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Using the *CEFR* to organise teaching and assessment in teacher training

Introduction

From July 2007 all higher education degrees in Sweden, as well as in the rest of Europe, have to be expressed through so-called learning outcomes; “*statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a process of learning*” (<http://europa.eu>.) As part of the process of creating student learning outcomes for a university course for teacher trainers it was decided that the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* should be used as the starting point for organising teaching and assessing the teacher trainer students’ language proficiency in English. More specifically the C1 level language descriptors contained in the European Confederation of University Language Centres in Higher Education portfolio 29.2002 specially designed for use in universities across Europe were used as the basis for the language proficiency learning outcomes introduced into the courses

The *Framework* was developed by the Council of Europe between 1989 and 1996 and one of its aims is to help describe the levels of proficiency required by existing standards, tests and examinations in order to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualifications. The *Framework*, along with the European Language Portfolio are used increasingly today in all levels of foreign language learning and have been shown to have positive effects on language learning. According to Little (2007(1)) they have only had a limited use at university level. Again according to Little (2007(2): 648) its impact on language testing “far outweighs its impact on curriculum design and pedagogy”. However, the communicative view of language learning behind the *European Framework* has influenced teacher training for EFL teachers in Sweden and how foreign languages are taught today in Swedish schools. Apelgren(2001) describes it as part of a paradigm shift from “teaching towards learning” which can be characterised generally as a move towards a more contextualized, meaning-based views of language. Influenced by Hymes’(1971) theories of communicative competence, the target language functions primarily as a means to communicate and while students are seen to need knowledge about the forms to be able to use the foreign language,

the focus and aim are communication in the target language. At the same time the focus has been on encouraging the learner to take more responsibility and independence.

According to the learning outcomes approach, student learning outcomes should be the starting point for course planning. In this approach one first decides what students can and should learn in relation to the subject and then figure out how such learning can be facilitated. Among the key characteristics of outcome-based education listed by Harden (2002) are: (1) the development of clearly defined and published learning outcomes that must be achieved before the end of the programme, (2) the design of a curriculum, learning strategies and learning opportunities to ensure the achievement of the learning outcome and (3) an assessment process matched to the learning outcomes and the assessment of individual students to ensure that they achieve the outcomes.

The main concern of my research is whether the process of introducing and organising a course around student learning outcomes (such as the CEFR descriptors) can help improve the learning culture in the courses for which I am course co-ordinator. A learning culture can be described as the social practices through which people learn, and attempting to understand and describe the learning culture involves looking at the particular ways in which the interactions between many different factors shape students' learning opportunities and practices.

Before the introduction of learning outcomes a number of indicators suggested that there was a need for an improvement in the learning culture. A teacher-dominated view of subject content prevailed and some of the teaching and assessment methods used in the courses encouraged surface learning approaches. There was also a lack of clearly stated academic expectations; for language proficiency tasks, for example, no commonly agreed criteria for student success in examination tasks existed. Students had very few opportunities to exercise choice in the method and content of study. Some parts of the courses were structured around certain teaching methods and assessed in certain ways because of tradition or administrative convenience. Finally, and importantly, there did not appear to be any clear agreement within the teaching group on what the key issues of learning for students were.

Student evaluations of courses held before 2008 showed that students had a number of criticisms of the courses. Students felt, for example, that the courses did not give them enough help in how to teach English, that the structure of some of the courses was unclear and there was a lack of clear instructions. The significance of some aspects of the courses was unclear. Students felt that little attention was given to the content of language tasks and questioned some forms of language assessment used.

A learner culture approach recognises that the culture cannot be de-contextualised from broader social, economic and political forces, both current and historic (James and Biesta 2007). I am trying to create new knowledge and understanding of the learning culture by carrying out an authentic study of the culture which addresses the complexity of relationships between teachers, teaching, learners, learning, learning situations and the wider contexts of learning. I am trying to understand and describe what Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) call the “practice architectures” which shape educational practice in terms of the ‘sayings’, ‘doings’ and ‘relatings’ of the individuals and groups involved. That process also involves understanding and reflecting on my own ‘sayings’, ‘doings’ and ‘relatings’

