Culturally responsive foreign language teaching in a Finnish elementary school

A Research Project by

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Executive Summary

The falling trend in Pisa-test[1] results from the Finnish students' worries Finland. Many teachers seem to find fault in the current curricula, even though there is evidence that students' socio-economic backgrounds are impacting the results increasingly.[2] Simultaneously, we are witnessing a rising trend with mental health problems amongst children, teenagers and young adults in Finland.[3] Paradoxically, the falling curve of Pisa results seem to worry more than the rising one of mental health problems. One solution that many teachers eagerly seem to offer is to go back in time to the previous curriculum and "Let teachers teach again." However, I will argue in my research paper that we have the solution already in our hands; there is a firm evidence base that suggests focusing on well-being correlates positively with academic success. I also argue we have the possibility to change things for the better with the tools provided by the current curricula, which are; focus on the socio-cultural view of learning instead of pressuring the individual learner; extend targeted care for the well-being of all the actors, and; provide quality learning opportunities. My research paper will provide more detailed information on how to put these goals into practice in a modern foreign language classroom drawing from the theories of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy since they include all the key factors for good teaching and from my own teaching practice.

Keywords: foreign language teaching, student-centered learning, well-being, culturally responsive teaching

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[1] See:PISA - PISA (oecd.org) "PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges."
[2] See the OECD publication on PISA results.
[3] Lasten ja nuorten mielneterveys perusteiset käynnit 2020 (julkari.fi)

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1 Introduction

Finland has a national core curriculum, which the local curricula are based on. Usually each municipality has their own curriculum, in contrast to regional ones. Each local curriculum has the same core values as defined and set in the core curriculum but it has more specifications and practices on school and community level. However, the local curricula cannot overrule the core curriculum, they are only to complement and specify it. The implementation of the local curricula starting from 2016 have not been fully successful, since they lack relevant content, for example grade specified goals in different subjects. [4] There is also evidence of the lack of up-to-date proficiency in assessment among English foreign language teachers.[5] Many teachers find it also difficult to understand curriculum goals on a more practical level. It is true that the core curriculum has many abstract concepts such as student-centered learning, well-being, versatile assessment methods and self-guidance without offering much tools in implementing these in practice. Thus, there is evidence that additional material to support foreign language teachers in their work is needed.

My teaching practice is based on the local curriculum, common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching. I have been practicing student-centered teaching for the past ten years focusing on the social aspect of learning. I have been working in an elementary school in the city of Espoo since 2011 as a foreign language teacher. I teach English as A1 language (first foreign language) and French as A2 language (second foreign language) to students from 4th to 6th grade, it is to say to kids from 10 to 13 years. Our school is located in a wealthy higher middle-class suburban area with the student population around 490. The class sizes vary from around 20 students till around 30. Some of the English lessons students study in smaller groups with half of the

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[4] See for example the report by Karvi (National Centre of Evaluation in Education) Näkymiä OPS-matkan varrelta – Esi- ja perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelmien perusteiden 2014 toimeenpanon arviointi (karvi.fi)

[5] See the Karvi report A-englanti, 7. lk | Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus (Karvi)

students of the class. English is a mandatory subject and all the students start learning it already in the first grade. Our school also offers second foreign language studies in German and French. This language is optional and students start learning it in the fourth grade. Additionally all the students start learning Swedish in the sixth grade since it is one of our two official languages in Finland. Our student population is mostly White with Finnish origins. We have only a few students with other ethnicities than Finnish. Almost all our students speak Finnish as their first language. The majority of our teachers, 27, are White women. Currently we have three male teachers who are also White. Our other educational staff consists of six White women and a White female school principal.

As I have studied in the Peabody College in Vanderbilt University I have found the language for my teaching aspirations: I have been following the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching. My main focus in my practice has been both mine and my students' well-being and I have been working hard in creating a supportive learning environment. I have also conducted students-centered methods, such as project-based learning. I actively encourage learners and create them opportunities to take an active role in their learning and engage in the classroom activities. I make time and place for interaction and try my best to create the classroom a safe space for learning. I have specialized in teaching and learning in digital environments and developed versatile ways for assessment utilizing diverse digital tools and for the integration of digital tools in the classroom practice. I also find it crucial to integrate transversal skills with the language content. In this paper I will discuss these aspects in more detail and support my practice with research evidence.

2 Culturally Responsive Teaching

2.1 What is Culturally Responsive Teaching?

The theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching is mainly created by teacher educators practicing their in-class observations with in-service teachers, referring here particularly to two of the experts in the field Gloria Ladson-Billings (2022) and H. Richard Milner IV (2021). They both base their theories firmly on practice having observed teachers who are successful in educating students from historically marginalized groups focusing on African American students. Those successful teachers worked with the kinds of students no other teachers had wanted to work with as being judged beyond help. Ladson-Billings (2018) sees no conflict of interest in focusing merely on African American students, since she believed that by focusing on the least successful students she would be able to find the kind of successful teaching that would benefit all learners, even the most successful ones. The kind of teaching that gets the struggling students to gain academic success will most likely be beneficial to all. Indeed Both Ladson-Billings' and Milner's work has many examples of teachers working with students that had traditionally been left out of academic success. These teachers that they worked with not only *complied* with teaching these kinds of students, but managed to get them thrive. The theories of Culturally Responsive Teaching are thus originally ideologies and practices put together by observing successful educators in their practice. The literature of Culturally Responsive Teaching, namely in the United States, has traditionally focused mainly on the issues of race. However, as pointed out by Howard (2016) in his book *We can't teach what we don't know*, Culturally Responsive Teaching can be beneficial for all disadvantaged social groups dealing for example with the issues of gender, age, disability, social class, religion, language, sexual orientation, what not (p. 14). If you as a reader believe that racial issues are not a problem in your context, you can take as a focus

group whichever group of people gaining the least academic success in your context and think of me referring to them. I will argue this theory is applicable in any context.

Even though Finland still scores above the OECD average in the PISA-results, there is a worrying trend in the decline of the results, starting already in 2006. In the OECD country specific overview we see evidence that the students with disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds are less successful than their advantaged peers. Another worrying finding is the gender gap between girls and boys. In reading tests the gap between genders was even higher than the OECD average, girls outperforming boys. The third equity related issue is the lower performance of students with immigrant backgrounds which was far below OECD average in reading skills. When thinking about implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching in Finland, it is thus these three groups of students we should focus perhaps the most.

2.2 Teaching as an 'act of freedom'

Ideas of Culturally Responsive Teaching were presented already in 1994 by bell hooks in her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* but the term used by hooks herself was *"engaged pedagogy"* (ch. 1). Hooks defines her pedagogical practices as *"an interplay of anticolonial, critical, and feminist pedagogies"* (p. 10). She developed her teaching based on her own experiences as a Black student before and after segregation, as an university student, as a pre-service and in-service teacher and finally as a university professor. To hooks, learning is, or should be, an act of freedom, and teaching, thus, a practice of freedom. Teaching as practice of freedom pushes students to overcome boundaries, whether these boundaries are based on race, gender, or social class. 'Learning' is the emergence and further development of critical thinking. The teacher's responsibility is to make the classroom an exciting place by transmitting the joy of learning to their students. This requires that the students are seen as individuals and that each student is valued as their individual selves. The

students need to feel wanted in the classroom and valued by their teacher. Without these feelings there will be no engagement by the student, and without engagement there will be no true learning.

The same idea of learning as an act of freedom is shared by one of the greatest pedagogues of all time Paulo Freire in his book classic *Pedagogy for the Oppressed* (1970/2018). Freire presents a model of teaching where the teacher and students work in collaboration. Teaching and learning takes place in interaction, a process which Freire calls a dialogical method of teaching. I will deal with this issue in more detail in chapter 3.2 but here I need to mention that for Freire this kind of teaching is the only possible one. This way teaching is realized as a practice of freedom. The term freedom refers here more to students than to the teacher, allowing students to be active in the process of constructing knowledge. Students are not mere receivers of information.

2.3 Teacher mindset in Culturally Responsive Teaching

The way teachers think about their students does affect the learning outcomes. According to Ladson-Billings (2006) Culturally Relevant Teachers believe in their students' possibilities in succeeding and hold high expectations for them. These teachers do not give up on their students. Teacher's mindset plays a significant part in education. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that the problems with teaching students from disadvantaged groups is caused by our thinking. If we as educators believe that our students will not succeed, they probably will not. Because our way of thinking about our students affects the way we teach them. And as we teach some students in a different way, and have lower expectations for them, we see that our prophecy has come true as they will gain less and less academic success. And we do not even realize that it was ourselves in the first place that created this problem. As Ladson-Billings says, when we are not aware of what we even think and cause harm to our

students, our classroom will become unsafe and " a place where bodies are managed and maintaining order becomes the primary task". I challenge all the educators to be better than that.

In his article "Teaching community, praxis, and courage: A foundations pedagogy of hope and humanization" Renner (2009) refers to many studies showing evidence of inequalities inside the American school system amongst Black students. One of the inequalities is the deficit mindset and low expectations towards students of color. There is evidence of a culture of control among educators "in which students are controlled, managed, and modified rather than challenged, developed, and encouraged to explore the world around them". Renner does not want to put the blame merely on the educators as he sees them as victims of the system themselves. Victims who have been socialized by the dysfunctional and unfair system. However, Renner does call for resistance. Who would be in a better position to change the world and correct the inequalities than the educators? We as educators need to commit to fighting for human rights. We do not have a choice or say in this. But before we are able to reach an up-dated understanding of the current world, we need to commit to mental work. We need to start seeing the world through diverse lenses, not solely through the ones of the privileged White middle-class. After reaching this point, the struggle only begins. Being aware of the systemic inequalities is not enough. We need action as well, which subsequently requires a lot of courage and also hope. But who said teaching was supposed to be easy?

Portelli and Konecny (2013) have studied subversive pedagogy in their article "Neoliberalism, subversion, and democracy in education". They talk about the harmful effects the neoliberal ideology[6] has caused to education by its oppressive and restrictive

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[6] 'Neoliberalism' is an ideology that is based on the values of capitalism. Its focus is on economic growth. This ideology fails to see people as individuals but treat them as a larger entity. In education this signifies the beliefs that "one size fits all", emphasizing the 'myth of meritocracy' and blaming the individual if not succeeding. As explained by Dr. Loni Horn during the class "Humanizing Pedagogy" at Vanderbilt University, Peabody College, September 25th 2023.

nature. The neoliberal legacy makes it difficult to enact democratic practices in the classroom and instead keeps on reproducing these detrimental systemic inequalities. But yet, democratic practices is what education in its core should aim at. The authors share that they "have encountered courageous educators, both teachers and school principals, who are willing to struggle for the democratic spirit in education to benefit students who have traditionally been marginalized, especially as the result of a system-wide deficit mentality". It is a fair assumption to make that they are indeed talking about *Culturally Responsive Teachers*.

