INTRODUCING U.S. HISTORY LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

THROUGH STUDENT-CENTERED METHODS IN ESL CLASSROOM

Maija Heikkila

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1. Introduction

The purpose of my inquiry project is to produce a syllabus for an EFL course in Finnish high school that will promote U.S. history, culture and language through student-centered activities while taking advantage of the available technology. The motivation behind my inquiry project derives from both my personal needs and interests to change my teaching into more student-centered and the recent reformation of the National Core Curriculum in Finland. The outcome of my inquiry project can be directly or partially adapted to different high school syllabuses in Finland to meet the needs of the FNCC 2015.

The Finnish National Core Curriculum (henceforth FNCC 2015) for upper secondary education was published last year and this August the schools started to implement it locally. According to FNCC 2015, participation, activity and collaboration is emphasized in all areas of upper secondary education. Learning is seen as a direct result of students' active, goal-oriented, self-directed action. Thus, a learner is perceived as having an active role in their and others' learning as well. The teacher's role is seen as being a facilitator for critical and creative thinking and guiding students through their learning processes.

The FNCC 2015 emphasizes that methods used in class should encourage students' active participation and develop their collaboration skills. Moreover, students are guided to plan their studies, assess their work and skills in order to take responsibility of their learning (FNCC, 2015) Thus, learning environments should support both creative and critical thinking together with collaboration (FNCC, 2015). In other words, students should be encouraged to use technology during their studies to learn skills that are needed when they move onto higher education.

Considering the changes in the Finnish National Core Curriculum 2015, the need to emphasize student-centered learning methods in order to promote active learning that encourages students to use their critical and creative thinking skills and collaboration with others, is crucial. Moreover, the use of technology is emphasized in FNCC 2015 as the purpose of general upper secondary education in Finland is to prepare students for higher education.

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2. Inquiry project questions

The purpose of my inquiry project is to create an elective course in the syllabus of English as a Foreign Language in Janakkala High School. This course will focus on introducing the history and culture of the USA for Finnish high school students while improving their English skills by using student-centered methodology and online learning. The reformation of the Finnish National Core Curriculum 2015 has created the premise for this inquiry project along with my personal interests to review student-centered teaching methods and the research on them. The research questions are the following:

1) How can *student-centered learning* be combined with *blended language learning*?

2) What kinds of student-centered methodologies and approaches do teachers use in the U.S. to enhance students learning?

For the purpose of this project I define student-centered learning as teaching that takes into account students' interests, uses authentic materials and appropriate technologies, gives students choice on both topics as well as tasks, promotes collaboration and peer teaching and maximizes students use of target language in class, drawing conclusions

from Rogers (2002), McCombs (2001) and Bonk (2016). Authentic material means that it was not written or made for this class in particular but for other purposes.

In this study blended learning is seen as maximizing the use of technology as a tool for students to work with as far as it is purposeful. This means that in the course syllabus students use technology to complete tasks when it is convenient, for example, digital learning environments, applications, word processing, for collaboration etc.

As previously mentioned Finland is undergoing an educational reformation and the new National Core Curriculum also emphasizes the use of technology and virtual learning environments to increase student motivation and deepen their knowledge and understanding (FNCC, 2015). Thus, this raises my interest to broaden my knowledge on blended learning and student-centered methods as a way to design the syllabus for the EFL course. I will review academic literature on teaching online with the student-centered approach.

For the second question I will introduce insights on the use of student-centered methods and the use of technology in class that I have observed during my school visits in U.S. schools. Therefore, based upon my findings on these questions and my broadened knowledge of the U.S. culture and society that I will acquire during my stay at Indiana University, I will plan the syllabus and some of the activities for the course.

3. Methods of inquiry

Since this inquiry project is relatively informal, it does now follow the conventional needs of a traditional research paper. The inquiry project is formed from my own personal interests and the pragmatic needs of my home institution. Therefore, the methods of inquiry consist more on meeting those needs rather than of structured research. In order to provide answers to the questions mentioned previously, I have gathered data by reviewing relevant literature for my project, observed classes in the U.S. schools, talked with teachers about their best practices and attended classes at Indiana University that both promoted and discussed student-centered methods as well has how to use technology in class.