Theoretical frame/Method

The starting point for my research is the suggestion that organising courses around learner outcomes (such as the CEFR descriptors) can be understood as an intervention with the potential to lead to a change or an improvement in that learning culture. James and Biesta describe learning cultures as the social practices through which people learn. They argue that “learning cultures exist through the actions, dispositions and interpretations of the participants. They exist through interaction and communication and are (re)produced by individuals just as much as individuals are (re)produced by learning cultures. Individuals’ actions are therefore neither totally determined by learning cultures nor totally free” (2007: 4) Connected to this approach is a belief in a cultural theory of learning, a theory which conceives of learning “not as something that happens in the heads, minds or brains of students, but sees it as something that happens in and ‘through’ social practices” (2007:22). The cultural theory of learning is based upon an acceptance that ‘learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting, and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources’ (Bruner 1996: 4), that learning is located in the interactions between context, concept and activity (Brown et al. 1989), and that learning is an inseparable part of social practice (Lave and Wenger 1991), closely related to what might be termed the culture of the place of learning. Weight is also given to informal as well as formal attributes of learning (Colley et al. 2003).

The reason for a focus on learning cultures rather than on teaching or curriculum or student approaches to learning is partly driven by the desire to understand

teaching and learning in its full complexity. This idea is attractive to my research because it enables the authentic study of a learning site, addressing the particular ways in which the interactions between many different factors shape student's learning opportunities and practices. These interactions include for example the complexity of relationships between teachers, teaching, learners, learning, learning situations and the wider contexts of learning. These wider contexts in turn can not be de-contextualised from broader social, economic and political forces, both current and historic. According to James and Biesta the impact of an individual on a learning culture "...depends upon a combination of their position within that culture, their dispositions towards that culture, and the various types of capital (social, cultural and economic) that they possess. Much of their impact is the result of their presence and actions within it, whether they intend to influence that culture or not." (2007:35)

The combination of the theory of learning cultures and the cultural theory of learning also suggest a different approach towards the improvement of teaching and learning, one which focuses on changing the culture rather than on only one element of it. Because a learning culture is by definition complex, trying to find a "secure cause-effect relationship between teaching and learning – is simply implausible. (2007: 22) Thus the reason for focusing on learning cultures is not to try to show how learning cultures determine learning,. The focus is instead on trying to understand the learning opportunities available; "... the kinds of learning that are made possible as a result of the configuration of a particular learning culture, and the kinds of learning that become difficult or even impossible as a result of the way in which a particular learning culture operates" (2007:4)

As I am part of the learning culture under investigation my research is in the form of practitioner research. As course coordinator I believe I am in a unique position to understand the complexity of the local learning culture. Much of my research data is based on the 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' of the teaching group in planning meetings and written and verbal discussions concerning the organisation of the course around learning outcomes. The reason for this is because educational change and curriculum design at university level involves the control of variables which are within the control and remit of the teacher or group of teachers. While learning is affected by other factors, such as the experiences of students prior to joining a course, "the curriculum (what is to be taught and learnt), pedagogy, (how what is to be learnt is transmitted) and assessment (what counts as a valid realisation of knowledge on the part of the learner) are those components of the academic environment which are most intimately related to learning" (Entwistle and Ramsden 1983:111).

A number of other methods have been used to collect data on the influence of the intervention on the learning culture such as on-line student questionnaires, spoken comments made by students in regular course counsel meetings, written comments in student log book entries, spoken comments made during supervisor meetings with individual students, as well as interviews with students. I have also kept a diary recording my own observations and reflections.

Understanding the learning culture involves the use of qualitative methodological approaches such as phenomenology and hermeneutics in an attempt to understand and describe the “practice architectures” which shape educational practice. While my dual roles as course coordinator and researcher in many ways overlap, my research role involves creating a distance from my practice. As Rönnerman (2005:308) puts it practitioner research “creates distance from known activities, Through documentation, practice is ‘objectified’. Such knowledge can be related to other knowledge generated in earlier and parallel studies. By such means, existing theories can be challenged.”