2.4 Teaching as offering opportunities

In his book *Start where you are but don't stay there* Milner challenges teachers towards a mindset that supports achievement and success for **all** students. Milner talks about "opportunity gaps" and defines them as "input-related practices and policies that are process driven and can result in students' academic, cognitive, social, affective, emotional, behavioral, and psychological challenges" (p. 10). He argues that by grappling with opportunity gaps we can enhance achievement.

In chapter 1 Milner offers "an Opportunity Gap Explanatory Framework". In the framework the focus shifts from the outcomes to providing opportunities. Success is the outcome of functioning opportunity structures in practice. The first step towards the working opportunity structures is the teachers' mindset. Educators need to first become aware of beliefs, practices and mechanisms creating, recreating and maintaining opportunity gaps and then figure out how to address and finally change them.

The first principle in the framework is to "reject color blindness". We need to accept that race does matter. Also, we need to challenge our thinking to be able to see how racism is produced and reproduced in the structures and systems. Then we will need to be willing to change this. This is related to the mental work necessary to recognise and acknowledge our

biases, which I will deal with in this paper in detail in chapter 5. It is a false belief that "racism can be conquered by ignoring it".

The second principle is to "understand cultural conflicts". This has to do with acknowledging and appreciating our students' backgrounds and cultures. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to build positive relationships. Every student has both the need and the right to feel safe and wanted in the classroom. It is the teacher's responsibility to make efforts in creating a supportive environment. Understanding and valuing students' diverse backgrounds and their cultures is crucial. The goal is not to become *one of the students* and spend hours in learning the latest TikTok-dance or take lessons in order to learn to rap. There will be cultural conflicts no matter what. But the difference is that the Culturally Responsive Teacher takes these conflicts as opportunities to learn. The students have the right to be heard.

The third principle in the framework is to "recognize the myth of meritocracy". It is indeed a myth, since not everyone starts at the same point. The cruel fact of life is that some people are more privileged than others. No student should be punished by the socioeconomic status of their parents. A child who has to take care of their little siblings because their single-parent has to do two jobs, clearly just cannot do any more at school. We are not born with the same opportunities. Students do not succeed **only** by working hard or even harder if they are not succeeding. Systems are not equally fair for everyone. And the most important; every student is worth the teacher's effort.

This leads straight to the fourth principle, which is to "disrupt low expectations and deficit mind-sets". Students do not enter our classrooms as empty vessels. They already possess tremendously different kinds of skills and knowledge. All of them also have the possibility to grow and develop. We as educators need to nurture the students' will to learn and create them opportunities. We need to see our students' unique possibilities and strengths

and value their diversity. We need to believe in our students and challenge them. Not challenging our students enough is undervaluing them.

The fifth and final principle of the framework is "counter context-neutral mind-sets". The school is not a neutral place. Every school is situated in a specific place and time. Every curriculum is a product of its time. Learning always takes place in a context. In addition we need to consider the diverse backgrounds of our students. The students are not isolated from the world, they always live in a certain place, in a certain community. We are also a part of this community, or at least we should be. We should be interested in not only the school community but also the community where our students live. We should make efforts to understand the community and then to value it. Building partnerships with the surrounding community and its members will support students' learning.

3 Re-defining foreign language teaching

3.1 Values and guiding principles in the Finnish Core Curriculum

Before we can start talking about teaching, we need to have a look at the Finnish national core curriculum and how the conception of learning is defined in chapter 2.3, since this sets the guiding principles both for our teaching ideology and methodology. The curriculum puts the spotlight on the learner. The students are active in their own learning processes. They will learn how to set goals and solve problems both independently and as group members. In addition to new knowledge, students will learn to reflect their own learning, experiences and feelings. Learning takes place in interaction with the teacher and other school staff, other students, community and learning environments. Learning is seen as working independently and in collaboration, thinking, planning, inquiring, but also self-evaluating these processes. Learning together supports creativity and critical thinking skills, problem solving skills and the ability to take perspective. Development of the learning-to-learn skills creates the

foundation to life long learning. These guidelines of learning should be followed and realized through our pedagogical practices.

Core curriculum chapter 14.4.3 establishes the requirements for foreign language teaching. With and through language people think and learn. Language learning further develops thinking skills. Foreign language teaching supports the development of multicultural identities and gives opportunities to use creativity. There is lots of space for joy and playfulness, which are being supported by the use of versatile methods and diverse material. Language teaching material needs to be authentic, in the sense that is relevant and meaningful for students. Language teaching builds bridges to students' lives and it acknowledges and utilizes skills acquired outside the school. The focus is on language use and communication. Language teaching should affirm students' belief in themselves and guide them to use their language skills with courage, even when they do not know yet much. When assessing foreign language learning, versatile methods are required to be used. Assessment of language skills takes into account all different aspects of language skills; listening, speaking, reading, writing and interaction. Assessment in the grades 1-5 is based on the goals specified in the local curricula. When assessing 6.th graders, teachers are required to use the national criteria provided by the Finnish National Agency for Education. These criteria are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

With the implementation of the current Finnish curricula, we also executed a change of paradigm in what is considered as 'teaching'. The focus shifted from the teacher and from the teaching towards learning and learners. The current core curriculum approaches the actualization of 'teaching' via learning goals and not the language content. Whereas the previous curriculum started from the language content that was needed *to go through* when teaching. Thus, the previous curriculum gave teachers the contents they needed to introduce to their students. Instead, the current one tells us where we should aim when it comes to the

learners learning through the practice of language teaching. However, many communities lack from their curriculum grade specified goals, and instead all the grades from 3 to 6 use the same goals. This creates a problem, since teachers do not have much concrete to start from. For this reason I myself have found the CEFR useful, since it includes lots of specified content for different language levels. In this chapter I will further specify the curriculum principles drawing from Freire's dialogical teaching and student-centered teaching methods, which all are consistent with culturally responsive teaching.

3.2. The socio-cultural aspect of teaching

The paradigm change mentioned in the previous chapter is not new in the field of education, even though we started deploying it in Finland as late as 2014. Similar ideas were introduced already in 1968 in Brazil by the revolutionary pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970/2018). In his famous book *Pedagogy for the Oppressed* Freire introduces and explains the concept of "banking education" in chapter 2. In this approach teachers are viewed as the possessors of knowledge which they then transfer to their students to be memorized and cited. This view of teaching is very unidirectional. Students are seen as mere receivers of knowledge and the focus is on the teaching. Guiding principles and practices in the banking education are for example the following; teacher holds the knowledge and is noble enough to transfer it to the students; teacher teaches and the students listen; learning is knowing and memorizing; the teacher chooses the content of teaching and students are to adapt; the teacher is the subject and learners mere objects in their own learning processes; the teacher uses their power by rules and regulations and students are to comply. No creativity nor students' voices have a place in this kind of classroom. We do already know so much about learning so that we know why this kind of teaching is no longer an option.

Similarly to Freire's concept of banking education Palmer (1998/2017) also criticizes "the top-down" model of knowledge (pp. 103-105), calling it an "objective myth". The myth sees knowledge as something that only "the expert" has access to and then out of grace decides to share it to "the amateurs". However, this is not the truthful essence of knowledge, Palmer states. He uses the concept of "community of truth", where both the teacher and the learners are all knowers towards the subject. The subject is then studied in collaboration with all the actors. The latter view of knowledge is certainly the one that is found in the core curriculum. The idea of the community of truth is also very applicable to foreign language teaching and learning. Learning languages is not just remembering words and grammar and using them in traductions and activities assigned by the teacher. The essence and purpose of language is communication. We need to let students use the language, be creative and express themselves in ways we cannot always even predict. Pure repetition or yes and no answers are unquestionably not enough anymore if they ever even were.

The problem with banking education or with the objective myth is that people are seen in relation **in** the world and not **with** it. This is exactly what Jean Lave is stating in her article *Teaching, as Learning, in Practice* (1996). She argues that learning should be above all seen as social and collective practice, instead of viewing it solely from the individual and psychological point of view. Lave defines learning as *"participation in socially situated practices"*. Of course the outcomes of learning are realized on an individual and psychological level, but how to come to the point where learning happens is the crucial question to be asked. Freire, Palmer and Lave each but also the researchers in the field of culturally responsive teaching (see chapter 2) emphasize the importance of the social dimension in the learning process.

In her article "Operationalizing the Access–Voice– Choice Framework for Equitably and Justly Teaching the Language for School Literacy" Phillips Galloway (2023) draws our

attention to the language used in the classroom. We as educators need to consider whether our language use allows all students access to the content to be learned, makes their voices heard and encourages students to use all their language capacities. The study focuses on English language learners but the same principles need to be followed with all students. These principles that Phillips-Galloway presents are compatible with Freire's dialogical method of teaching. Without access to the content, that is, without understanding it, the students will not be able to participate in the mutual creation of knowledge. If they are not allowed to use their voices, there will be no connection to their lives or what is relevant to them. And without choice, students are not able to draw from their other linguistic (or any other kinds of) repertoires. First of all, these three aspects - access, voice and choice - are fundamental as a matter of principle. But also, according to my experiences, ensuring access, encouraging students to use their voices and supporting their choices have positive effects on motivation and engagement. This consequently guides students towards the joy of learning.

Freire (1970/2018) defines learning as *"practice of freedom"*, in substitution for banking education. For Freire learning happens in a dialogue where all the participants, both the teacher and the students are active subjects. In dialogical teaching, the teacher poses a problem, yet they *are* still the ones who have *more* knowledge in relation to the learners. The idea of the process is that the students, in dialogue with the teacher and their peers, acquire a new way of knowing, which is more commonly referred to as 'learning'. The dialogical teaching is explained in more detail in the article "What is the "dialogical method" of teaching" by Ira Shor and Paulo Freire (1987). If you have feared so far that the new way of teaching means teachers are no longer allowed to teach, rest assured, this is by no means the case. Dialogue is *a mutual learning process* in which both the teacher and the learners engage; "Dialogue seals the learning process between the cognitive subjects, the subjects who know, and who try to know". Dialogical teaching method is not a *laissez-faire* pedagogy.

Learners still need the teacher to pose the problems (what to learn) since the teacher is the one who knows the curriculum and what is meant to be learnt. However, the teacher no longer tries to pour the information onto their students in a monological way. Instead, they all engage in the processes of creating and recreating knowledge. Students are encouraged to participate and contribute with what they already know. Teachers are equally learners themselves in the process. It is the responsibility of the teacher to connect the contents with real life and the lives of the students. The teacher needs to introduce the new knowledge in a way that is comprehensible to the students.

