Visible and invisible outcomes in language learning.

Developing learner autonomy in language teaching raises the question of what we actually mean by language learning outcomes. We customarily tend to think that the outcome is the learner’s communicative competence which can be measured using various performance or proficiency tests. While the skills-oriented tests measure the student’s language performance and thus make it visible, they miss, however, a number of significant learning outcomes that do not lend themselves directly to quantitative testing. A great deal of relevant language competence easily remains invisible both to the teacher and to the student.

Language learning also involves a number of important student properties that are educationally valuable learning goals in their own right. Students come to our classes with their personal properties and beliefs and assumptions of language learning which they have acquired as part of their learning biographies in their families and in school. These features evolve, one way or another, in connection with the affective, social and cognitive processes of language learning. They impinge indirectly on the student’s observable language performance. Such invisible learning outcomes include a number of properties that are essential for the development of language competence and motivation:

1. commitment for and ownership of one’s language learning
2. tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty in communicative situations
3. and learning in general
4. willingness to take risks in order to cope with communicative tasks and situations
5. understanding of oneself as a language learner and a language user in terms of the beliefs about language use and one’s role as a learner
6. understanding of one’s cultural identity and what is means to become an intercultural speaker
7. skills and attitudes for socially responsible learning and language use
8. plurilingualism, involving a reflective awareness and appreciation of languages and language learning, as well as assuming respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity and otherness
9. learning skills and strategies necessary for continuous, independent language learning
10. a reflective basic orientation to language learning, with abilities for self-assessment

Properties such as these are crucial for learner autonomy, intercultural communication and the student’s personal development (see Byram and Fleming (eds.) 1997; Arnold (ed.) 1999; Kaikkonen 2000; Kohonen 1999; 2000). In many cases such aspects of learning can be inferred only indirectly from the linguistic output data. Unless we pay explicit attention to them, they may remain inaccessible to the student for conscious monitoring and to the teacher for pedagogical interventions.
Combining the language/communicative goals and the above learning process goals, I have grouped foreign language learning goals under three broad headings as follows (Kohonen 1992; 1999; 2000):

1. **Task awareness**: understanding language as a linguistic system and learning the necessary communicative skills; meta-knowledge of language at the various levels of linguistic description.

2. **Personality awareness**: personal identity, realistic self-esteem, self-direction and socially responsible autonomy.

3. **Process and context awareness**: management of learning processes towards self-organized language learning; strategic and metacognitive knowledge for reflection and self-assessment; social skills.

Considering such a holistic personal and language competence to aim at, developing learner autonomy in language learning requires time, commitment and explicit pedagogical guidance. As David Little (1999) points out, students do not become autonomous learners simply by being told that they are now in charge of their learning. They can take control of more and more aspects of the learning process only to the extent that they acquire the appropriate knowledge, skills and motivation. To enhance their learning they also need to be actively involved in the whole process, interacting with their peers (in small groups) to share their learning experiences.

**Increasing visibility in learning through portfolio assessment.**

Portfolio assessment opens new ways for promoting the above kind of outcomes in language learning. It can offer new possibilities for making at least some of language learning more visible to students, teachers and other stakeholders of school. By this visibility I mean that language teachers can facilitate their students to become aware of the wide range of goals and learning outcomes connected with the language learning enterprise. They can teach these aspects to the students (at least to some extent) by using concrete instructional materials, just as they do when teaching the linguistic aspects of language use. Visible goals are negotiable and accessible to conscious efforts and reflection.

In my understanding, the language portfolio may constitute a major part of the “missing link” between the goals of learner autonomy and the pedagogical ways of fostering it in language education. It promotes the twin goals of learner-centred curricula discussed by David Nunan (1988): (1) learning communication and (2) developing a critical awareness of language learning. The European Language Portfolio (ELP) offers significant possibilities for enhancing language learning in terms of both the learning processes (pedagogic function) and the learning outcomes (reporting function).

**Getting started with the ELP – where to begin?**

It is not easy for anyone to become reflective about one’s learning. Young students have little experience and knowledge about learning in general and even less about language learning as a linguistic and psychological phenomenon. Self-assessment of language skills using the criterion-referenced level descriptors is a difficult and complex task. For one thing, the descriptions are written in an abstract language which is not easy to understand. Secondly, as students have difficulties in realising what the learning goals mean in concrete terms it is not easy for them to assess the degree of their language skills – degree of what? What are the tar-
geted standards of language proficiency? How can they understand and evaluate something that they do not know what it is?

As David Little (1999,3) points out, students seem to face a hopeless undertaking when asked to assess their linguistic correctness: “How, after all, can learners assess themselves with any degree of accuracy unless they already possess the same degree of linguistic knowledge as the person who set the examination paper or devised the assessment task?” However, students are more likely to know what they can do with the target language communicatively in concrete situations and tasks. They also have a better idea of the general level of proficiency with which they can do it (Little 1999). The functional “can do” statements are thus more natural to begin with, as students generally have a fairly good understanding of what they can do with their language in specific situations and contexts of language use.

