

A plurilingual teaching intervention

I am a teacher of Finnish language, both as a first language and a second language. As part of my teacher training, I took part in a plurilingual teaching intervention in a secondary school where the language of schooling is Finnish. In the intervention I worked in a group of future teachers of both Finnish and English. Our goal was to find out *how we could integrate the two subjects and more broadly, how to enhance pupils' awareness of their existing language competencies*. In the school participating in the intervention, we worked with the pupils' teachers of Finnish, English and Finnish as a second language. The experience made me understand that a lot of things could be done better in language education; for example, there was a lack of cooperation between different language educators and different languages were very much taught as separate entities.

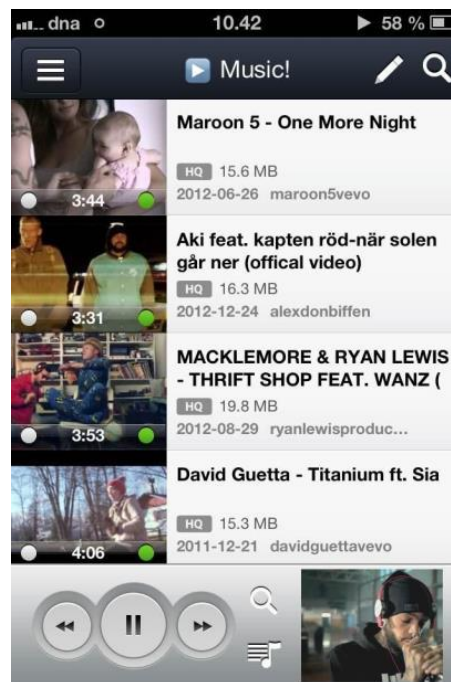


In the teaching experiment our group sought to find ways to engage the 13-year-old Finnish pupils in activities that allowed them to use their everyday knowledge of languages and different genres, and to encourage them to appreciate all of their language competencies, whether formally or informally acquired. We were especially focused on informal knowledge and understanding, such as learning through movies, games, music, social media, etc. We wanted to activate those competencies and put them to work. Another objective was to increase their motivation to learn languages. Some pupils came from bilingual families, so we also wanted to give some prestige to the home languages.

We started the intervention by getting to know the two groups. We conducted a survey, asking about languages in their everyday life and their language competencies (with functional descriptors, such as “I can easily understand music lyrics in this language“, “I am familiar with a couple of expressions”). We also asked about their use of different media: TV, music, games and internet. As homework, the pupils took photos of different situations where other languages were involved; some examples can be seen here. This all gave us a good insight into the wide range of languages and multilingual media they encountered in their everyday lives. It was interesting to see how excited the pupils became when thinking about all the smallest competencies too, such as: *Hey, I can say bonjour, does that count?*



With regard to activities, we organised a 'living library', where we invited visitors from different cultures and language groups to act as 'living books'. The library consisted of an Ecuadorian, an Estonian, a Chinese and a Finnish sign language user answering questions about their cultural and lingual experiences. Other activities included creating a Facebook profile for a person based on only a list of "likes" and a drama based on linguistic misunderstandings. Here pupils really showed their creativity with languages. During the classes, *they were encouraged to use whatever languages they wanted, and they ended up using English, Swedish, French and Finnish.* In the 'living library' some pupils used their home language, Spanish, to help their peers. We also organised a CLIL style class during which we cooked only in English. After some resistance, pupils started doing things in English, as if they had not even noticed it happening.



All in all, the experiment proved to be very inspiring and educational. At the same time, it posed new questions and challenges. What kind of arrangements might support the cooperation between different language educators? How to give prestige to students' home languages and engage them during classes? How to convince students (and teachers) that informally learned competencies are advantageous? What kinds of activities enable the use of students' whole language repertoires? What is the position of textbooks on a plurilingual approach? During the whole experiment the pupils were really motivated, but was it because it was something totally different to their normal routines? How easy is it to integrate this sort of content into the "everyday life" of language teaching? At the very least, it requires cooperation between different subjects and an appreciation of the huge range of different languages and language varieties that pupils are familiar with.

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