Teaching our subject, it is crucial to reflect what 'knowledge' is. In Freire's pedagogy 'knowledge' is not static, but recreated in a shared dialogical process with the teacher and the learners. Thus, knowledge has a transformative nature. It is not something that the teacher hands over to the students as such and that remains the same when received. However, as Palmer (1998/2017) explains, we have created this illusion of "objective knowledge" in the world of education. Objectivism separates us from the self, since any form of subjectivism poses a threat to the true knowledge. This creates the illusion of authorities possessing real knowledge. (p. 52-54.) Freire (1970/2018) has exactly the same idea when talking about banking education. In reality, knowledge is a social construction, as Palmer (1998/2017) points out. He says that knowing is "[...] how we make community [...] and a human way to seek relationship and, in the process, to have encounters and exchanges that will inevitably alter us." Thus, language teaching is more than going through vocabulary and grammar and reciting them by heart. Of course, language teaching starts by introducing the content, but then it goes further. The content is further developed in the dialogue between the teacher and the learners and in the end new knowledge has emerged. With the following images I hope to uncover the difference between the static, banking concept of knowledge and the dialogical one.

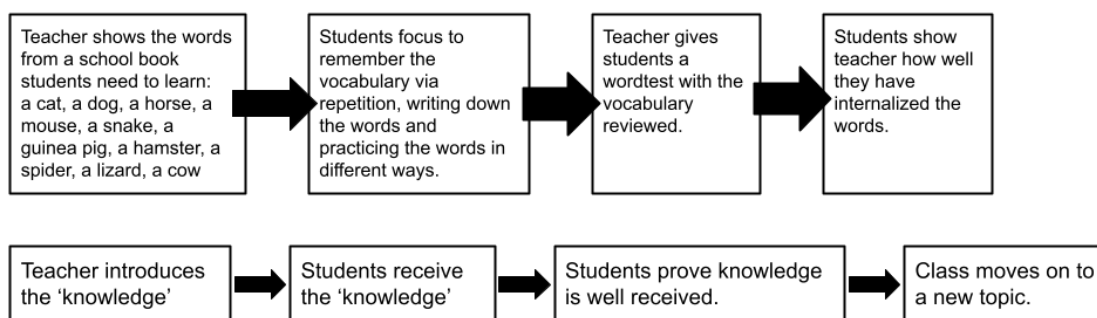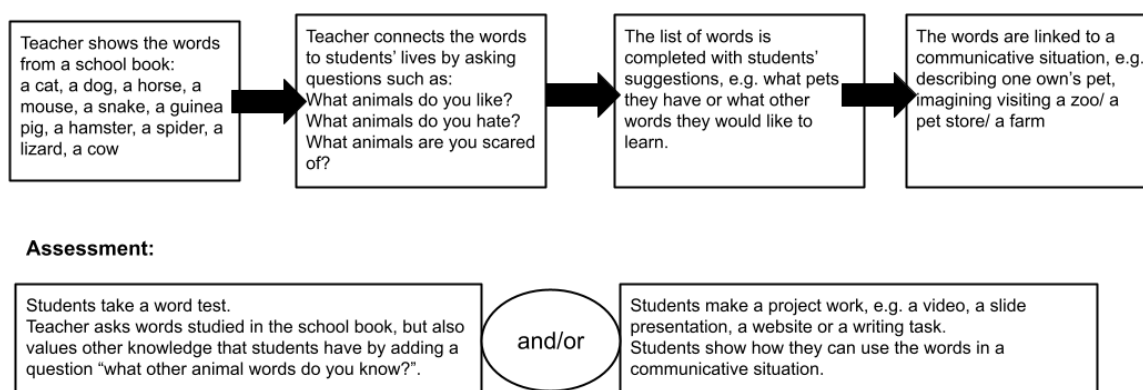**Image 1 shows the static, banking essence of knowledge.**

| Teacher shows the words from a school book students need to learn: a cat, a dog, a horse, a mouse, a snake, a guinea pig, a hamster, a spider, a lizard, a cow | → | Students focus to remember the vocabulary via repetition, writing down the words and practicing the words in different ways. | → | Teacher gives students a wordtest with the vocabulary reviewed. | → | Students show teacher how well they have internalized the words. |

| Teacher introduces the 'knowledge' | → | Students receive the 'knowledge' | → | Students prove knowledge is well received. | → | Class moves on to a new topic. |

Image 2 shows the dialogic, transformative essence of knowledge.

| Teacher shows the words from a school book: a cat, a dog, a horse, a mouse, a snake, a guinea pig, a hamster, a spider, a lizard, a cow | → | Teacher connects the words to students' lives by asking questions such as: What animals do you like? What animals do you hate? What animals are you scared of? | → | The list of words is completed with students' suggestions, e.g. what pets they have or what other words they would like to learn. | → | The words are linked to a communicative situation, e.g. describing one own's pet, imagining visiting a zoo/ a pet store/ a farm |

Assessment:

| Students take a word test. Teacher asks words studied in the school book, but also values other knowledge that students have by adding a question "what other animal words do you know?". | and/or | Students make a project work, e.g. a video, a slide presentation, a website or a writing task. Students show how they can use the words in a communicative situation. |

3.4 Transferable skills

The Finnish national core curriculum for basic education specifies seven categories for *transversal competence*; 1) thinking and learning to learn, 2) cultural competence, interaction, and expression, 3) managing daily life, taking care of oneself and others, 4) multiliteracy, 5) ICT competence, 6) working life and entrepreneurial competence and, 7) participation, influence, and building a sustainable future[7]. These skills are meant to be taught simultaneously as integrated into the subject content and assessed within the subject assessment. However, neither the curricula nor the school books offer material or tools for either.

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[7] Translations from: Transversal competencies - MOOC.fi courses

Ladson-Billings (2006) said it already in the most straightforward way; "No curriculum can teach itself". There is always a teacher between the curriculum (and/or the teaching material) and the learners. It needs to be understood that teaching requires a lot of work. The easiest methods do not necessarily lead to the best learning outcomes. Teaching is a work you need to be committed to and the focus of learning should fall on the long term goals. This means that teaching is not merely going through the content. Instead the strive for teaching critical thinking skills and other transferable skills should be in the core. As was explained in the introduction, the somewhat unsuccessful execution and implementation of the local curricula has caused the substitution of the curricula with school books provided by big publishing houses. This is unfortunate since many language school books lack both the teaching and the assessment material of the transferable skills.

When it comes to teaching transversal skills, the question we need to ask is not *what* to teach, but *how* to teach a specific content. How do we teach, imagine for instance animal vocabulary, in a way that it also supports the development of transferable skills? Here, I will provide a few examples referring to each of the transferable skills. In order to find more material (in Finnish), you can visit my teaching site.[8] As you will see, many of the transferable skills intertwine.

Using as an example: Learning animal words, beginner level

1. **Thinking and learning to learn**
   - Provide students a list of descriptions, for example like "brown and big", "green and small", "black and cute" or "white and fast". Students come up with an animal that suits the description and write it in English. Or you can do this the other way, too.

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[8] https://sites.google.com/eduespoo.fi/monipuolinen-arviointi/etusivu

- Give students the London Zoo website address. Provide students with a list of the kinds of animals they need to find. Ask them for example to find the biggest, the fastest, the smallest or the cutest animal. Taking this further, ask your students to choose their favorite animal in the London Zoo. Ask them to make a presentation of this animal.

- Create an escape room exercise in Google Forms.

2. **Cultural competence, interaction, and expression**

- Make a little field trip in the near forest. Make a list in English of all the animals you encounter. The lists can be completed with animals students have come across in their neighborhood. Discuss what animals you have seen.

- Compare animal words with different languages. Find the similarities, differences or surprises between the languages that your students can speak.

- Learn how animals "speak" in different languages. Give examples of animal sounds in different languages and make your students guess what languages different animals speak.

3. **Managing daily life, taking care of oneself and others**

- Practice animal words through different games when you work all together as a whole group or students work in smaller groups. (Memory game, miming, digital games, pyramid game, bingo, changing the seat game…)

- Make a shared Slides Presentation of animals, each student contributing with their own Slide. Create the template and make the first Slide with your own information (pets, favorite animals, animals that scare you, etc.).

4. **Multiliteracy**

- Miming animals

- Creating videos, Slides presentations, comics, posters of animals

- Reading texts about different animals

- Listening to and singing animal songs. Maybe even creating your own simple lyrics.

- Watching animal videos

5. **ICT competence**

   - Use game-based sites to practice words (e.g. Blooket, Baamboozle, Kahoot!, Loru Games, Quizlet, Gimkit).

   - Students make live animal picture vocabularies: students take pictures or video clips of different animals or themselves pretending to be different animals and then they say or write the word in English.

   - Students create a Slides presentation of their pets/ favorite animals.

   - Students create a presentation of their imaginary zoo using Google Sites.

   - Students search information online about animals they are interested in.

6. **Working life and entrepreneurial competence**

   - Students work in groups and they make a presentation of animals in a specific country. They take roles in the group based on their strengths.

   - If possible, organize a visit to a local zoo. Ask for an English speaking tour guide.

   - Students make a project where they come up with a service related to animals (e.g. pet grooming services, doggy daycare). They create a poster and/or a leaflet of their business. You may even organize a pet business fair.

7. **Participation, influence, and building a sustainable future**

   - Find out whether there are any endangered animals in your community or country. Find out more about these species. You may also find information

- about the most endangered animals in the world. Create posters, leaflets, Slides presentations, etc.

- Talk about the pets students have. Talk about how to take care of them and look after them. You may even create video/written tutorials.

4 Student-centered language teaching

4.1 Guidelines for student-centered methods

Both the Finnish National Core Curriculum and the culturally responsive teaching place the student in the center. This is also what Fenner and Snyder (2017) affirm in their book *Unlocking English Learners' Potential; Strategies for Making Content Accessible*. In culturally responsive teaching there is not just one student-centered method, instead there are several the teacher can choose from. Neither does the Curriculum require the use of specific teaching methods as long as the guidelines are met. Fenner and Snyder (2017) mention by name the methods of collaborative learning, inquiry-based learning, and project-based learning (p. 45), which I myself use all on a regular basis. However, it is not that important which methods the teacher decides to use, but Fenner and Snyder offer us several principles we should consider when making the choice (pp. 45-46). For instance, we should allow students to participate in the choice of learning materials. We should also let students make decisions considering the pace of learning, goal setting and assessment and working methods. We need also to provide students with multiple opportunities in building relationships with their peers creating them opportunities for group-work and collaboration. These guidelines are easily met by using task-based, problem-based and project-based learning.

When choosing the methods for foreign language teaching, we should also keep in mind the essence of language; it is a tool for thinking and communication. Our approach for language teaching should thus be more than just seeing language as a target to be studied.

