give a short and concentrated idea of how language learning is seen today and how this is reflected in the description of language learning by the Council of Europe.

Communicative language teaching

has been dominating for almost 30 years. Books for language teaching do not any more contain phrases motivated merely or mostly by the introduction of a certain grammatical problem. Such phrases sound and are artificial, not mirroring natural use of language. This becomes especially obvious in dialogues constructed to elucidate flexion of verbs or other grammatical phenomena, for example:

- Čerstina: Bet tagad mēs esam Rīgā. Es gribu apskatīt Rīgu! Anders, vai tu arī gribi apskatīt Rīgu?
Anders: Jā, es gribu apskatīt Rīgu.
Juris: Labi, mēs tagad esam Rīgā un gribam apskatīt Rīgu.¹

Today most books of language teaching have dialogues, which are natural. The aim of a lesson is described as to its communicative situation but also in terms of grammar:

Adónde vas? /Where are you going?/

Ask and understand what time something happens verb *ir* (present singular)
a las tres, a la una²

¹ Priedīte, A. *Lettiska för universitetsbruk*. 1, I. Stockholms universitet, 1992.

² Masoliver, J., Barnéus, B., Rindar, K. *Por supuesto. Primer paso*. Örebro: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002. (Translation into English by K. Rindar.)

Focusing on functional – notional use of language was something new and radical 30 years ago, when language was still normally presented in terms of grammar. Understandable communication started to be seen as the most important aspect. This communication should be as grammatically correct as possible. Correctness is thus still important, but no more the most dominating issue.

Moving focus from teaching methods to learning strategies

Didactics of language has traditionally focused on how to teach: methods. Which method could provide the best results? Pedagogical research about language was, until the 1970s in Sweden and elsewhere, concentrating on the comparison between various methods with the aim of finding the most efficient general teaching method. As any such method could not be identified, focus was moved from teaching to learning – from language teacher to language learner. What happens in the classroom? How does the language learner cope with the task of learning? What strategies are used by language learners?

Swedish project “STRIMS”

Inspired by recent literature on learners' language strategies³ and by the language project of the Council of Europe, a Swedish research project, STRIMS (*Strategier vid inlämning av moderna språk* = Strategies in learning modern languages) was started in the middle of the 1980s. The result of the project was published in a report, abbreviated and edited in the year 2000 with the title “In the head of a student”.⁴

One important finding of this research is that learning strategies differ very much from one individual to another. When five different young students of English have been followed and observed during five years, the researcher finds that learning styles vary between these students but that there is a tendency in each one of them of preserving the same personal learning style through years.

³ Stern, H. H. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983; Faerch-Kasper, G. *Strategies in Interlanguage Communication*. New York: Longman, 1983 et al.

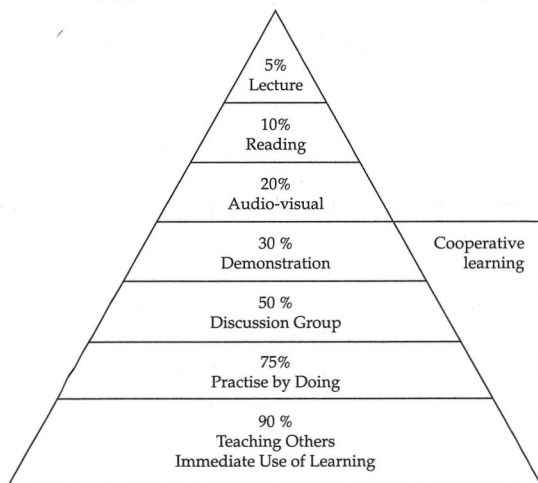
⁴ Malmberg, P. (red.) *I huvudet på en elev*. Projektet STRIMS. Eskilstuna: Bonniers, 2000.

In another study students were given the task to write a letter in German (with the help of a dictionary and a grammar book) to a friend reacting to the friend's decision to get married. The same task was given to the same students once again after two years. On the first occasion the students were not told that the same task would be given again. The students are given instructions to say aloud what they are thinking when producing a letter and the observation is recorded by the researcher Ulrika Tornberg.⁵

U. Tornberg lists 17 different strategies used during the writing of this letter, for example: "uses grammar, uses a dictionary, is rephrasing / restructuring, identifying problems, trying how it sounds, thinking of the meaning of words". The first and second use of strategies and the final results are compared.