The methods used in my research raise questions connected to the issue of validity and reliability. Practitioner research is often criticized as not being valid research, because the researcher is too close to the object of study and therefore it is argued can not be “scientific”. I not only question whether any research can be scientific but argue that my research should be judged according to other measures of validity and reliability. Many supporters of practitioner researcher argue for the use of different criteria of validity. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995:105) for example, claim that validity is “concerned with the extent to which descriptions of events accurately capture these events, for example, the extent to which the material being collected by the researcher presents a true and accurate picture of what it is claimed is being described” The aim is to check the accuracy and quality of the research data, its methodology, evidence and claims. While the results of the research can not be said to be generalizable from the viewpoint of the empiricist tradition, the research concerns a change process that is an ongoing part of the Bologna process and which has affected many involved in higher education in Europe over the last few years.

Results

In line with the learner outcome approach contained within the Bologna declaration, the introduction of the Framework descriptors as indicators of student language proficiency was

aimed to help course teachers make decisions about teaching and learning activities for students.

As a result of the process of developing and implementing the learning outcomes a number of changes have been made to how the courses were organised. Compared to courses given before the changes, more focus has been put on some of the specific skills relevant to the English language teacher profession, with examination tasks being based more on tasks that reflect professional practice. There are now more integrated examination tasks, with language proficiency tasks being more integrated into academic contexts, and connected to professional problems. For some learning outcomes this has involved a move away from teaching transmission and the learning of content to a more enquiry based type of learning. One example is the introduction of student run lessons as a way of testing student knowledge of English grammar issues, and another a case study approach to knowledge of phonological issues.

The fact that more precision has been added to language proficiency criteria has meant more discussion of language proficiency issues between teachers and between teachers and students.

Another change is that more learning opportunities have been made available to ensure that students achieve the learning outcomes. For example, a number of language workshops have been introduced, with the aim of giving the students general and individualised help in the language proficiency skills needed to tackle the tasks concerned..

The courses have also included a greater focus on student learning strategies with the aim of trying to make students more responsible for their learning. For the first time each student was allocated a supervisor (one of the course teachers) who over the term was responsible for helping students to reflect on their progress towards reaching the learning outcomes for the course. The students were also required to keep an electronic teaching /language portfolio as well as an on-line log book where they could raise issues with teachers and reflect on their own progress.

A number of changes have been made to assessment procedures to try to ensure ensure that learning outcomes are achieved. This has involved an attempt to move away from assessment of learning (summative assessment) to assessment for learning (formative assessment) where the focus is that the information from assessment is used diagnostically to guide learning and future lesson planning. This has also been reflected in the amount and type of feedback students have been given by teachers; students have been given more feedback on

their work than in previous courses and there has been an attempt to give feedback of a more formative nature.

My data shows that despite organisational changes, the attempt to organise teaching practice, examination and assessment around the learning outcomes (including those based on the language descriptors in the CEFR) has had only a limited influence on teacher practice.

My research suggests that in fact teachers have not always had the descriptors in mind whilst making such decisions .One example of this is the language workshops which were introduced into the course schedule to help students reach the goals and criteria connected to the language proficiency tasks. In course evaluations students expressed the opinion that many of these workshops were continuations of the grammar lectures and that they wanted more workshops to help them reach the language proficiency goals for the course. It would appear that teachers have not always had the range of “action-oriented” descriptors in mind during the workshops and that the focus has been primarily on grammar and writing, with less focus given to oral production and oral interaction.

As far as using the descriptors in the *Framework* to report on student progress is concerned, a general problem has been that teachers have found it difficult or have not been positive to connecting their assessment and feedback to the learning outcomes based on the *Framework* descriptors. Feedback to texts written in language workshops have not always been connected to the descriptors and assessment checklists used to give feedback on oral and written examination tasks, while originally closely following the wording of the language descriptors, have after discussions between teachers been modified towards more simplified descriptions and with more focus on grammatical accuracy.

The introduction of the descriptors connected to the Framework can be seen as part of a wider attempt to focus more on co-operation between teacher and students, of support and the idea of the active learner, with students being more responsible for their learning. My research shows that while teachers have given more feedback to students than in courses given before the introduction of the CEFR descriptors, they have often found it hard to give formative assessment, by being expansive in their assessment and in pointing out what students need to improve work. Teachers have also complained about the time involved in giving detailed feedback to students . Students were initially critical of the feedback being given by teachers. During course counsel meetings in the first term, students expressed the view that they wanted more detailed and positive feedback on their written papers. In the suggestions for improvement section to the course questionnaire one student wrote that “The assessments needs to be more expressive in terms of WHAT could be made better, and WHY something is

not correctly written.” Over 80 % of those responding to the questionnaire said that it had not always been clear what feedback had meant. However, subsequent course evaluations have shown that students feel that the thoroughness of teacher feedback has improved over the two year period since the courses were organised around learning outcomes.

While students have been generally positive towards the idea of organising teaching practice and assessment around the learning outcomes based on the language descriptors in the CEFR, reaction from teachers has been mixed. Initial objections to using the descriptors centred on whether or not they were applicable to university education and whether the C1 level of achievement was a high enough level for students entering the the language teacher profession. Whilst these inintial objections have now been dropped , some teachers have since expressed the view that the descriptors are vague, and at times hard to understand . All teachers have felt that it has been difficult to apply the framwork descriptors when giving feedback on examples of student work. In interviews at the end of the first term of using the descriptors, teachers said that they felt they could determine whether the student had reached the C1 level, but one teacher referred to their previous experience of assessing students rather than the descriptors themselves when making a decision. The teacher argued that the C1 language level requirement was “ really another name for what we understand by a (pass) , that we are sort of giving it a sort of hocus pocus name so that it sounds like we had really penetrated into the differences between a B2 and a C1I think both you and I will say this is C1 when we feel sort of happy about it and not too many obvious mistakes “ The same teacher did not feel that the descriptors helped them to decide what level a student’s individual work was on if it was not a pass, and suggested that a set test would be make it easier. Another teacher agreed that “ ...since we’ve been so focused on the C1 level it has been in some cases hard to define whether someone who doesn’t reach the C1 level is at the B1 or the B2 level because you are so focused on the C1 level so if someone is below you tend to think of him or her as below that level ...” However, this teacher felt that the descriptors did help the assessment of students areguing that “if you study them for a while you would find them.”

Discussion

The main concern of my research is whether the process of introducing and organising a course around student learning outcomes (such as the CEFR descriptors) can help improve

the learning culture in the courses for which I am course co-ordinator. My research involves looking at the ways in which the interactions between many different factors shape students' learning opportunities and practices. More specifically this involves looking and trying to understand the 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' of the individuals and groups involved, and in particular those of the teaching group.

Despite the change to organising courses around learning outcomes a teacher-dominated view of subject content remains and influences how both the language and the methodology teachers organise their teaching practice. Some teachers have expressed the view that the descriptors are vague, hard to understand and difficult to use when giving feedback on examples of student work. Previous research on the CEFR descriptors has come to the same conclusion. Alderson et al (2006) found that the scales lacked definitions, there were overlaps, ambiguities, and inconsistencies in the use of terminology, and has concluded that the demand is high "for more exemplification of levels" (2007: 661)

Teachers vary in their willingness to embrace the "action oriented" approach that the CEFR descriptors represent.. Teachers have expressed the view that content will not be covered in integrated enquiry based examinations and that traditional sit down examinations are more reliable methods of assessing student work. As far as learning opportunities are concerned (what is allowed, disallowed, encouraged or discouraged in the name of learning) there still exists a culture where examinations tasks tend to encourage the transmission of factual knowledge. Practice shows that teacher assessment and feedback has tended to focus more on grammatical errors rather than other aspects of language proficiency such as sociolinguistic and strategic language competence and the general "can do" approach of the European Framework. Teachers have also found it difficult to give feedback of a formative nature. In fact most feedback has been given at end point and in connection with examination tasks and as a result feedback has tended to become instrumental in nature, a situation similar to what Torrence has described as *assessment as learning*; "with assessment procedures and practices coming completely to dominate the learning experience and 'criteria compliance' replacing 'learning'. (2007:281)

Westhoff (2007:676) notes that "supporting foreign language (FL) proficiency development through the stages described in the CEFR requires a shift in pedagogic routines for those practitioners who are used to teaching in traditional ways, especially in the role they conceive for grammar in the language classroom. He recommends that for teacher education "more attention should be paid to teaching skills like task management classroom management, communicative language methodology, and giving corrective feedback, that is, to managing a

task-based, content-oriented FL classroom.” (678) Westhoff suggests that “ for many European countries, such shifts would mean a small revolution. But without such changes, the CEFR as a framework of referencewill not be compatible with methodologies commonly used in European FL classes, with the risk that teachers and learnerswill see the ELP as an optional extra whose use will involve them in extra work” (678) Westhoff concludes, however, that “precisely because of the current incompatibility of CEFR scaling with much common teaching practice, implementing the CEFR might provide a powerful incentive for innovation, particularly if it is supported by systematic curriculum renewal and extended opportunities for in-service teacher training “ (678)

As in any learning culture there exist “practice architectures” which shape the local educational practice and which mediate the influence that using the language proficiency learning outcomes based on the descriptors in the *Framework* has on the local learning culture. Bernstein’s(1996) description of two curriculum models is a useful place to start to understand many of the tensions within the local learning culture. According to Bernstein the *disciplinary model* is characterized by vertical pedagogic relations between teachers and students, with the rules of selection of curriculum content and of evaluation residing in the hands of the teachers. The transmitter (the teacher) has explicit control and education implies a strong emphasis on students’ acquisitions of theoretical knowledge. Bernstein calls the other main curriculum model the *vocational model*. It emphasises the development of specific skills relevant for specific professions. The ability to combine concepts and skills in practice is emphasised; and the model is characterised by an integrated approach to theory and practice. While the disciplinary model has been significant in the university curriculum, the vocational model is traditionally linked to the college sector and undergraduate professional programmes. Whilst the introduction of the learning outcomes based on the descriptors in the *Framework* can be seen as an attempt to move the learning culture towards a more vocational model, there are strong traditions within the learning culture which are more in line with the characteristics of the disciplinary model.

These findings are in line with earlier research done on teacher training in Sweden. As Beach (1995) has shown subject study has had and still has the feature of factual knowledge in teacher training. According to Aplegren (2001:31), the reason for this is the strong position of subject study, where “emphasis is often on coverage of huge classified and structured content through factual transmission.....This has led to curriculum theory and didactic theory, based on a somewhat broader view and focus on development and constructive learning, being regarded as less important by the students.” Research on student teachers’ perspectives on

their training and knowledge show that subject knowledge, as 'transmission', dominates other important areas of a teacher's knowledge base and therefore can be said to affect the whole teacher training for subject teachers (Beach, 1995).

Previous research has also shown how cultures resist change. Latour (1987) uses the idea of a "black box" to describe how perceived views of knowledge develop and become resistant to change. A "black box" contains frozen knowledge with a long and complex history which helps organise the learning situation and shape what the various actors do and why.

Research has shown the wide differences which exist among institutions, and among academic development staff, in how pedagogical change is conceived and implemented. Land (2001), for example, has described a range of orientations adopted by educational developers to effect change in their respective institutions in the light of how they interpret the strategic 'terrain' in which they find themselves practising, and the varying interests of particular stakeholders. Different conceptions of the change process were found to be important determinants of practice as was the perceived need to work within disciplinary cultures and discourses. Change in teaching and learning within disciplinary communities is seen by Webb (1996) as a hermeneutic process, essentially dialogic and dialectical - a learning conversation. Yet, organisational tensions and constraints may impede any such conversations. Gornitzka (1999) draws attention to two potentially conflicting influences on change in academic departments. The first is 'resource dependency', which emphasises the influence of the wider higher education environment and counters notions of self-directed and autonomous academic organisations, pursuing their own ends. The second stresses the survival value of conformity to powerful disciplinary norms, often operating in opposition to resource dependency.

While I do not intend to go into the local and broader social, economic and political forces, both current and historic in this paper, Apple (1999) has pointed out that the curriculum is always the result of conflicts and compromises which are a product of power and other forces from both within and outside of the educational context. In the area of teacher education a number of researchers have pointed to the tensions between different academic and institutional traditions within the programme itself. Åberg, for example, discussing a teacher programme in Sweden, describes the situation where students found themselves "victims of many different forces trying to hegemonise their own versions of how a teacher should be educated" (2008: 219).

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