However, I am not saying nor have I ever argued that we should not teach vocabulary and grammar. My main argument is that we not only can but should teach both vocabulary and grammar through language use, prioritizing communication. Using task-based, problem-based or project-based learning makes this possible. I also argue that naming methods has little significance. We can also mix different methods. Because why not? Some firm believers of task-based learning, for example, might argue that we should not teach grammar explicitly, at all. And if we do so, it is no longer task-based learning. I argue that we should not worry about teaching grammar when using student-centered methods. If we feel like we should teach grammar explicitly I do not see any harm in doing so. Focusing on terminology or separating and isolating different methods is not relevant. What matters is the big picture. How we use language in the classroom matters. What we do, or ask our students to do matters. And we can start by asking ourselves what kinds of exercises we ask our students to do or what kinds of questions we ask them. Let's ask ourselves the following questions:

- Do the exercises we use require thinking skills or problem solving skills?

- Is the language content connected to students' lives?

- Is the main skill required in the exercises copying?

- Are all the answers found in the textbook/ texts?

- Do we already know the answers for the questions we ask our students?

If we answer the first two questions "no" and all the rest "yes", then sadly, we are using none of the student-centered methods and it is about time to do something about it.

In all the methods mentioned the starting point is language use and communication. Vocabulary and grammar are learned through language use. When teaching in a culturally responsive way, activities and assignments are relevant to students and they have a connection to real-life situations. That is why it is important to ask students what themes and topics they want to learn about. In task-based learning and project-based learning students

work on more restricted assignments and they get as much scaffolding from the teacher as needed. The notable difference between task-based and project-based learning is the complexity of the assignments, the latter focusing on broader themes and longer periods. In problem-based learning the process is more important than the product, whereas in the former methods the goal is to produce or create something. But as I already mentioned, naming or differencing the methods we use is not that relevant, as long as we focus on the language use and place the student in the center. However, in the next chapters I will deal with each method in more detail.

4.2 Problem-based learning

Problem-based learning, as explained in chapter 1 in the book *Problem-based Language Learning and Teaching - An Innovative Approach to Learn a New Language* by Ansarian and Lin (2018), has its origins far back in history in apprenticeship learning. The learning in apprenticeship is a combination of learning both skills and knowledge in practice. In addition, Socrates is assumed to have used a dialectical approach in his teaching. More recently, the method was put to use in medical education in Canada in the 1960s having been developed there ever since. The method has thus existed for quite a while now, but it has not been studied thoroughly in the field of language education yet. Woods, Hall, Eyles, and Hrymak (1996) define problem-based learning in their article "Tutored Versus Tutorless Groups in Problem-Based Learning" as learning driven by problem solving. Students are to work in groups solving a problem they have been given. They start by defining what they already know about the problem, they make plans for what they still need to know about it and then set the goals for learning. Each student is given an individual task that they focus on. Thus, each student has the chance to participate actively and contribute with their knowledge to the shared task. The group continues working together, combining all the gathered

knowledge by reflection and elaboration. The final product is thus a shared effort, knowledge built collaboratively. Here, I will give some examples on the kinds of problems we can use in language learning. 'A problem' is more or less a situation of language use. Depending on the time allocated the problems might be specific and more limited situations, e.g. what do you say when you see an alien, how to react when you see a dinosaur in a supermarket or how to invite the president of your country to your birthday party. The examples below are for more long-term tasks.

- Students prepare a presentation or a video on the nature/history/other aspect of a chosen country.

- Students find out about an event or a holiday in an English speaking country (or else where) and they make a presentation/ video/ poster about what they learned.

- Students pretend to start their own travel company. They come up with their vision and create a selection of holidays they are offering. This company might as well be a pet shop (what kinds of pets, services and equipment do you sell/offer), zoo or a sporting event/camp.

- What can you see or do in different seasons? Depending on the level of students, you can focus only on one season or work on all the seasons.

- How would you promote holidays in Lapland (or else where)?

- Students create an election campaign for a real-life election or an imaginary one (including creating candidate profiles, slogans, posters, speeches etc.)

- Students plan and create a new holiday. They come up with the holiday history and traditions. They prepare a slide presentation, a video, or a poster.

- Students choose a real-life problem (e.g. a relevant community issue, climate change, littering, bullying) and they plan a campaign to solve the problem.

Ansarian and Lin argue that one of the benefits of problem-based learning is the intrinsic motivation it may lead to, as shown by several researches (p. 5). As I have led and witnessed this kind of work in my classroom, I strongly agree on this. Another immediate benefit of this kind of work is the time spent with the students, as they do need help in the process. Thus, the teacher constantly takes part and gets to observe a whole lot of different skills and also the use of the target language. This gives the teacher a tremendous amount of information about the students' skills, knowledge and strengths. This kind of work is also a great opportunity to work on positive relationships with the students as you can give a lot of positive feedback about many different kinds of successes (e.g. organization skills, being supportive in the group, finding lots of good information, encouraging group members, working persistently, helping others, knowing when to ask for help or using creativity). Another benefit of problem-based learning is the development of problem solving and thinking skills, as stated by Ansarian and Lin (p. 5). They continue that this kind of learning has a great probability to result in in-depth learning. When scaffolding is used successfully and appropriately, problem-based learning will support and develop the students' self-directed learning skills. Although, if students need a lot of scaffolding from the teacher, project-based learning might work better instead. When thinking about assessment, the focus is not on the final product. Problem-based learning offers the teacher a window to the students' minds and worlds and also gives a lot of information about other skills, like collaboration and self-regulation. Assessment might as well focus on these skills. When the teacher cannot predict the final product, it sets limits for rubrics. They cannot be too specific. There is surely always the possibility that the teacher evaluates the level of the language used in the product, instead of evaluating specific grammar or vocabulary aspects. The rubric may well include the descriptions for both written and speaking skills. Either one of the descriptions is used depending on the product. The rubric may also include descriptions of working skills. In the

image below is an example of a rubric in a problem-based learning period. Note that in this

example the goal language levels used are just examples.

Image 3. A rubric in a problem-based learning period.

	Excellent work	Good job	OK	To be revised
Problem solving	Group managed to solve the problem in an appropriate way.	Group managed to solve the problem, but solution was not quite appropriate.	Group solved the problem partly.	Solution is not clear.
Speaking skills	A2.2	A2.1	A1.3	A1.2
Writing skills	A2.2	A2.1	A1.3	A1.2
Time management	Group finished on time.	Group needed a little extra time.	Group needed extra time and/or needed to leave something out.	Group did not finish the task on time.
Self-regulation	Group stayed well on task.	Group stayed well on task most of the time.	Group stayed on task with teacher's support.	Group needed lots of support to stay on task.
Task sharing	Group shared the tasks evenly and according to the different skills of the members.	Group shared the tasks evenly but maybe not considering enough the different skills in the group.	Tasks were shared but the group needed teacher's help.	It was unclear to the group what different members were supposed to be doing.
Participation	Group worked actively.	Group worked mostly actively.	Group needed teacher's support.	Group needed a lot of teacher's support.
Positive collaboration	Group showed many positive skills.	Group showed some positive skills.	Group showed few positive skills.	Group needed teacher's support.

4.3 Project-based learning

In project-based language teaching students apply what they have learned by creating different kinds of projects, for instance slide presentations, websites or videos, as explained by Knoche Laverick (2018) in her book *Project-based learning* in chapter 2. As benefits of the use of project-based learning she lists for instance negotiating of meaning, the use of English in authentic contexts, the increase of language usage opportunities, promoting a positive learning environment, focus on the communicative approach in language use and supporting students' motivation. Project-based language teaching differs from problem-based language teaching in a sense that projects are more restricted. Also, in problem-based learning students are required to work more independently and take more responsibility. However, there are many similarities in both of these approaches and in practice, particularly with beginner level students, it is not relevant for the teacher to be able to define which of these approaches they are using. Of course, the main difference between the two approaches is that problem-based learning is always collaborative group work whereas project-based learning may include both group and individual work.

If and when you start engaging in either problem-based or project-based learning with your students, there are some issues to be considered. First of all, the problems or the projects (that is the situations in language use) should be authentic to the students, meaning that they should be based on real-life situations that are meaningful and relevant to students, as explained by Ansarian and Lin (p. 5). The requirements of the project also need to be understandable, that is what is expected from the students. This kind of learning requires patience and flexibility from the teacher. For example, if it turns out that the project at hand is too difficult for the learners, some reteaching might be needed, as explained by Knoche Laverick in chapter 3. It may well be the case that only some of the groups need this kind of scaffolding while others are perfectly capable in proceeding with their work. This is why it is

substantial for the teacher to circle around the groups while they are working. It is a good idea to ask the groups to show their progress on each lesson, so that you can set them on the right track when needed as soon as possible. Rubrics in project-based learning can be more specific since usually students are working on the same assignment. The idea is also to use vocabulary and grammar practiced together, so that the teacher can see how well learners have learned them. Image 4 will show an example of a rubric in project-based learning. In this example 4th grade French students have created a video presentation of their families, either real or imagined. Note that the goal language level depends on your home country's regulations. In my example I am using the language goal levels in the Finnish curriculum. The letter T with a number refers to the specific curriculum goal.

Image 4. A rubric in project-based learning.

	Excellent work	Good job	OK
I can introduce myself and my family members in French in an appropriate way. (T9)			
I can use adjectifs even though I still make mistakes in conjugation. (T11)			
I know how to act in a situation of introducing oneself and others. (T7)			
I can use French bravely (without being too much afraid of making mistakes). (T7)			
I read my sentences understandably. (T11)			
I followed the instructions. (T5)			
I used diverse vocabulary. (T5 + T11)			
I asked for help if/when needed. (T5)			
I finished my presentation carefully. (T6)			
I focused on the task using self-regulation. (T6)			
I can create a Google Slides presentation with teacher's support. (T6)			
I payed attention to the layout of my presentation. (T6)			
I tried out the iPad screen-recording function bravely. (T6)			

4.4 Assessment

The better understanding the students have about what they are supposed to be doing in the language classroom, the better will the outcomes of both the projects and tasks and the learning be. This is also a question of assessment. What are we meant to assess in this kind of work? For this purpose I create rubrics, as shown in the previous chapters. As project-based learning builds on what has already been learned, it is easy to include the mastery of certain words or grammar issues into the rubric. The biggest benefit in Finland in my opinion with rubric is the fact that we are able to include the working skills and the transversal skills in the assessment of the project. This kind of assessment is not usually possible when using traditional or standardized tests, which both focus on the strict use of certain vocabulary and grammar and do not always allow the use of creativity. Traditional tests tend to focus more on memorizing and reproduction than communicative language use and creativity, not to mention the non-academic skills, such as showing perseverance, knowing when and how to ask for help, improving your performance with the help of support, sharing one's expertise with peers or having a positive impact on the classroom atmosphere. This is also what Gay (2018) states: "Learning experiences and achievement outcomes for ethnically and culturally diverse students should include more than cognitive performances in academic subjects and standardized test scores. Moral, social, cultural, personal, and political developments are also important. All of these are essential to the healthy and complete functioning of human beings and societies. If education is, as it should be, devoted to teaching the whole child, then this comprehensive focus should be evident throughout curriculum, instruction, and assessment."

