

The 6th IATEFL Interactive Language Fair (ILF)

The Interactive Language Fair is a feast of presentations in a single, interactive format and is exclusive to the IATEFL Annual Conference. This year, 14 presenters from 12 countries and 4 continents showcased their innovative ELT ideas on topics ranging from learner-oriented assessment tools to virtual teaching and from anxiety in self-learning environments to teaching literacy.

A truly participatory event, speakers present their research or other successful ELT projects to everyone who visits their table. Each may display any material they wish (for example, posters, realia, handouts, or computer- and paper-based materials) using the display board and table top. For example, a presenter might use a short questionnaire, a click-through activity on a laptop, an activity involving the (re-)arrangement of realia, or display students' work. It's an innovative way to cover a wide range of issues in a short time.

The ILF is the perfect opportunity for newer presenters to get started at a major international conference. It involves more audience participation than a poster presentation but without the stress of preparing slides and speaking alone in front of a room full of delegates. The longer 1¾ hours of the ILF means presenters and delegates have more time to ask and answer questions individually. If you are thinking of submitting a proposal for IATEFL Birmingham 2016, do consider the 7th ILF.

Burcu Akyol and Bethany Cagnol, Organisers

(The two following articles are based on presentations at the ILF in Manchester. Editor)

It's time to get on your bike!

Anne Ontero prepares her students for lifelong learning.



Anne Ontero is a teacher-researcher of English in the Upper Secondary School in Oulu, Finland. She has worked as an in-service teacher trainer in Abu Dhabi and Finland, a Fulbright teacher of Language Arts in Ohio, and a project coordinator of in-service teacher training in Namibia and Tanzania.

A three-year participatory action research project started in autumn 2014 in Finland in an upper secondary school examines how students and their teacher collaboratively develop and explore a dialogical learning environment and its affordances for language learning. The students are provided with content-based instruction in an EFL context (CBE), where language is transformed into usage and English acquired naturally.

The role of English

Even if English still has a foreign language status in most countries, its role has changed due to economic and cultural globalisation, the development of information and communication technology, and transnational cultural flows. According to the National Survey on the English Language in Finland (Leppänen et al. 2011), English is gaining ground in everyday life and has an impact on business, trade and working life as well as on educational reform, which should lead to more effective language teaching. When the primary vehicle of interaction at work and outside school is English and use of the internet, gaming and social media is expanding, teaching and learning practices in the classroom should incorporate these informal ways of language learning. However, the question arises as to how these learning processes can be promoted methodologically and didactically at school.

'The CBE courses have given me the confidence to speak English with people and that means a lot to me.' (Student observation)

The monological approach

According to The National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools (2003) in Finland, learning should emphasise the students' own active knowledge construction process, and it calls on schools to create wider study environments to enable students to learn to set objectives and to work independently and collaboratively in a variety of groups and networks. The operational culture of teaching and learning should be seen in the learning environment and in its transition to the learning outcomes.

Unfortunately, a considerable number of studies show that a monological conceptualisation of language learning is still common: learning objectives are represented in terms of grammatical rules and lexical items, and learner performance evaluated in terms of formal accuracy (Dufva et al. 2003; Aro 2004, 2009). This is due to the washback effect of standardised testing on both the learning process and teaching content because teachers are anxious to cover the parts of the textbook they believe are most likely to be tested. In Finland, the matriculation examination at the end of the upper secondary education may

therefore be seen to drive the curriculum, teaching methods and students' approaches to learning. This monological perspective of language development, however, ignores the way knowledge about language is converted into practice

and contradicts students' everyday experiences of learning languages informally in a dialogical learning environment.

A dialogical approach

The influence of the teacher on language learning processes at school is limited and calls are being made to promote learning processes through designing the learning environment. If learners work actively with one another in a dialogical learning environment in which they engage with the different content areas, learning processes are promoted to a greater extent than in traditional, textbook-based forms of teaching, which are often inauthentic.

The dialogical environment encourages learners to deal cognitively, consciously and emotionally with the content area. When learners work in small groups, their individual learning processes are enhanced, their motivation is increased and they are more involved in the learning process which they follow themselves through self assessment. A dialogical approach requires the development of learners' autonomy, the ability to work independently and self-assessment skills, which grow in the context of group and project work. One of the decisive factors in promoting language skills is development related to content-based work. It demands more highly developed reading skills than traditional foreign language lessons. Reading texts and documents is dependent on reading strategies that have to be taught to learners and not just seen as self-evident.

Action research and self-assessment

In this participatory community-based action research project (see Kemmis and McTaggart 1988) learning practices are explored with the aim of improving them. The students and their teacher form the community and collaboratively build scientific knowledge, drawing on the students' own interpretation and self-assessment of their experiences in the learning process. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is used to assess the students' views on their progress in terms of key competences. Participatory action research brings about development in language teaching and learning practices by analysing existing practice and identifying elements for change. The study combines multiple data sources gathered through semi-instructed language profiles, reports and interviews. The three cycles of qualitative data analysis focus on students' experiences and observations about their language learning as well as their linguistic background. The focus is on (1) the concepts of learning at the beginning of the studies, (2) the change/development of the concepts of learning in the dialogical environment, and (3) the impact of the dialogical learning environment.

The objective is to discover the influence of the dialogical, content-based language learning environment on the

'In CBE classes we do more practical stuff and I think it helps us more in real life.' (Student observation)

learning process and outcomes of the students' English language skills during their three-year studies. By sharing the understanding of the influence of the language learning environment, the study will provide implications for language teaching methodology, learning practices and curriculum development. The research questions of the study are:

- How does learning emerge?
- What are the overt signs of learning processes?
- What evidence can be gathered to document learning?

Conclusion

Traditional pedagogical approaches to foreign language teaching may not be the best way to cater for the needs of learners at upper secondary level, particularly in light of the changing learning environment, students' altered expectations and their professional prospects. Enhanced language learning awareness as a means of fostering foreign language acquisition is key for future professionals who will increasingly be using English as their working language.

Foreign language teachers sometimes have preconceived ideas about how languages are learned and how they should be taught. These beliefs can directly interfere with the English language acquisition of students whose beliefs about language learning and teaching, as well as their needs and expectations may differ from those of teachers. The knowledge and analysis of these student beliefs can be used to increase student learning and satisfaction in the foreign language class.

anne.ontero@eduouka.fi

Based on the author's presentation in Manchester

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'It felt weird to speak only English in the class, but I soon noticed I was getting used to it and the ability to improve listening comprehension and reading skills is rising up to a whole new level.' (Student observation)