Our experience in Finland suggests that it is perhaps even more advisable to start student reflection with a more general reflective orientation to learning. Learning to be reflective about oneself as a human being and as a student seems to be something that most students find quite a natural thing to do. Again, for some students reflection seems to be more difficult, probably due to their personal histories. We need to proceed with caution and see what is possible with different students and accept quite modest observations in the beginning. In any case, it is necessary for the teacher to justify the rationale and benefits of reflection to the students and why she is asking them to reflect on themselves as learners. The learning atmosphere also needs to be supportive (e.g., using small groups to discuss experiences). Once they realise the purpose of reflection and self-assessment students have crossed the basic motivational threshold for the reflective language learning.

Beginning with the students themselves.

Like with any new skill, it seems a good idea to teach reflection by giving students concrete questions to begin with. It also seems helpful to use small groups in which the students can share their reflections and thereby get perspectives to their own thoughts. The teacher might facilitate her students to reflect on their roles and responsibilities as language learners by instructing them to keep a personal diary of their learning process, supporting the work with further questions and comments. Our experiences suggest that a useful way of doing this is to guide the students to reflect on the following kind of questions regularly as part of the language lessons (and later also as homework):

- What is important for you as a person?
- What (three things) do you value in yourself? Why?
- What are your strengths as a student in school?
- What weaknesses (shortcomings) do you have as a student?
- How do you see your role as a language learner?
- What are your expectations for the language teacher?

Thinking about language learning processes and aims.

We have used the following kind of questions to facilitate students to reflect on their learning processes and their role in the groups and in the class.

- What aims do you wish to set for this course (week, etc)?
• What are you going to do to reach your aims?
• What aspects of language learning are easy (difficult) for you?
• How might you improve your work/your working habits?
• What is a good group member like in our language class? Why?
• How might you improve your participation in your groups?

As regards the more specific language learning aims, we encourage students to become aware of their undertaking by asking them to consider, for example, the following kind of questions.

• Why do you wish to learn foreign languages?
• How do you understand (intercultural) communication?
• What elements and skills does language learning include?
• What elements do you find easy (difficult) for you? Why?
• What skills are you good at? What can you still improve?

Consequently, we have wanted to begin with the students’ beliefs of their language learning, how they understand their roles as learners, how they work and how they might improve their learning skills. The teachers have guided them to undertake independent writing tasks (small-scale projects) to be included in their dossiers. As part of every piece of work submitted, the teachers have asked the students to reflect on their learning processes and what they thought they learned from doing the task. We have thus facilitated them to become more reflective about themselves and their language learning, to acquire some basic understanding of their learning, and to obtain concrete tools for reflective self-assessment.

Some student reflections.

The following student’s comment shows that she has assumed responsibility for her own learning:

“I did not understand some things, but that is my fault because sometimes during the lessons I only think of my own doings and I therefore don’t know what to do at home when trying to do my homework” (lower secondary school 8th grader, in connection with a test in Swedish)

She realises that she could have done better on the test if she had concentrated more on the tasks at hand during the lessons. The following comments show that the students have learned a great deal about their language learning and social responsibilities (Kolu 1999):

“I have learned to introduce myself to the others. I learn by speaking, reviewing and writing… the ‘teach yourself’ tasks are very useful. Variety during the lessons makes learning interesting. My behaviour is affected by how others relate to me. I attend to another person when speaking, listening and interacting.” (lower secondary school 9th grader)

“I did not learn much English [during the group sessions], some new words. I learned, however, at least a bit about cooperation and attending to the classmate when we took turns in writing the story. I learned to look up words in the dictionary. I enjoyed the group work, but our group roles were a bit mixed up.” (lower secondary school 8th grader)

Several students got emotionally attached to their dossiers, and leaving goodbye to them (at the end of the three-year experiment) filled the following student’s mind with longing (Pajukanka 1999):
‘Dear Diary, I don’t know how to begin. There is much to say and so little time…. It is time to say goodbye soon. Time to leave behind my German dossier and diary … I feel longing … the fond feeling is increased when I read the old beautiful works (with so many errors) and notice how I made mistakes and what I had in mind at that time when I was ‘little’. At times I feel like laughing, then again like crying… these works are so nice no matter how many times I was crying when I was doing them, but still. I would not want give up a single day…” (upper secondary school student, end of school)

Our findings indicate that it is natural to teach student reflection in connection with concrete learning tasks, with supportive tutoring and comments by the teacher. Students also appreciated their schoolmates’ comments. We have discovered further that it is very important for the teacher to support the idea of self-direction and ownership of learning. This is primarily a question of justifying and legitimizing the idea to the students and motivating them to assume increasing responsibility.

The teacher consequently has a significant function as a resource person for self-directed reflective learning. The participating teachers noticed that their role shifted towards becoming an observer, a tutor, a professional consultant of student learning and an organiser of learning opportunities (Kujansivu and Pajukanta 2000). The process required a great deal of flexibility, sensitivity to learner needs, and firmness about the agreed plans and deadlines. The work also required tolerance of uncertainty when facing unanticipated and surprising situations. For these reasons the teachers found that collegial support and continuous inservice education during the project were crucial for their professional development.
References


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