When creating rubrics, we should seek help from the local curriculum and also from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The benefit of rubric is also that during the process it works as a tool for formative assessment. The students can use it themselves, we can encourage students to look carefully through the requirements of the

project or give them straight feedback on their work referring to the goals stated in the rubric. Quite often my students ask which grade they would get with the on-going product, and with the help of the rubric I can give them a grade suggestion. Then they are able to decide for themselves whether they still want to improve their product or hand it out. If they choose to improve their project, I will tell them in detail which parts they still need to focus on. Sometimes they are happy with the grade they are getting and if they feel like they have already done their best, they will hand out the project. Nevertheless, they always have the chance to improve the outcome with the help of feedback before the final grade. When students are familiar with this kind of work, they learn how to use the rubric and they also learn how to ask more information from the teacher. Creating a rubric takes time, but assessment with a rubric is a lot faster and less insecure than without one. In some digital learning environments, such as Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom, the rubric tools are already built in the system itself, which will lessen the burden when creating them.

4.5 Teacher's role in student-centered learning

Remember, as Freire said, dialogical teaching method does not equal a *laissez faire* pedagogy, nor does problem based or project-based learning. Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007) emphasize the same thing in their article "Scaffolding and Achievement in Problem-Based and Inquiry Learning: A Response to Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark*"* stating that "The teacher plays a key role in facilitating the learning process and may provide content knowledge on a just-in-time basis". The shift from banking education to dialogical teaching, problem-based learning or project-based learning does not mean that the teacher is no longer needed. Quite the opposite, I might argue. The younger the learners are, the more they usually need scaffolding. The level of the language also affects how much scaffolding the learners need.

As Hmelo-Silver et al. explain, scaffolding enables the learners to proceed beyond their actual language level and operate in the zone of proximal development.

The concept of the zone of proximal development was introduced by psychologist L.S. Vygotsky (1978) already in the 1970s when he published his book *Mind in society : the development of higher psychological processes* and he defined it this way: "It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined through independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In other words, on the ZPD there are maturing skills that can be seen via scaffolding the learner. If we always operate depending on pure memory, there are many skills and lots of knowledge that remains unnoticed. As Vygotsky puts it: "what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do herself tomorrow" (p. 87). The ZPD is a social construction, as the learner needs someone who is scaffolding them. This again highlights the importance of collaborative learning and interaction in the classroom. Scaffolding makes imitation possible. It is not a mere action of copying something without thinking. Imitation needs understanding and a certain amount of content knowledge (p. 88). For instance, I would not be able to produce Chinese in written form no matter how much scaffolding I would receive since I do not know the signs. Nor would I be able to solve higher math problems since already everyday math equations cause me slight feelings of agony. To put it simply, learners cannot perform without limits even when scaffolded, so there is no need to worry about it too much in the classroom. Learners cannot in a sense *go over* their zone of proximal development. This is why I always guide my students to use supportive material when they are working on a project. I provide them material myself making them wordlists, sentence frames, model sentences and example projects. In order to be able to use these appropriately, they need to understand how they can make use of them. At times I have been asked how it is possible to assess the project when I

cannot know what the students are capable of producing themselves. It is crucial to understand that the students **are** producing language themselves but they are not just merely trying to remember things. **They are producing and creating language in their zone of proximal development.**

When it comes to scaffolding in practice, Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007) offer examples like coaching, task structuring, giving hints without the actual response, redirecting students' attention, providing learning material or prompts for specific reasoning strategies, structures that students may follow, templates and modeling. Indeed, I have done all of these in my classroom, yet I would like to add to the list emotional support. It is tremendously important (both for my students and myself) to show interest in their work, ask how they are doing and how their work is proceeding, encourage them, give them praise and just circle around the class and truly **be present** with the students.

When conducting student-centered teaching, you also need to prepare yourself for failures and discomfort. not everything goes smoothly always, particularly if you and your students are new to the student-centered methods. In the beginning there will no doubt be a lot of fuss, noice, uncertainty, even chaos. Paradigm change may be difficult for the learners as well when they make the transition to the passive recipient to a full agent. hooks (1994) states that "it takes a fierce commitment, a will to struggle, to let our work as teachers reflect progressive pedagogies"(p. 143). Little chaos in the beginning does not mean that student-centered methods do not work. Change is seldom easy. Student-centered methods require a lot for the learners themselves. And sometimes working with assignments may feel challenging and difficult. But "sometimes it's necessary to remind students and colleagues that pain and painful situations don't necessarily translate into harm", as stated by Ron Scapp (p. 154), a friend of hooks' (1994). And there is nothing painfully challenging in sitting quiet in a classroom filling in a busy book. The easiest methods rarely lead to the best outcomes.

Another difficulty in conducting change making pedagogies is collegial support or, more likely, the lack of it. If student-centered methods and culturally responsive teaching are not widely practiced in your school community there is always the possibility that your new ways will not be understood nor approved. When bringing joy or even pleasure into the classroom, this might cause fear as discussed between hooks (1994) and her friend Ron Scapp (p. 145). We have a very strong idea about what true school learning looks like. We tend to connect school learning with seriousness and sitting in silence in the classroom. Laughter and excitement in a classroom poses thus a threat and raises doubt. Surely there will be no learning if the kids are having fun. And some teachers might even say this straight to your face, or start talking behind your back. But do not fear these reactions, it is just people reactint with fear with something new to them. And as hooks' friend Ron Scapp says (p. 154) "Sometimes it's important to remind students that joy can be present *along with hard work*." Sometimes we might need to remind our colleagues or even school principals of this fact.

5 Teaching as lifelong learning and growth

5.1 Critical thinking

According to hooks (1994) teachers should be committed to the process of self-actualization to be able to practice pedagogy of freedom and to guide students towards a holistic development and true learning (p. 15). In addition to well-being the process of self-actualization requires **will** from the teacher. The teachers themselves should be open to their own learning and both personal and professional growth. Thus, it can easily be argued that a successful learning process starts firstly from the well-being of the educator and secondly from their mental work. For Ladson-Billings (2006) the problems in reaching each students' potential and getting them to learn originate in *the way teachers think* and not in

what they *do*. For this reason teaching cannot merely be a set of ready-made tools that teachers use in the classroom and thus simply by using these tools they practice successful teaching. The whole process of teaching begins with the mental work by the teachers themselves.

To Ladson-Billings (2018) teaching is a way of *thinking* and also a way of *being*. Teaching is a lifelong journey of thinking, rethinking, growing and then growing some more. When we reach "complete certainty and assuredness about our practice, we will stop growing" Ladson-Billings states. In the teacher's profession we need to re-make the decision to grow every day. We ourselves need to find the joy of teaching and renew this process each day, in order to transmit the joy of learning to our students. We need to see and find the joy **in** our students which will feed us back when we constantly find and re-find our will to teach. We need to see that our students are worthy of our efforts. For me, teaching is showing and sharing the love of learning with my students. I myself can be the messenger of the joy of learning to my students and at best this joy catches our students. I think this is the prerequisite for the kind of teaching that Ladson-Billings (2022) describes; teaching which helps students to choose academic success.

Hooks (1994) talks a lot about passion, emotions and feelings. Her holistic pedagogy does not separate the body and the mind. We as teachers bring to the classroom also our emotions and feelings. And so do our students. To hooks, love is a fundamental element in the classroom and in good teaching. I can sense from the pages of her book her love and passion for the work she does, the love for her students and the passion for teaching. Even if this love talk might sound irrelevant and unimportant to you, there is evidence that it is not. According to the OECD report, students who report having a teacher who shows enthusiasm towards their subject reach better scores in the PISA reading tests. Although it is worth noticing that only 69% of Finnish students reported having a teacher who shows enjoyment in teaching,

whereas the OECD average was 74%. My beloved fellow Finnish teachers, surely we can do better than that?

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2022) studied in her book the *Dreamkeepers Successful Teachers of African American Children* and gathered the teacher data already in the late 80s and in the early 90s (p. 157) So, the basis had already been created for the theory in the early 90s when the first edition of the book was published. Ladson-Billings gathered the data by observing the teaching practice of teachers who successfully taught African-American students. Ladson-Billings focused on this group of students, since at the time of her study, they had fallen far behind their white peers "on all standard measures of achievement" (p. 1). 'Successful teaching' is defined by both the students' academic success and also by them keeping up a positive African American identity (p. 13-14). Through observations and conversations with these successful teachers Ladson-Billings was able to define common characteristics in the teachers' ideology and practices, which she opens up in chapter 7. Similarly to hooks' ideas about education as practice of freedom, Ladson-Billings talks about teaching as questioning the systemic inequalities and injustices in society. When talking about *Culturally Responsive Teachers*, this questioning leads to challenging the unfair system and finally acting. According to Ladson-Billings Culturally Responsive Teachers are not afraid to practice *subversive pedagogy*.

Critical thinking is crucial, since without it, we cannot truly know our students. We cannot understand where they come from nor are we able to see the systemic injustices. Or even worse, we help to reproduce systemic injustice by our actions, since we do not see how they will affect the status quo. This is also what Howard (2003) says in his article "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Ingredients for Critical Teacher Reflection". It is our duty to find and use the kind of pedagogical practices which are relevant and meaningful to our students. And we will not be successful in this if we do not know who our students are. We also need to be able

to rethink, alter and further develop our practices if they do not meet the needs of our students. If there is a specific social group of underachieving students, this will tell us that there is a serious need for rethinking our pedagogy. As Howard says, at times we need to "engage in one of the more difficult processes for all individuals - honest self-reflection and critique of their own thoughts and behaviors*". Even posing questions concerning our beliefs and biases for instance towards the issues of race, ethnicity, gender or social class is a difficult task. But it is far more difficult to answer these questions honestly. When I myself came to acknowledge for the first time my privilege as a white person and thus understood I had been carrying on color-blind beliefs (race does not matter), it led me to an identity crisis and feelings of anxiety. But when I got over those feelings of guilt and self-blame, I understood that in the future I will be a better teacher. We will suffer from growing pains when we do such mental work that leads to a greater understanding and emotional growth. I would almost argue that without pain there will be no change in the way we think and see the world. Howard offers us questions that will guide us towards recognising our beliefs and possible biases which I in turn will offer you to think about. As Howard's focus point is race, I will add here other markers myself.

> *What kinds of interactions did you have growing up with people from different*
> *backgrounds as yours? (E.g. Social class, religion, ethnicity, language, race, gender)*
> *Who were the primary people that helped you to form your opinions about people*
> *from different backgrounds as yours? And how were these people's beliefs formed?*
> *Have you ever had prejudice towards people from different backgrounds?*
> *If you do have prejudice towards a specific group of people, how does this affect you*
> *teaching students with the same background?*
> *Do you have negative opinions about people with different backgrounds?*

What is the background of students in special education? Are there some similarities with students who are referred to as special needs students?

Do you allow students to show their skills in diverse ways using versatile assessment methods?

Do you focus on your instructions in the classroom and make alterations to it when needed?

Do you value and appreciate students' own backgrounds and cultures and give them space in the classroom?

Another useful tool to develop one's critical thinking skills is reading. For instance Palmer (2017) has written a whole book dealing with the inner life of teachers called the *Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. For me this book has been helpful and it has brought me many useful insights. He says that all human activities, including teaching, arise from our inner world. In order to know our students, we need to know ourselves first. Palmer argues that the process of knowing our students and the subject we are teaching begins with our self-knowledge (p.3). Thus, we cannot skip the stage of hard mental work and jump straight into good teaching.

5.2 Good teaching is more than just good methods

I have now talked about the importance of critical thinking when it comes to practicing good teaching. However, based on my own experiences as a teacher, my university education and discussions with teacher colleagues back home and around the world, I argue that we focus too much on methodology. My argument is supported by Lilia Bartolomé (1994) in her article "Beyond the Methods Fetish: Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy". Bartolomé argues that even the greatest methods themselves are not sufficient to ensure successful teaching. She works as a teacher educator and has noticed that her students often

expect her to provide them with a set of ready-made tools to be used in practice. Unfortunately, good teaching is not that simple. Bartolomé has discovered that many pre-service teachers see low academic performance as a mere technical problem which can be corrected, of course, by mere teaching techniques. She argues that usually this kind of belief encases false assumptions, such as teachers do not have the need for mental work, schools are equal and fair institutions and that low achieving students need some kind of special adjustment. Bartolomé says that many of her students seek the one-size-fits-all model. Unfortunately, the same kind of assumptions can be recognised amongst in-service teachers. During my 15 years as a teacher I have met many teachers with the same kinds of beliefs. The real question is, how can we get experienced teachers first of all to understand the significance of critical thinking and let alone engage in it. Neither Bartolomé nor myself is saying that we do not need good methods in teaching. The point is that the methods themselves do not ensure quality teaching. The foundation of good teaching is created with critical self-reflection and after that understanding ourselves, our students and systems of power. Via reflection and critical thinking we are able to see how unequal power structures are created, re-created and maintained. After this we can start our active work for abolishing the dysfunctional system. And then we can start thinking about which methods benefit both us and our students the most. I will conclude this paragraph with a citation from Bartolomé's article: "A teaching strategy is a vehicle to a greater goal. A number of vehicles exist that may or may not lead to a humanizing pedagogy, depending on the sociocultural reality in which teachers and students operate". This is something for us all worth thinking about.

Palmer (2017) has a similar main focus point throughout his book. He says that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). However, this must not be understood that teachers do not need any specific teaching methods, and it is enough for them to show up in the classroom and just be

themselves and hang around. We do still have a curriculum to teach and the students are still supposed to learn. In chapter 4 I presented some student-centered methods appropriate to the language classroom, but surely there are more.

5.3 Teacher biases and positionality

As Milner (2007) introduces his framework for Culturally Responsive Research in his article "Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working Through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen" the starting point is indeed "*researching the self*". Milner creates a framework for researchers in the field of education. Nevertheless, I argue that the same principles are valid for educators. When we think of education as the practice of freedom, the prerequisite is to be able to **see** the current system. And by seeing I mean truly seeing the system through the lens of Culturally Responsive Teaching. Firstly, we need to understand ourselves. We need to know who we are and be connected to the different components of our identities. Milner uses the concept of 'positionality', which is used to describe the fact that our past experiences and our identities affect the ways we experience the world, see other people and interact with the world and others. If we are not aware of our positionality, these beliefs might become biases that affect the way we think and see other people and thus may lead to unjust teaching. In order to become aware of our positionality, we need to engage in mental work. Sometimes this work will be hard and difficult. It may cause anxiety when we come to acknowledge for example our privileges for the first time. Nevertheless, it is a work to which we unquestionably need to commit as educators. As was once said by a wise man "*With great power comes great responsibility*"[9].

By truly knowing who we are, we are able to position ourselves in the world and in the systems we work in. And only after this we are able to see the inequalities and injustices in the systems and then finally will we be able to make efforts to change them. Annamma and

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[9] This line is used by Peter Parker's - known as Spiderman - uncle.

Morrison (2018) share their discoveries of the American education system as "a series of dysfunctional ecologie*s*" in their article "Identifying Dysfunctional Education Ecologies: A DisCrit Analysis of Bias in the Classroom*"*. Since their study is about the American education system, the results are not directly transferable to the Finnish equivalent. However, we do need to reflect the same principles in Finland as well. There are several researches that show how students of color have been mistreated in the American education system. Annamma and Morrison state there are still many educators who are unwilling to discuss or deal with difficult issues such as race, racism, and racial injustices. I would personally like to add to this list of "topics many teachers are still reluctant to talk about" gender and sexual identity issues.[10] However, Annamma and Morrison refer to many studies according to which students of color have been treated differently in favor of their white peers. These dysfunctional systems are being maintained by educators who hold biases. This is how structural racism is being produced and reproduced. Only through critical self-reflection can we be able to first recognise and then finally acknowledge the biases we may hold against marginalized groups. It is easy to notice and recognise explicit biases which are actualized by - to the extremity - overt racism. What we should be more concerned about are the implicit biases educators may hold, since they often are "*outside of our conscious awareness*", as Annamma and Morrison explain. The key to unlock these implicit biases and to change our ways of thinking is the hard mental work required from the educators themselves. Therefore, the arising of critical thinking is the key in changing the dysfunctional systems. We as educators **cannot** refuse the requirement of hard mental work, since as Howard et al. state *"We have a professional and ethical duty not only to acknowledge systemic oppression but also to work to eliminate it as an obstacle to students' success and well-being"* (p. 66). As

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[10] See for example Garvey, J. C., Mobley, S. D., Summerville, K. S., & Moore, G. T. (2019). Queer and trans* students of color: Navigating identity disclosure and college contexts. Journal of Higher Education, 90(1), 150–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1449081

Gay (2018) affirms, we need more than just good intentions in order to change the unequal systems. Educators also need proficient pedagogical knowledge and the courage to take action. To challenge and test our beliefs, Gay provides a list of quotes on pages 23-24. To start your journey towards a Culturally Responsive Teaching, I will cite here a few of those quotes to consider:

> "*To those accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression.*" —Anonymous
>
> "*Equal rights for others does not mean fewer rights for you.*" —George Orwell
>
> "*Rather than accepting the things you cannot change, change the things you cannot accept.*"—Angela Davis
>
> "*Respect existence or expect resistance.*"
>
> "*Equality is not in regarding different things similarly; equality is in regarding different things differently.*"—Tom Robbins
>
> "*Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.*"—bell hooks

5.4 What teacher positionality might look like? Using my own positionality statement as an example

I cannot change the fact that I belong to the majority. I am a white middle classed woman, in a sense privileged. Rules of the world were made by and for white people and I have not experienced what it feels like living in another colored skin. I am mostly worried about systemic racism; will I be able to recognise it when I see it? I come from a blue collar family who had to struggle with finances when I was growing up. Because of my background as a blue collar family child born in 1981 (in the beginning of the 90's a severe economic depression hit Finland), as in a way disadvantaged, I have felt exclusion and not-belonging to

the academic world or to the teacher community. I have never felt being good enough, and I have had to work hard(er) in order to prove to others that I *deserve* to be where I am. My background has definitely had an impact on how hard I work, how hard I try and how hard I try to fit in and *earn my place*.

In the past, I have overcome toxic relationships where I experienced emotional abuse. In addition, I was bullied as an adult by other adults in the worklife. This led me to overachieve at work for several years. Yet, no matter how hard I struggled, I did not achieve respect nor approval. Because of this, I got a diagnosis of depression and burnout in June 2022. Consequently, I no longer take disrespect nor any kind of emotional abuse. Thus, I have become a 'difficult person', since I let nobody tell me anymore how I should be, what I should feel and what I should think. I have finally found my voice, oppressed for a very long time. I also have realized that burnout and depression are not merely problems on a personal level, but on a more systemic one. Thus, I am very concerned about teacher care.

When you go into the habit of speaking up, after a while you do not have to say a word. "The eye rolling" starts the second you enter the room. *There comes the problem*. People do not hear the problem itself anymore, they hear *me talking about the problem*. Thus, they make the conclusion that *I* am the problem. I need to admit that this is not easy to accept and it feels hard. That is why I still doubt myself a great deal. I need to choose my company very carefully. I am very sensitive and get offended when people point out something that is sore to me. Anyhow, I choose not to be with toxic people and this may create confusion. It affects the way other people see me. They may consider me as unsocial, rude or weird.

However, I do believe that people need to speak up, that **I** need to keep speaking up. If not, nothing will ever change. Because of the depression, I think about well-being constantly. I am concerned about the well-being of my students and I try to support them as much as I can. I ask how they are doing, I listen to them and talk with them. I try to give them chances

to use their voices. I do not give a lot of homework and I have developed foreign language assessment trying to find less burdening tools than traditional tests. This way I can relieve their workload and might give them more time to recover. This might be seen as low expectations, yet the truth is quite the opposite. I have **great expectations** of my students. I just want them to be well enough (and alive!) to see them realized. With the positionality I have come to the conclusion that what counts is to be aware and open-minded, to admit your mistakes and learn from them, to acknowledge your flaws and weaknesses and to **try** to be better.

6 Learning Environment

6.1 Guidelines in the Finnish Core Curriculum

As stated in the Finnish national core curriculum in chapter 4.3 when defining the learning environment and working methods, it is the teachers' duty to ensure that both the learning environment and the chosen working methods support and develop interaction, the growth within the individual and on the collective level, participation and collaborative knowledge building. It is important to note here that the concept of 'learning environment' includes the notions of space, place, communities, practices, equipment, services and materials used in teaching (e.g. school books). Also it is important to remember that students **have the right** to show their skills and knowledge in diverse ways, so we as teachers need to make sure that this also happens. Versatile use of teaching and learning methods and the kinds of methods that develop students' self-directing skills support motivation. Here, it is essential to understand that self-directedness is not a learning method per se, instead it is one goal for learning. However deeply involved we are in the dialogical teaching method, it is unquestionably the teacher's responsibility to choose the appropriate teaching methods, in

consideration of the learners' age and individual differences/needs, subject specific features and the transversal skills.

Finnish teachers have the autonomy to choose the appropriate teaching and learning methods. We are not bound to any specific one, which is extremely important. However, in the national core curriculum in chapter 4.3 there are some requirements that we do need to consider. As I already mentioned in the previous sections, quality learning environments support interaction, student participation and collaborative knowledge building. Learning environments should also enable the use of creativity, taking perspective and independent studying. The use of ICT is a crucial element in the modern learning environment. The use of inquiry and problem-based learning (see ch. 4) are explicitly mentioned on page 30, along with play and the use of imagination and art. These are the prerequisites we necessarily need not only to consider but implement in our teaching practice.

6.2 Democratic Practices and Fair Process

A safe learning environment is democratic. Lilia Bartolomé (1994) deals with this issue in her article "Beyond the Methods Fetish: Toward a Humanizing Pedagogy". According to her, a democratic classroom is a place where students are seen as capable and worthy. They are not only allowed but also encouraged to use their voices. The teacher and the student interact and collaborate, and creating knowledge is a shared practice. This recreated shared knowledge is built on students' existing knowledge, expanding their previous skills and abilities. Students' interests and diverse backgrounds are appreciated, valued and integrated into the classroom practice. In a democratic classroom the teacher is a learner themselves.

When talking about democratic classrooms or schools, there are a few issues to consider. It seems that **fair decision making** is often understood as making decisions via

voting. Democratic and fair practices are then oversimplified and overused as going along with the mere will of the majority. However, this kind of decision making process does not work in the field of Knowledge Industry, as explained by Kim and Mauborgne (1997) in their article "Fair process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy". They give evidence that a fair decision making process is more important to the people than the outcome, even when the outcome is favorable. They also state that people are more willing to accept unfavorable outcomes if and when a fair decision making process has been executed. Kim and Mauborgne highlight that the fair decision making process is not the same as voting or reaching a consensus. The idea is to promote the best ideas and not to please the majority. As Kim and Mauborgne state: "the merit of the ideas - and not consensus - is what drives the decision making." and "Fair process pursues the best ideas whether they are put forth by one or many." How are decisions made in your classroom? What about in your school, in your teaching community? Do you pursue the best possible outcomes or consensus?

Kim and Mauborgne explain that in a fair decision making process people are being included and engaged from the very beginning. Their ideas are listened to but also challenged. When the decision is reached, it is crucial that it is explained as clearly as possible. That way it is most likely to be accepted by the people, even if the outcome is not in their favor. After reaching and explaining the decision it is important to explicitly state the new expectations so that everyone understands what is expected from them. The fair process is highly important in the Knowledge Economy, where the outcomes depend on human participation, as "knowledge is a resource locked in the human mind", as stated by Kim and Mauborgne. People need to have the feeling that they are valued and seen as human beings and that they matter. People need to have trust in the decision making process or otherwise they will not commit to the decisions made. As the outcomes depend so much on human beings and their voluntary participation, every principal in every school should commit to the

principles of a fair process. I also argue that these same principles are applicable in our classrooms, too. Our students are also human beings and value fair decision making as much as adults. It is crucial that our students believe that we are acting in their best interest. When we are following the principles of the fair process, we are building trust. As Kim and Mauborgne state: "Fair process builds trust and commitment, trust and commitment produce voluntary cooperation, and voluntary cooperation drives performance, leading people to go beyond the call of duty by sharing their knowledge and applying their creativity."

6.3 Cues and circumstances supporting learning

Benedict Carey's (2015) book *How we learn* offers some illuminating insights on learning. Carey is a science reporter who examined research done by psychologists on learning for his book. Some of the studies mentioned in the book date back to the 19th century. Some of the research findings are not surprising at all. What is surprising, is why we deal with learning in school the way that we do. For instance, the best possible learning environment is not necessarily neutral nor quiet. Learning always happens in a context, as Carey explains (p. 51). Our brain constantly notices things around us while we study, and this happens partly in an unconscious way. Our brain picks up music, pictures, sounds or feelings. These are called contextual cues and they might help us remember things later on. The more we vary our place of studying, the more cues our brain picks up and stores (p. 64). And these cues affect the process of retention. Since the process of storing cues is unconscious, we cannot predict which cues will trigger our memory later on. That is why it is important to vary the place and the time of studying. At school since we have timetables to follow, we cannot make that many changes to the time. But what if we would allow our students for example to choose their seat themselves and also let them do their work outside the classroom, in the hall, why not outdoors or even in a storeroom. (My students often want to

work in our storage room, they find it a fun place.) Another interesting finding is that guessing engages our mind actively and this will leave a more deeper mark in our memory with the correct answer (p. 97). Even when we guess wrong. In school this can be used as a study method so that students take a test in the beginning of the study unit. This will guide them to better notice relevant information during the course. (pp. 100-101.) Another piece of information that might be relevant in the school context is that when we are stuck with a problem, it is beneficial to take a break (p. 129). This might seem self-relevant but I think we need to seriously ask ourselves whether we let our students take breaks during the lessons. We should not be afraid of interruptions either. There is evidence that being interrupted in the worst possible moment - that is when we are really deeply caught in a task - serves learning the most (pp. 136-137); we will remember the interrupted work longer. It is also beneficial to work in stages. As we are in the middle of a project, our brain actively picks up cues relevant to our project (p. 140). We are tuned in to specific kinds of input in our environment both consciously and unconsciously. Our brain picks up signals that are relevant to our work and processes information continuously (pp. 146-147). This process explains our heureka-moments which seem to come up from nowhere. One more thing to consider in school is that focusing on a single skill at a time may improve the mastery of that specific skill in a short term. But if we want - and we do want - to achieve more permanent learning, it is better to vary the practice of different skills (p. 158). This kind of process of practicing varying different kinds of skills is called interleaving (p. 163). It does not exclude by any means the importance of repetition, because we do need it to a point. However, interleaving improves our ability to transfer skills and knowledge into new environments, our capability to act productively in surprising situations and our problem solving and thinking skills. (pp. 149-171.).

6.4 Positive pedagogy

I have already provided many tools for supporting student engagement throughout chapters 3 and 4 and the current one. A quality learning environment, student-centered learning methods and teacher scaffolding all build towards learner autonomy. Yet there are other aspects to consider, such as motivation. My main idea is that by building a firm base with aspects mentioned previously in this paper we already work to support student engagement and motivation. In this chapter I will deal with in more detail ways to further support motivation and thus work towards engagement and finally learner autonomy.

In Finland during recent years many educators have implemented positive pedagogy in their classrooms. I myself have been using character strengths when learning foreign languages. Gay (2018) also stresses the importance of finding each students' strengths, since, after all, every student can always do something well (p. 17). However, these strengths may not be academic and may thus leave unnoticed in schools. All students deserve to be valued. That is why it is crucial to offer students diverse opportunities to show their social, cultural, or personal skills and to be recognised for them. Practicing character strengths introduced in positive psychology may well be one way of doing this. I have noticed how important it is to give positive feedback on perseverance when learners work with challenging tasks, even if the outcome is not that successful by academic standards. We can and must still acknowledge and value the hard work and efforts the student has shown.

O'Brien and Blue (2017) tried to identify the kind of pedagogical practices that support positive learning experiences in their research article "Towards a positive pedagogy: Designing pedagogical practices that facilitate positivity within the classroom". They found evidence that students' well-being correlates positively with their engagement. They also found that teacher support plays a significant role in students' sense of academic confidence. In addition, there is evidence that a positive relationship between the teacher and the learner

reduces behavioral problems and predicts positive academic achievement in the future. Evidence also supports that positive emotions, character traits, cognitions and resources support people's positive engagement and productivity. Good news is that positive character traits, such as perseverance, humor, courage, social intelligence or self-regulation, can be practiced and developed. The Finnish pioneer in the field of positive pedagogy, Kaisa Vuorinen, offers ready-made tools for educators for positive education.[11] It is highly beneficial to all actors, both the learners and the teachers, to notice and give credit for positive actions, such as helping and encouraging others, being a good listener, using one's sense of humor for creating positive feelings in the group or whatever we find worth acknowledging for. We just need to be attentive in our classrooms to notice them.

In their research O'Brien and Blue (2017) present tools for positive teaching, such as pedagogical talk, actions and relatings. Positive pedagogical talk includes use of positive language and explicitly scaffolding students' positive thinking. Actions refer to providing students opportunities for positive engagement. Relating is the process of building relationships through collaboration and sharing. I have used Kaisa Vuorinen's material in my classroom, such as her book on character strengths and activity cards. It would be also beneficial to have posters in the classroom presenting positive and encouraging language. It is important to offer students appropriate language which enables them to talk about their strengths and recognise them. It is easier to recognise emotions and character traits when we have words for them. It is also beneficial to teach students language with which they are able to give each other praise. As a teacher it is important to make sure you have enough time in the classroom to practice peer feedback. The language of positive feedback can and should be learned and practiced explicitly. I have had memorable and warm experiences with my

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[11] See Kaisa Vuorinen's website Kaisa Vuorinen - kaisavuorinen.com

students during the lessons we have focused on giving positive peer feedback. It is also tremendously important for the students themselves.

When using positive pedagogy in our classrooms we need to be careful not to shift the responsibility on the individual student by emphasizing success as the result of mere character strengths. We need to remember that the students do not start from the same level and that systems are not equal to all students. This means that no matter how much effort an individual makes in resilience or perseverance, they are still not able to change the system or their backgrounds. It is important to teach everyone character strengths but not in the way that these become an excuse for an individual "failure". For example stating "You did not succeed because you did not show enough persistence." may cause a student a great deal of harm if we are not aware of the circumstances that this student is going through in their life. Bettina L. Love's (2019) insightful book *We want to do more than survive: abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom* gives educators great tools for thinking how to address for example these character strengths in our teaching in a way that is not harmful for the students. In chapter 4 Love points how character education has wrapped up academic success as pure grit.

Positive pedagogy does not either equal the exclusion of negative feelings. Alex Shevrin Venet (2021) states the same in her book Equity-centered Trauma-informed Education. She emphasizes how not to "weaponize" the use of self-regulation and calming down when dealing with feelings of anger, anxiety, stress, fear or powerlessness (p. 61). We do need to teach our students how to deal with negative feelings but focusing too much on just *dealing with* the feelings may make us neglect the real reason behind these feelings. When the reason behind the feelings stays unresolved, the negative feelings will reappear. Us not handling the situation in depth will cause our students even more stress and anxiety.

6.5 Towards learner autonomy

In her article "Improvement of students' self-directed learning readiness through problem-based English language learning in Korea" Han (2023) points out that problem-based learning supports learner's self-directedness skills through the development of metacognitive skills. In problems-based learning students also learn other meaningful skills such as communication and collaboration skills, reasoning and self-efficacy, not to mention target language skills. In problem-based learning "the problems", the language usage situations, are from real-life and relevant to the learners' themselves. The focus in the language usage is on the meaning and communication. The learners themselves are in the center of the learning process. Han points to many benefits of the problem-based learning supported by research, which are for example student empowerment, improved confidence and the recognition of their own agency in their learning processes. Thus, problem-based learning has the great potential in supporting and developing self-directedness. When students are included in the planning of the problems and allowed to choose the tools they want to use in solving them, they will have more autonomy and ownership in their learning. And this, as Han states, will support the development of the learners' intrinsic motivation.