The observations mainly occurred in Bloomington High School North (BHSN) where I observed history, ESL, French and German classes. In addition to BHSN, I was able to visit two other elementary schools that emphasized problem-based learning. These were Columbus Signature Academy Lincoln and Columbus Signature Academy Fodrea. In Lincoln I was able to see how projects were started and linked to the community whereas in Fodrea campus I was able to observe many classrooms, subjects and grades from kindergarten to the 6th grade. The other school in Indianapolis was called Meredith Nicholson School, which is an elementary school that supports flexible learning

environments as they do not have desks and chairs in every classroom. In addition to these schools, I was able to visit a high school in Columbus and two other schools in Indianapolis and one in Evansville where they had students from 8th or 9th to 12th grade.

Columbus Signature Academy New Tech High School is a school where problem-based learning (PBL) is emphasized. In addition to emphasizing PBL they emphasize 21st century skills in a high tech, small school environment. There I was able to visit, for instance, Spanish classes as well as world language class. This was interesting as I have never seen many foreign language taught in the same class at the same time. In Indianapolis, I had the chance to learn of a New Comer program that was a school meant for immigrants who do not speak any or very little English. They were assigned for the school for a year after which they would continue to a local public school. It was interesting to hear how they had combined ESL teaching with content learning. The final school that I had a chance to visit and observe classes was Signature School in Evansville. This is a charter school that offers and IB Diploma Program. There I was able to observe math class, social studies class and the theory of knowledge class.

4. Organization of the report

In the inquiry project I will first focus on the theoretical framework that has given me the setting and guidelines for the syllabus design. In the literature review I will first focus on student-centered learning and how it is defined. Then I will focus on describing how student-centered approach can be seen in an EFL/ESL setting. This will provide an answer to my first question.

The second part of literature review will focus on blended language learning and how to design blended language learning classes. After briefly describing what blended language learning is, I will concentrate on how the two approaches – student-centered learning and blended language – learning can be combined. This will answer my second research question.

After the literature review, I will focus on describing actual classroom practices that I picked up during my observations. Moreover, I will discuss how and why these activities were present. This section will give an answer to my third research question.

In the last part of my project I will present the actual design and outline for the course as well as provide background information of the school setting and students. Lastly I

will attach a lesson plan to demonstrate how to promote student-centered and blended

language learning in an EFL class that focuses on broadening the students' knowledge of

the U.S. history and culture.

5. Literature review

"I realize that if I got up and left the room, nothing would change. Students were engaged in academic, intellectual conversation. My presence was secondary to their academically driven conversation. Success!" (Margeson, 2015, p.183)

This quote summarizes the essence of student-centered learning in my opinion. It is a collaborative activity where the teacher makes him- or herself redundant, yet the students are learning from themselves with each other.

Student-centered learning

As mentioned in the introduction the FNCC 2015 sees students as active leaners and teachers as facilitators for creative and critical learning processes. Thus, student-centered learning is worth looking into when designing a new syllabus that will meet the needs of the national curriculum. Already in 2001 McCombs stated that there is an increasing demand for person-centered learning that will reconnect youth and adults in order to provide challenging learning experiences where the learners are knowledge producers, users and socially responsible citizens. Moreover, McCombs (2001) states that students should be seen as generators of knowledge and active participants in their

own learning. These kinds of views of learning are directly applicable to meet the requirements set by the FNCC 2015.

There are many approaches and varying definitions of student-centered or learner-centered learning that supplement each other. McCombs (2001) defines student-centered learning as taking into account both the learner and their previous knowledge and experiences and learning itself. This means that the learner's background, interests, capability, talents and needs should be acknowledged as well as knowledge about how learning occurs and teaching practices that enhance motivation, learning and achievement for each individual learner (McCombs, 2001). McCombs (2001) states that learner-centered approach can be seen in teaching where the teacher includes learners in the decision-making on how and what is learned and how it is assessed. She continues by pointing out that in learner-centered approach teachers should value each learner's unique perspectives and respect accommodate individual differences. In other words, student's background, experiences, interests and abilities should be taken into consideration. Furthermore, learners should be treated as co-creators and partners in the learning process (McCombs, 2001). This means that teachers should plan, create and develop the learning goals, grading and assessment collaborating together with their students. Thus, students feel that they have made a difference and can have an effect on what they are learning as well as how. This kind of pedagogical approach gives the students more choice, which respectively increases student motivation.

Bonk (2016) lists learner-centered strategies in his course package (p.72). These include "peer teaching and tutoring, mentoring, cooperative learning, interdisciplinary learning, service learning, building relationships, inclusion, higher-order thinking strategies, multiple intelligences, performance/authentic assessment, project-based learning, electronic networking, computer-based technologies and self-assessment and self-monitoring" (Bonk 2016, packet of handouts, p.72). He continues this by listing learner-centered characteristics, which include "choice, responsibility, relevancy, challenge, control, connection, competence, respect, cooperation, self-directed learning and personal mastery" (Bonk 2016, packet of handouts, p.75).