Learning to learn

Today the advice given to the learner contains "learning pyramids" promoting cooperative learning as the most efficient way of studying. The traditionally overestimated effect of lectures is seen to be considerably reduced. Here is an example of a learning pyramid. The % refers to the average % of retention rate:



⁵ Malmberg, P. (red.) *I huvudet på en elev*. Ibid., pp. 196–200.

Teaching Others: Immediate Use of Learning

The teacher's role has changed in the direction of the learner's adviser and promoting "learning to learn".

Of late focusing on the learner has made us meet quite a few new terms: quantitative and qualitative knowledge, communicative competence, learner autonomy, learning to learn, learning by doing, peer teaching, sociocultural competence.

Peer teaching, one learner teaching another or work in small groups, is practised during language lessons all over the world. Here the teacher is a "resource person" to ask for help and advice.

Council of Europe: A Common European Framework

Focus on the learner has strongly influenced the work of the Council of Europe. A Common European Framework (CEF) has been created in the production of a European Language Portfolio stressing the learner's responsibility for his/her studies.

In several countries the description of language competence levels and the grids for self assessment of language skills are being used by learners and reflected in books for language learning.

The Council of Europe has produced a "European Language Portfolio". It has three parts:

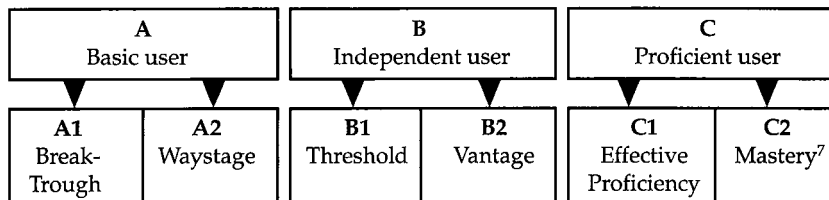
1. A Language Passport where the learners themselves list their competence in different languages and their sociocultural experiences of foreign languages. It is also completed with formal marks from language courses.

2. A Language Biography as a tool for learning. It contains checklists for helping the learner to exercise self assessment of language skills.

3. A Language dossier for the learner's own production of texts, tapes and language study projects achieved.⁶

⁶ European Language Portfolio. Uppsala University In-Service Training Department. www.fba.uu.se/Portfolio

The Council of Europe has created a description of language competence at six levels:



We can expect the above levels to be used when describing targets of language competence in official documents and programmes for language study. The main ideas of CEF are present in the central Swedish school authority framework for language programmes in Swedish schools in the years 1994 and 2000, where the student's responsibility for his/her studies are stressed.

Learning to learn also implies evaluating one's own results, the so-called "self assessment". The self-assessment grid for Levels A2 and B2 may give an idea of the thoughts behind a description of levels with the learner in focus⁸ (see p. 53).

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Par valodas mācīšanu un valodas mācīšanos

Kopsavilkums

Pēdējā laikā uzsvars ir mainījies no valodas mācīšanas uz valodas mācīšanos. Zviedru STRIMS pētniecības grupa, novērojot studentus viņu ilgtermiņa studijās, ir secinājusi, ka veidi, kā cilvēki mācās jeb tā saucamie mācīšanās profili, ir atšķirīgi katram indivīdam. Kad uzsvars mainījās tieši uz indivīdu, kas mācās, un uz mācību procesu, "mācīšana mācīties" ir kļuvusi svarīga, pat svarīgāka nekā mācīšanas metodes. Šis uzskats par valodas apgūšanu ir atspoguļots Eiropas Padomes izstrādātajā "valodu portfeli", kas apraksta valodas pārzināšanu sešos dažādos līmeņos – A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2. Šīni valodu portfeli ir īpaši uzsvērtas tādas tēmas kā studenta pašnovērtējums un atbildība par savām studijām.

⁷ *Språkboken – en antologi om språkundervisning och språkinlärning*. Örebro: Skolverket, 2001, p. 30.

⁸ European Language Portfolio, accredited model No. 19. 2001 Council of Europe.

	A2	B2
Listening	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programmes. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.
Reading	I can read very short, simple texts. I can find specific, predictable information in simple everyday material, such as advertisements, prospectuses, menus and timetables and I can understand short simple personal letters.	I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes of viewpoints. I can understand contemporary literary prose.
Speaking Spoken interaction	I can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics and activities. I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself.	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.
Speaking: Spoken production	I can use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms my family and other people, living conditions, my educational background and my present or most recent job.	I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
Writing	I can write short, simple notes and messages. I can write a very simple personal letter, for example thanking someone for something.	I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. I can write an essay or report, passing on information or giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view. I can write letters highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences.