LEARNING THROUGH SHARING :
OPEN RESOURCES, OPEN PRACTICES, OPEN COMMUNICATION

Short Paper

Towards an open culture of sharing in language teacher education
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1 Introduction

Even though new technologies are increasingly utilized for pedagogic purposes in the Finnish educational field, principles of open resources, practices and communication do not seem to be widespread within language teaching and learning. From the point of view of student teachers, teacher education is largely focused on what happens in the classroom, on specific courses, around the textbook. The wider conceptions of language learning as taking place across formal and informal fields of life are not highlighted. Project-based approaches are applied but not necessarily as part of regular pedagogic practice, stepping across disciplines. There is a lot of experience from learning projects online and technology use in education but, in many schools, there is seldom access to the facilities and resources as part of everyday language learning. Even though there are communities and networks of teachers sharing resources and ideas to be applied at work, they are not yet widespread. Neither do they have an established role in the language students' pedagogic studies, which would offer a natural place for developing a culture of `genuine participation´ and sharing (Hart 1992; Chawla & Heft 2002). The scenery may be changing as teenagers who in Luukka et al. (2008) were found to be fluent users of various types of social media in contrast to their teachers will soon be entering language teacher education. Nevertheless, it is the historical body, i.e. accustomed practices and experiences (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), of language teachers in the field that provide future language teachers important ground in elaborating their professional profiles and identities. To explore the situation in the field more closely we conducted a discourses survey of Internet sites with traces of open networks, communities and resources online promoting language learning (Scollon & Scollon 2004). The results of this survey will be introduced below.

2 Learning and teaching languages in a technology-rich world

Today's world is increasingly immersed with technologies, which contributes to the transformation of our daily practices in many ways. The omnipresent "information flow" and the expansion of interactive and collaborative situations from face to face encounters to various communities online require new media skills, literacies and multimodal practices. Vast resources and interaction networks open through the Internet and social media. In the near future, ubiquitous technologies will provide new environments for learning and teaching languages – not only in selected projects but for everyone. This fast development requires new considerations in education, schooling

and research. A special challenge for research is to search for a deeper understanding of what children's and young people's worlds and their "historical bodies" are and what this means for teaching and learning.

Finnish school children were some years ago already well acquainted with the use of media and social networking in their everyday lives (see e.g., Luukka, Pöyhönen, Huhta, Taalas, Tarnanen & Keränen 2008). Measures taken by the authorities to support the development of "information/knowledge society" have led to the schools becoming equipped by educational technologies since the 90's. Still, recent surveys on the present situation in terms of basic education and teacher education show that equality has not been reached and changes in technology-related pedagogic practices proceed at a slow pace (see, e.g., Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2010). Meisalo, Lavonen, Sormunen, & Vesisenaho (2010) conclude in their report on the use of ICT in Finnish initial teacher education that there is a need for designing the ICT-related goals of the teacher education programmes and related courses on a more concrete level and to create methods for systematic follow-up for reaching them. They further suggest that necessary resources should be guaranteed as should the follow-up research on the effects of measures to promote an adequate level for the use of modern technologies in teacher education. Teachers are in a central role ascertaining equality in terms of technology-mediated literacy practices. Kumpulainen & Lipponen (2010), referring to OECD, point out that a digital divide may emerge due to differing practices in homes and teachers not being aware of this may even contribute to the widening of this gap. (see also MEC 2010a, b, c and d). For this reason, it seems even more important that research is strengthened and extended even beyond school, to encompass people's everyday environments of language learning, which are sites for collaboration, participation, sharing and distributed cognition. These everyday environments certainly include the Internet and social media.

3 Research approach

The idea of "openness" concerns in this connection three aspects of education: resources, related practices and communication. Downes (2011) refers to Open Educational Resources (OER) as educational materials that may be freely accessed, reused, modified and shared. ICDE (2011) outlines Open Educational Practices (OEP) as practices which support the production, use and reuse of high quality OER through institutional policies. These policies are to promote innovative pedagogical models, respecting and empowering learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning path (ICDE, 2011). Finally, along the lines of Gunawardena and Zittle (1997), Open Communication (OC) can be described as reciprocal and respectful exchange which contributes to social presence in online learning. This also involves developing intercultural awareness and competence in language learning.

In this study, we applied the method of discourses survey, part of nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) to trace the most central features of the topic at hand in terms of the professional field that students in language teacher education are becoming prepared for. This was done while engaging the field together with field observations and scene surveys to view what was going on; who were the participants and what was talked about. In our study, we approached the question how open educational resources,

practices and communication were visible in the Finnish context to understand the context of current language teacher education. It must be pointed out that discourses surveys are conducted in the initial phase of nexus analysis, looking for discourses that might be worth studying in more detail. Thus, the observations will here remain on a general level characterizing the overall situation, serving the subsequent stages of the research. The initial findings of the study will be discussed below.

4 Discussion and conclusion

To start with, a search for open resources using the Finnish terms `open´ (Fi. `avoimet´), `learning resources´ (`oppiresurssit´) and languages (`kielet´) produced 487 results, which, again, led to hundreds of further sites. If we characterise the findings broadly, it seems that the majority of the links found referred to language learning materials of different kinds, put online either by institutions or by groups or networks of language teachers. There were resources for learners including different types of linguistic tasks in different languages, resources, training information, suggestions for ICT tools, promoting the study of languages as well as possibilities for teachers to share ideas[1].

Looking at the key actors providing access to these resources and networks, the National board of Education was in a central role, launching projects for schools and supporting the teachers' networking. Individual language teachers also kept blogs for personal reflections and some schools provided resources of their own. Nevertheless, many of the blogs and resource sites seemed have been launched as part of some in-service teacher education course and included only one to three entries. Relatively few participants seemed to be engaged in the collaboration and students did not seem to be part of these activities. Thus, no genuine sharing and collaboration on a wider scale became visible through the data. Further, there was little evidence of reciprocal interaction going on between the language teachers and especially between teachers in the field and language students still in the middle of their studies. From the point of view of language teacher education, the results highlight a situation that for language teacher students may seem to imply the prevalence of accustomed practices in language education the majority of resources available being produced to support the classroom-based curriculum and linguistic focus in teaching. This initial observation, obviously, demands further research into the matter.

The survey showed that there were open resources available but not necessarily in the sense that the ideals of OER, OEP and OC aim for. Even if the Finnsh national curriculum mentions social media as an important part of society, it does not give concrete guidelines for how to deal with it in education. Therefore, each teacher can freely apply his/her own pedagogic approach in the daily practice of teaching. The majority of the resources online openly seemed to echo the text-book-based curriculum in the language classroom despite the efforts of the National Board of Education to activate a culture of collaboration among language teachers. The people involved seemed to be few devoted teachers, or representatives of educational authorities with

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[1] See e.g. http://www.kielitivoli.fi/, http://kieltenopetverkossa.ning.com/ and http://vinkkiverkko.wikispaces.com/

strategic aims rather than the wider teacher community. Also, many entries in the social media dealing with these issues were from people who had been engaging in discussions and materials production as part of their in-service courses and the contributions had not triggered long-term collaboration. In other words, the use and production of open educational resources, educational practices to promote innovative pedagogical models, respecting and empowering learners as co-producers on their lifelong learning paths seems to be still emerging in the Finnish context rather than an established tradition.

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