The impact of teachers' beliefs on their perception of their classroom practices and how these perceptions differ from the students' perceptions has been research by McCombs (1998), McCombs and Lauer (1997), McCombs and Quiat (1999) and McCombs and Whisler (1997) (as cited in McCombs, 2001). The outcome of these studies confirm the idea that learner-centered teachers are "more successful in engaging all students in an effective learning process and are themselves more effective learners and happier with their jobs" (McCombs, 2001:190). The studies also revealed how important students self-assessment and reflection was (McCombs, 2001) as it is a way to see how teachers can change their practices in order to reach individual students and their needs in learning better. Moreover, according to McCombs (2001) students' views on their

teachers' practices had an impact on their motivation, learning and achievement. She continues that motivation and achievement are enhanced by students' perception of positive learning environments and their interpersonal relationship with their teachers (McCombs, 2001).

Student-centered methods in EFL/ESL classroom

In an EFL or ESL classroom, learner- or student-centered methods are crucial as they allow the students to actually use the target language in communicating and completing tasks. Rogers (2002) emphasizes that student-centered methods have significant pedagogical benefits when it comes to language learning. He continues that as student-centered learning involves students in decision-making processes it puts more responsibility on the students for their own learning. With student-centered methods the students learn by doing rather than performing meaningless tasks that are unreal (Rogers, 2002). Moreover, learning becomes more active and thus more memorable and personalized (Rogers, 2002). In student-centered approach the tasks and topics are authentic and designed to bring the target language 'alive' and relevant to the real world (Rogers, 2002). The students can share their thoughts about their own lives and experiences.

Rogers (2002) gives handy practical advice on student-centered approach in an EFL setting in his article. He lists 10 strategies on how to incorporate these methods in a language class. These include eliciting, focusing on students interests, encouraging communication over accuracy, engaging students, giving students choices, building students confidence, encouraging their interest in the target language, open-ended tasks, authentic materials and critical thinking (Rogers, 2002).

Many of the techniques or strategies that Rogers (2002) mentioned are already used widely by many language teachers around the world. However, he takes a step further when explaining them. For instance, the teacher should not merely elicit correct answers to simple questions but also ideas and information on the topics in question (Rogers, 2002). He continues that having students share knowledge and experiences in class can contribute significantly to the learning process and thus make it more memorable. Moreover, teachers should focus on not only to the students' experiences but also to their interests. According to Rogers (2002) if the teacher uses students personal lives and areas of interest and experiences the students are thus more likely to get involved in the lesson and thereby remember more of what is learned (see also Marsh, 2012).

The main reason why we learn a language is because we want to be able to communicate with people from other cultures. Thus, encouragement and positive

feedback are crucial. Furthermore, Rogers (2002) points out that teachers should always emphasize communication over accuracy. Students should be provided the opportunity to practice speaking English and having a conversation without a constant fear of making mistakes and being interrupted in order to being corrected (Rogers, 2002). Moreover, he continues that students should be engaged in learning by doing which in the case of foreign language learning means practicing and producing the target language as much as possible. Students should be actively involved in their own learning as then they are more likely to remember what they have learned (Rogers, 2002). This is especially true in a foreign language class.

According to Rogers (2002), students should also have choices on their learning. They should have a say in what they study and how at least some extent. For example, this can also be done in terms of leading students into brainstorming topics that maybe the teacher has somehow already given them. Moreover, students that are engaged into group work either cooperatively or collaboratively have to negotiate and make decisions as they are working together towards a common goal (Rogers, 2002). Furthermore, student-centered approach in language teaching involves developing communicative competence and thus, language plays an integral part in students' lives. This, according to Rogers (2002) can be done by building students confidence in the target language use by giving them positive feedback.

Rogers (2002) also points out the importance of using authentic materials as they will encourage the students' interest in English as it relates to the real world. Rogers (2002) states that these include magazines, videos, television, the Internet etc. Personally I would extent this to include not only authentic materials but also authentic situations that the students can engage in target language with other language users. Moreover, Rogers (2002) continues that high-exposure to English through the use of authentic materials is crucial, as it will constantly improve their target language skills.

When describing student-centered tasks in foreign language learning Roger (2002) states that tasks should be open-ended. In other words there are many possible answers. Having students just complete multiple-choice questions, is not the key to student-centered approach. Instead, open-ended questions allow students to focus on variety of language skills and moreover, students are encouraged to think critically in order to develop problem-solving skills through more creative tasks and collaboration (Rogers, 2002). Open-ended questions also allow the students to practice producing the target language whether in a spoken or written format.

Marsh (2012) points out that student-centered approach gets the students involved in their own learning and thus they do not depend on the teacher all the time. As student-centered approach promotes cooperation and collaboration, it also teaches the students to value each other's contributions. This is mainly present in the way students

learn from each other (Marsh, 2012). This supports the strategies listed by Bonk (2016) as peer teaching and tutoring are one way to achieve this. Marsh (2012) also argues that the teacher's role in a student-centered classroom is to help, guide and advise students, manage their activities, direct their learning and help the students to develop their language skills.

Blended language learning

In the recent years technological innovations have given endless possibilities to broaden the way and what we teach in the classroom. There are new educational applications released everyday and new learning environments and e-learning materials are being developed constantly. The most common approach to make the most of these technological advances in the field of education is blended learning. However, there are various definitions of blended learning (Grgurovic, 2011) depending on the researcher. The most simplistic definition of blended learning is offered by Thorne (2003), who defines blended learning as mixing online learning and traditional teaching methods in order to better meet the needs of individual students. Traditional in this context means face-to-face teaching and not a methodology. Thus, it can refer to student-centered or project-based learning too. In language learning this kind of approach to teaching where technology can be seen as an advantage or a tool to bring the world in the classroom via

global connections, is ideal in my opinion. In this project, however, the focus is on the learner, and thus, blended learning is seen as students using and taking advantage of the technological resources and skills available while working together collaboratively to achieve a common goal while using both spoken and written English.

Marsh (2012) points out that blending different teaching methods is not new. Moreover, she continues that most effective teaching and learning has always combined different methods, approaches, and strategies in order to make the most of knowledge acquisition and development of skills. In the past decades technology has increased its importance in playing a crucial role in the language classrooms. Today there are different ways to incorporate technology in language learning. Thus, Grgurovic (2011) argues that blended learning will be the future of language learning. However, the idea of combining technology and language learning is not new (Neumeier, 2005). In fact, in language learning computers have been used since the 1960s (Marsh, 2012). However, Neumeier (2005) points out that although Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been studied before, there is still a lack of qualitative research on blended learning and language learning.

Nowadays when considering language teaching (especially in Finland) the term blended learning is difficult to define. If one simply states that it is a combination of face-to-face teaching with the use of technology, there is the question of what is considered as

technology as well as how is that technology used. Technology can simply mean CD-player or an interactive whiteboard, which in a more traditional classroom would be operated by the teacher. According to Marsh (2012) in the beginning of the century blended learning simply meant that a part of traditional classroom teaching was supplemented self-study e-learning activities. Marsh (2012) continues that nowadays blended learning combines not only different methods of learning but also different learning environments and styles.

Although, as earlier pointed out, integrating technology into classroom-based instruction is nothing new, the concept of blended language learning is (Marsh, 2012). Research conducted on blended learning shows that when implemented it can significantly improve the learning experience (Marsh, 2012). According to Marsh (2012) several advantages have been found when researching blended language learning. These include providing more individualized learning experiences and personalized support (Marsh, 2012). Moreover, Marsh (2012) explains that blended language learning can encourage both individual and collaborative learning. It also increases student engagement and supports various learning styles. She continues that it provides the students a place to practice their language skills outside the classroom and thus creates less stressful environment to practice their language skills in the target language and provides more flexible studying environment as practice can be done anywhere at

any time. Moreover, it provides students opportunities to practice 21st century learning skills (Marsh, 2012).

However, Marsh (2012) claims that although blended learning is able support deep and meaningful learning, it has to be implemented the right way and just mixing technology and face-to-face teaching is not enough. According to Marsh (2012) the key concepts of making your blended language learning successful are that the different "ingredients" (Marsh 2012, p.6) compliment each other, the learning materials are chosen carefully and that the learners receive support – academic, affective and technical.

Blended language learning and the student-centered approach

Blending different teaching methods is nothing new, in fact, Marsh (2012) states that "good teachers will always use more than one method or approach in their teaching, and good learners will always combine different strategies in learning" (Marsh, 2012:3). Thus, combining student-centered approach to learning with the blended language learning in order to design a syllabus for EFL course that will focus more on the content than language, this is ideal.

In the blended learning classroom the teacher's role is more of a facilitator - someone who gives advice, guides and motivates the students. Thus, according to Marsh (2012), blended learning is itself student-centered. Moreover, Marsh (2012) continues that since blended learning allows you to tailor your teaching according to your students needs, it thus allows the teacher to exploit all the advantages of student-centered approach. Moreover, when combining blended language learning and the student-centered approach, Marsh (2012) points out that the teacher's role is crucial. This is because of the students are encouraged to adapt and develop new learning strategies that might be different from the so-called traditional class. In other words, the teacher should help the students to take on more responsibility of their own learning and thus become more self-directed as combining these two approaches allows more responsibility for the learner. This might create challenges on the teacher, as they will have to teach skills as well as the content in order to allow students to fully benefit and reach to their potential.

Designing a blended language learning syllabus

When designing a blended language learning class there are many things to consider. To name but a few, include what kind of technology is available, what kinds of skills do students have to use that technology, how many contact hours are available for the

course, what is the general timetable and timing of the syllabus. Most importantly the expected learning outcomes and how they will be assessed need to be taken into consideration when planning.

Marsh (2012) points out three principles for blended language learning design. Firstly, you need to make sure that the use of classroom time is effective and efficient, secondly there should be increased opportunities to use English/target language outside the classroom, and thirdly, to maximize opportunities to review and recycle improved learning (Marsh, 2012). This can be reached by making sure that the students use their online time to prepare for the class or to review and extend their learning, as the time in class is focuses on providing opportunities for students to communicate (Marsh, 2012). In other words, this means, for instance, new vocabulary can be introduced online and thus practiced before the class. This way the students can familiarize the new vocabulary at their own pace and thus are more confident in using the new words and expressions in class. Moreover, the online preparation for class can also be used for developing students' listening and reading skills as, especially, reading is something that students tend to do at their own pace. Thus, according to Marsh (2012) when designing blended language learning syllabus, one should make good use of the resources online, including texts, audios and videos, especially if they are authentic. She also encourages having students work collaboratively online to build vocabulary books, find new

resources, share documents online and encourage them to participate in an online discussion about the topics in class (Marsh, 2012).

As mentioned above, the time in class should be used to promote and develop students' communication in the target language. Moreover, the teacher should plan activities that encourage and promote different pair and group work and cooperation and collaboration. This way the students speaking skills will be improved and they will get more confidence in their ability to communicate in the target language in real-world situations (Marsh, 2012). In order to achieve this, Marsh (2012) points out that students should be asked to name topics that they are interested, they should be encouraged to prepare topic-based discussions for class and students should be allowed to facilitate these class discussions. This not only promotes language learning but also follows the guidelines of student-centered approach to language learning.

The third aspect of blended online learning design is to extend, review and consolidate the students' learning (Marsh, 2012). Marsh (2012) suggests that this could be achieved by encouraging students to create their own blogs in the target language, reading others' blogs and posting comments on them, setting up a class wiki which everyone can modify and comment on, and setting up project-based activities that students can work on collaboratively to reach a common goal.

6. Best practices

In this section I discuss my class observations in different schools in Indiana and what I witnessed in regards of student-centered pedagogy and blended learning. There were numerous observations made about different practices and how I could implement them in my teaching and the curriculum design.

Observations

As mentioned earlier I was able to visit four high schools and three elementary schools in Indiana during the program. The high schools are called Bloomington High School North, Columbus Signature Academy (CSA) New Tech, New Comer Program in Indianapolis and Signature Academy in Evansville. The elementary schools I visited were the following CSA, CSA Fodrea and Meredith Nicholson School. All of these schools were public schools but very different from each other.

In CSA Fodrea I was able to visit many classrooms and almost all elementary grades from Kindergarten to sixth grade. The New Comer Program had students from 8th to 12th grade and I was able to visit some classes. The New Comer Program was a school that had just been founded a few months prior to our visit that intended to teach ESL

students basic language skills while teaching them content before integrating them to the local public schools. Usually a student would spend one year there before attending a public school. In Bloomington High School North I was able to observe all the different grades from 8th to 12th and different types of classes including Advanced Placement level classes.

I will organize my findings into two categories – student-centered learning and the use of technology in class – as they are the two main focuses of my study. For the purpose of protecting the privacy of the teachers I observed, I will discuss my observations in a more generalized manner. First I will focus on the use of student-centered methods that were used in the schools and then move onto describe the use of technology in class. Finally I will conclude this section with a discussion on my findings.

The use of student-centered methods

The student-centered methods I observed varied a lot from school to school and from teacher to teacher and from class to class. In some classes I mainly observed eliciting in other words teachers asking questions from students and them replying with fairly simplistic answers (observed on September 7, 14, 22, 29 and October 4, 2016). However, I did not see many open-ended questions asked by the teachers. In some

instances the questions were more open-ended, for example, in the Advanced Placement classes (observed on September 14 and 22, 2016). In general I observed teachers using the class time to lecture and not engage their students in so many activities (observed on September 14, 22, 29).

In language classes I was able to observe more student-centered approaches. This included the use of authentic materials. The students were engaged in a task where they watched videos that were not originally intended as teaching videos and thus, the language use was more authentic (observed September 29 and October 4, 2016). However, the questions about the video could have been more open-ended to allow students to demonstrate their language skills although I think that maybe the students' language skills were not exactly at the level where they would be able to produce more elaborative sentences in the target language. In both language and history classes that I observed the teachers provided students with positive feedback to motivate them and encourage their learning.

I was able to observe very student-centered practices in some of the schools. These included station work where students changed stations every 20 minutes or so in order to get a new task to solve in groups of four (observed October 19). They worked for their task in collaboration with other members of the group. Mainly the students worked as a team and the teacher did not have to interfere with the tasks. This provided

the students to improve their collaboration skills, take ownership of their learning as completing different tasks depended more on their own work as the teacher was more occupied with one of the stations.

Other student-centered methods that I observed included collaboration and peer feedback. This again was a language class where students were asked to write sentences in the target language on the whiteboard, which were later on corrected together as a collaborative and cooperative activity (observed September 29). This allowed the students to learn from others' mistakes and also to revise learned concepts and use the language more naturally.

The use of technology in class

As mentioned earlier during the program I had the chance to observe classes in different schools around Indiana. All of the high schools had one to one device program, which meant that each student had their own device, usually a laptop provided by the school. The elementary schools I visited used iPads collaboratively, which means that there was one iPad for a certain number of students to share (observed October 19).

I was very interested to see how the technology was integrated in the classes. Mainly I observed laptops and online learning environments used for both formative and summative testing, distributing materials and for homework. However, at the high schools I did not witness any work that included collaboration online with only one exception (classes observed on November 2, 2016), although this might be because I did not happen to observe those classes in which this was done. Moreover, the laptops were not used for taking notes (classes observed on September 7, 14, 22 and 29, 2016). Instead the students wrote in their graphic-organizers that the teacher had printed out for them. This was interesting as why they would be required to do it like that as this type of activity would have been actually easier to organize digitally.

Many other tasks were also done on paper. For instance, on October 7, 2016 I observe a class where the students were given a word or a concept and they were asked to find out its definition and significance. Although the students used their laptops in finding the meaning of the word, I noticed that certain students had little idea on what is a reliable source or how to find define a word in a historical context. A case in point was a pair of students that were supposed to define the word *cataract.* After trying their luck on Google, they concluded that its meaning was "an eye disease". This was particularly interesting as clearly the topic of the class was Ancient Egypt and the students should have been very aware of that. The students' skills on using a search engine like Google

or evaluating sources were practically non-existent. Moreover, many of the students accepted the first definition offered by Google without questioning it.

In language classes online learning environments were used to practice vocabulary. The students were asked to collaborate online in a game that the teacher had made for them in order for them to practice numbers in German (observed September 29, 2016). This allowed students to participate in an engaging and competitive game against their classmates while reviewing the vocabulary they had just practiced. Although this type of activity offers some collaboration as they can compete in teams, it also emphasizes the testing and competitive atmosphere of U.S. schools. Many of the classes that I visited students' progresses were measured on the class walls on a scale of some sort with their names on for everyone to see. I do not know whether this kind of approach that encourages students to compare each other's achievement is actually beneficial for the child's development.

Discussion

During the course of the program I was honored to be able to observe so many teachers' classes. What I noticed in regards of using technology and applying student-centered methods varied from class to class and from schools to schools. Some of the schools were more student-centered as the pedagogy of the school was characterized

as project-based learning whereas some of the schools had an International Baccalaureate program and others where just traditional public schools.

I was surprised to find so little student-centered teaching as the U.S. culture and the American values emphasize individuality so much. Although I was really impressed with many of the schools providing each student a laptop, the lack of quality in the use of the technology surprised me as U.S. is one of the greatest countries in the world when it comes to IT inventions and companies. This might be due to the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,* which changed the culture of schools in the USA (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). According to the *No Child Left Behind Act*, students are supposed to reach certain standards and the students are assessed in certain subjects or skills annually to see if they have achieved these standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Having schools and teachers focus on standardized testing and agonizing over the results may be why I did not witness so many participatory pedagogies - in other words the students are taught to memorize small details for multiple-choice questionnaires instead of allowing teachers to develop students' critical thinking, problem-solving and collaborative skills.

Although the *Every Student Succeed Act of 2015* has now given more control back to the individual states, the standardized testing is still involved. However, according to the U.S. Department of State, the testing is now done on state level and is based on multiple

measures (http://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn). Moreover, regardless of which country we are talking about, teachers will always feel the hurry to cover all the required materials. Having the extra burden of being evaluated by how well your students perform builds up the pressure of teachers' hectic work. Although I understand the good intention on standards – making sure that every child reaches a certain level – I think that perhaps having learning objectives instead of standards would make learning more successful.

Overall, I was able to observe interesting classes and speak with both teachers and students about schooling in the USA and gained valuable knowledge and insights into the schooling system. I would have liked to continue my observations in different states and schools to see how much they differ from one and other. For future study, observing how technology is used in classes effectively to meet the needs of the curriculum would be interesting.

7. Course outline

In this section I will first describe the setting of the course. This course will be taught at Janakkala High School, which is a public school that follows the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education. Thus, this framework is described first. From there on I will outline the learning objectives and the purpose of this syllabus and describe the course content and assessment. Finally there will be an example lesson plan on one of the 18 lessons of the syllabus.

The setting – Janakkala High School and the English Curriculum

Janakkalan lukio is a small high school operating in two different locations in the municipality of Janakkala in southern Finland. I teach in the smaller community of Tervakoski with only about 80 students. Tervakoski is a municipality of about 6,000 inhabitants. The school shares its facilities with a local middle school with about 250 students. Most of the high school teachers also work in the middle school.

Janakkala high school has students form various socio-economical backgrounds and with different learning difficulties. Most students come from the surrounding rural area. The only selection criteria that the school has is that the student's GPA has to be 7 or above (10 being the maximum). The school follows the National Core Curriculum and its own

curriculum, which is based on the national one. Janakkala high school as all schools in Finland is publicly funded.

As I mentioned earlier Janakkala high school operates in the same building as a local middle school (Tervakosken yhteiskoulu), where I also teach English as foreign language. This gives us the advantage of working closely together on various projects.

To complete a high school diploma a student will need to complete minimum of 75 credits (one course equals one credit) of which depending on the students' choices of subjects 47-51 are compulsory. Advanced English has 6 compulsory courses and 2 electives according to the National Core Curriculum. The other requirement for a high school diploma is that the student will take four exams one of them being an advanced level exam. Usually all the students in my school take Advanced English as their compulsory exam.

The final exams in Finland are called the Marticulation Examination and the examination board is now implementing a reform to make the exams electronic. This has created many challenges for teachers as well as schools in order to meet the needs of the new exams. In addition to computerize the exams, the structure and demands of the exams will also change. In the case of English the listening comprehensions will include videos in addition to just sound and students will also be required to record and demonstrate

their skills in spoken English. Nowadays, the English exam only consists of listening comprehension, reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary and composition writing. The upcoming changes will require new methodologies and practices to make students more comfortable in using technology and recording themselves while they are demonstrating their ability to function and communicate in a foreign language. The tasks planned for this course aim to take these new demands into account, and thus, blended learning is implemented in the syllabus design.

Learning objectives and the purpose of the syllabus

For the compulsory English courses there are textbooks or e-books that one can use when teaching but since this syllabus is not a national one there are no readymade textbooks I can use. Moreover, many teachers design their own material that they will use in addition to the textbooks. Nowadays, this has become more and more common as teachers have included virtual learning environments more effectively to meet the needs of the students and the curriculum.

The main learning objectives on this course is to

a) broaden students knowledge of U.S. culture and a way of life,

b) enhance their awareness of cultural phenomena and reasons behind different perspectives as well as,

c) improve their English language skills in all the areas of language learning – listening, reading, speaking, writing.

The students already know some aspects of the U.S. history and culture. What this course aims at is to allow students to learn more on the issues that they are already familiar with and to explore new aspects to the U.S. culture and history. As this course is entirely conducted in English, which is not their first language, this allows them to develop their language skills. The tasks or projects that they are required to complete forces them to collaborate with each other and also to demonstrate what they have learned in terms of the content as well as language.

Possible materials and resources

As a language teacher the most important aspects when it comes to materials are that they are authentic, meaning that they were written (or produced) in English and that the source is reliable, and they are engaging meaning that they are both interesting and challenging enough for my students. This also supports one of the main principles of student-centered teaching.

The possible authentic materials that will be used in this classroom are, for example, newspaper or magazine articles and videos, news network websites, TedEd videos and websites and other relevant websites, books, movies, blogs, vlogs, podcasts to name but a few. The material may change according to students interests and choices and unreliable sources may be used to promote discussion and comparison between topics. Moreover, websites by reliable institutions and organizations such as the Smithsonian Institute, the Library of Congress or non-profit organizations.

Course syllabus, required assignments and assessment

Janakkala high school has 75-minute lessons three times a week during a 7 weeks period. This is the class time each course will have. In practice it means there will be 18 contact lessons during that time. I have decided on designing this course to consist of introductory lesson, four different study modules and a guest speaker. Thus, it leaves 16 classes for the modules, four 75-minute lessons each.

The modules are

    I Popular culture

    II History – from past to the present

    III Exploring the U.S.

IV Media and Current Affairs

Topics and themes that are included in the modules are, for example, American values (freedom, liberty, pursuit of happiness, democracy), religion, multiculturalism, dialects and accents, civil rights, constitution, senate, congress, elections, small talk, political correctness, slavery, independence, controversial issues, cultural concepts, food, holidays, traditions, celebrations, fashion to name but a few.

The required assignments that the students have to complete include two written pieces and multimedia tasks. The students will be able to choose which modules and topics they do the written tasks on and which the multimedia ones.

- Create virtual travel brochures (history, sight seeing, restaurant recommendations) (different types of texts/multi-literacy (reviews, information texts, adverts, commercials etc.))
- Making Newspaper articles of historical events
- Creating TV-shows
- Creating class wikispaces

In addition to the four required assignments the students will be asked to be a topic facilitators, prepare for classes in terms of reading articles, preparing for debates and

discussions and completing certain smaller assignments or work that is essential for the course.

Avatar

As one of the objectives for this course is to allow students to look at different phenomena and cultural issues from a different perspective, one of the ways to achieve this is that the students will create an avatar for themselves. Defining who they are in terms of background, age, sex, race, where they live, what do they do for living, their hobbies and interests, will allow the students to discuss and debate current issues from a different perspective. This will also allow students to develop their critical thinking skills, creativity and problem-solving skills.

As this course is an elective course it will be assessed in terms of fail or pass. In order to pass the students need to attend minimum 15 classes out of 18, complete all the assignments on time. Moreover, the assignments will be evaluated in terms of content and language. The students need to demonstrate that their ability to speak and write English is at B1-B2 level (independent user) set in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Example lesson plan

An example lesson plan for a 75-minute lesson.

Lesson objectives:
Content – students will familiarize themselves in the Civil Rights Movement and African-American history. They will produce a mindmap and a timeline of the on their prior knowledge and what they will pick up during the tasks.
EFL – students will practice all four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), build their vocabulary and practice conversation skills.

Time	Activity	Skills/purpose
5 minutes	Checking attendance	To see who is absent.
8 minutes	8 nouns – the students describe them with 8 nouns.	Ice-breaker activity to get the students talking and ready for a new topic and into a groups.
Station work	**Station work**	
3 x 18 minutes (54 minutes)	3 different stations where students work in groups Station I - slavery http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/voices/ vf ssp.html The students will listen to one of the interviews on this page as a group and take notes on what life was like for African-Americans during slavery.	Station I listening skills taking notes from a spoken text collaboration
	Station II – civil rights movement https://www.nps.gov/subjects/civilrights/index.htm The students will search the articles on National Park Service website on Civil Rights Movement and complete their timeline/mindmap	Station II Reading Taking notes from a written text Collaboration
	Station III – current situation Students will search online for current news and movements (#BlackLivesMatter) for up-to-date information on the situation and negotiate what piece of news they will pick and why.	Station III Reading, Cooperation speaking
8 minutes	The students will share their mindmaps and timelines and discuss the questions raised by the topic.	Wrap up activity

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