Indeed, empowerment of our students is crucial. John Spencer and A.J. Juliani (2017) have written a whole book about it called *Empower*: *What happens when students own their learning.* They question the traditional education and the way we have been teaching our students how to *comply*. But if we just simply follow rules and instructions strictly, not being able to use our own voice, our imagination and creativity, we are not participating in meaningful learning. We cannot turn *this* into engagement. Teaching to comply does not really make us want to learn at all. It just makes us learn how to play *the game of school*. And, if we do not want to learn, there can be no true engagement. There can be participation, sure, but participating does not mean we are engaging. Particularly if we are participating

only out of the fear of avoiding consequences. Spencer and Juliani (2017) gives us guidelines for changing our classrooms from engaged to empowered (p. xxxv). Empowered learning environments listen to what students themselves want to learn. We are not just preparing them for their future professions but they are preparing themselves for anything. From giving students choice we move further giving them possibilities of finding things on their own. We are not making them follow a predetermined path, instead we are supporting them in creating their own paths. We do not follow one-size-fits-all pedagogy but encourage students to move further in their own learning processes, creating them personalized learning opportunities. We teach and encourage our students to become creators instead of being mere consumers. Venet (2021) talks about empowerment too and how it is important to give our students the sense of having power over their learning (p. 69). As educators we need to give students power over their own bodies, allowing them for instance to use bathrooms or sit the way they want. School dress codes might also be harmful for the sense of power over one's own body and they should be reconsidered. According to Venet, we can empower our students in many ways, for example using student-centered learning methods, involving students in decision making, and creating opportunities for them to collaborate with the community (p. 70). We need to move away from the teacher-centered focus and towards building a learning community where the teachers themselves are learners as well.

7 Building a learning community

7.1 Guidelines in the Finnish national core curriculum

Principles and values guiding the basic education are set in chapters 2.1 and 2.2. Teaching is to be organized in a way that supports the healthy growth and well-being of the students. We are to follow the Finnish constitution and non-discrimination act: discrimination based on gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, conviction, opinion, sexual

orientation, health, disability or other personal trait is forbidden. Both the teaching and the

teaching material are to support the equality act. In education we are to follow the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Every child has the right to be heard and

express themselves and we as teachers are to respect the childrens' views. In addition, every

child has the right to live a good life and to go through their unique, physical, emotional,

spiritual, moral and social development. Each student is to be seen as their unique and

valuable selves. Basic education supports the growth of each child towards truth, kindness,

beauty, justice and peace. Education is based on respecting life and human rights. The goal of

basic education is to promote well-being, democracy and active citizenship. The mission of

basic education is defined in chapter 3.1. Teaching is to support students' positive identity as

human beings, learners and members of the community. It enables participation and

sustainable lifestyle and supports the growth towards a full citizen in a democratic society.

Basic education supports equally male and female students in learning different disciplines

but also widens our understanding of gender diversity.

7.2 Starting from well-being

hooks's (1994) Engaged pedagogy is *holistic*, as she explains in chapter 2. It

acknowledges the importance of well-being in the process of learning. Both the well-being of

the learner and the educator are equally important. One cannot reach their full potential if

they are not well. Only when you are well can you seize your potential and become

self-actualized, as hooks states. J.R Howard, Milner and T.C. Howard also stress the

importance of teachers' selfcare in their book *No More Teaching Without Positive*

Relationships (2020). In fact, similarly to hooks, the writers argue that the prerequisite for

students' well-being is the well-being of their teachers (p. 62). Teaching is an emotionally

demanding profession since the teachers need to be able to meet their students' emotional

needs every day. This requires that the teachers take care of themselves first. I could not agree more. Teachers' well-being **is** fundamentally important for successful teaching and it should be treated as such. For every principal in every school, teacher care should be their priority. Only after the teachers are well themselves, will they be able to look after the well-being of their students. They say to put on *your* oxygen mask before helping others.

Difficult times call for more pervasive ways for both student and teacher care. When a community is living through a period of trauma, teachers are required to focus more on the well-being of their students, since they need to respond to the students' growing needs for emotional support. During difficult times focusing on teacher care should always be the enhanced goal of the management. The COVID-19 pandemic was a worldwide crisis but it hit the hardest the groups of people who already were disadvantaged. Brooks-DeCosta and Lenard (2023) handle the issue of self-care during pandemic time in their article "Restoring the Village through Radical Self-care in the book From being woke from doing #the work: using culturally relevant practices to support student achievement & sociopolitical consciousness" (Porcher et al. (eds.)). As they state, psychological studies have proven the negative causal-connection between stress and mental and physical well-being. The subject of the article is the Harlem School of Social Justice, a small public elementary school with a student population of entirely Black and Brown students. The school community had to deal not only with the trauma of the pandemic but also the rising need for anti-racist work. Police brutality and the mistreating of the people of color in the States truly bursted out worldwide via the murder of George Floyd. All this led to a growing need for care. The school staff started to focus on the well-being of the whole school community, including the parents and other caregivers and, most importantly, the teachers. The writers concluded that even after surviving traumas and crises, the focus should still be on well-being. They call for compassion from the management level and solutions that support well-being on a concrete

every-dayl level, such as providing space and opportunities, meditation, mindful practice and opportunities for collective processing, problem-solving and reflection. The writers also remind us of the importance of breaks, compassion, empathy and understanding. We need to consider all of these aspects between all the actors in the school community; between students and teachers, teachers and parents/caregivers, between teachers and their colleagues and also, most importantly between teachers and management. I argue that the most important duty of the management is to secure teacher well-being, since this is the level where successful teaching begins. Venet (2021) also calls for measures on a systemic level in taking care of teachers and students (p. 60). According to her "Universal trauma-informed practices should help lift up all members of a school community so that we all have the opportunity to feel safe, to thrive, and to grow. It is not up to teachers or students to just self-care their way into a state of perfect mental health and wellness" (p. 60). Until we start seeing mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, as systemic problems, teachers and students are left alone in their coping processes. The numbers in mental health issues both among students and teachers are alarming, so it is about time to do something about it and stop dealing with the issue as an individual matter.[12]

Trauma-informed pedagogy offers us a tool in securing well-being in our school. Venet (2021) states that kids dealing with trauma need a safe and caring environment in order to recover (p. xv). She also argues that we need to deal with trauma as a structural level problem, shifting the focus from the individual student to the larger system (p. 8). Unequal systems may also cause trauma through oppression and discrimination of students of marginalized social groups. That is why According to Venet it is crucial to work towards equity in our classrooms and fight for a more just world (p. 15). She enhances the importance of proactive work instead of reacting only to trauma that already exists. Participation in this

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[12] See Lasten ja nuorten mielneterveys perusteiset käynnit 2020 (julkari.fi) and Pandemia vei opettajien voimat – Tutkija varoittaa uupumisen seurauksista • Opettaja.fi

work should be every teacher's responsibility by embedding trauma-informed practices in our classrooms. We should also see trauma-informed pedagogy as teaching that benefits all students, changing our mindset from "fixing broken kids" to making our classrooms safe and supportive spaces for everyone.

7.3 The importance of positive relationships

Good learning starts with good relationships. There is evidence that positive student-teacher relationships will improve students' academic success (Howard et al. 2020). This is because students who believe that their teacher cares for them, will engage more actively in the classroom. Teachers need to take responsibility in creating a safe and supportive environment. For instance, our language use matters (Howard et al. 2020). It is important to acknowledge each student every day in our classrooms. This is very easy to do for example via very traditional name calling; just to mention each student by their name, say something positive or encouraging or share a smile. These acts do matter since they say to the student "you matter". These little acts are called micro-affirmations (Howard et al. (2020)), which are explicit words of kindness, inclusion or care.

Creating positive relationships is the starting point for teaching. As Howard et al. (2020) state, what we invest in relationships will pay back as positive learning outcomes (p. 50). We need to know our students to be able to know how they learn and what works for them. Although, I argue that it is easier to get our students engaged no matter what we ask them to do, if we have succeeded in creating good relationships and if our students feel that they are being cared for. I also argue that even the best and the most efficient learning methods - whatever they might be - do not work when there is no trust.

We might have children experiencing trauma in our classrooms, which makes relationships even more important. If we do not know our students, we might easily

misinterpret their behavior. For example children going through chronic trauma will go into

survival mode easier since their stress-response system gets triggered by the environment

cues, as Venet (2021) explains (p. 35). We might misinterpret the behavior of the students

who are reacting to these cues by activating their survival mode as misbehavior. And as we

react to this kind of behavior as misbehavior, we might make the trauma even worse (pp.

36-37). This is why we need to move away from punitive measures towards restorative

communities (p. 38). "Children affected by trauma need an environment that is based on

consent, not coercion", as Venet (2021) affirms (p. 63). Though I would alter this statement

by omitting the "affected by trauma".

One of the trauma-informed practices is building connections. According to Venet

(2021) children need adults that care about them. Positive, caring relationships have impacts

on the children's well-being and resilience (p. 70). Positive relationships are a prerequisite for

academic work and finally for academic success (p. 71). For when a child does not feel safe,

they will not be able to engage. Unpredictability and the lack of flexibility may create stress,

too. Stressed children may behave in unexpected ways that we might interpret again as

misbehavior (pp. 72-77). To be aware of this helps us alter our practices, but being aware

requires us to know us students.

7.4 Being included

Being included is what our students want and what they need. Students need to be

valued as they are and included in the group as their unique selves. We as teachers have all

the power to make our classrooms safe places of inclusion. Åsa Wedin (2021) talks about

linguistic landscape in her paper "Schoolscaping in the third space: The case of the Language

Introduction Programme in Sweden". Linguistic landscape in school consists of written and

spoken texts. We need to think about who our language use excludes or includes. For

instance, what languages are present inside the school, inside classrooms or what languages do we hear in the school yard, in the halls, in the classrooms? Are the minority groups represented? What kind of language do we as teachers use in the classroom? Do all the students' languages have a place in the school and are they made visible? These kinds of linguistic choices are relevant when it comes to students' agency and their identity development, as Wedin concludes in her article.

Garvey et al. (2019) affirm Wedin's arguments in their article *"Queer and trans* students of color: Navigating identity disclosure and college contexts"*. The kind of language we use in the classroom matters. The comforting part of this all is that small things may have big impacts on the students' sense of being included. As little as having a little rainbow flag sticker on your laptop will let LGTBQ students know that your classroom is a safe space for them and that you are a safe adult for them, as was discovered in Garvey et al. 's research. In our language use it is after all quite simple to avoid exclusive language: there is no need to create groups or form lines based on gender, which is in the worst case only an assumed one. We have all the power to avoid further promoting the outdated gender binary. For us this might not seem that relevant, but there are students to whom this matters a great deal.

7.5 Classroom management

As already dealt in chapter 5 how we see ourselves and the world will affect how we interact in the world with others. Our willingness to know our students and the efforts we make for getting to know them will have impacts on the relationships we manage to build. Our willingness to listen to our students and our ability to change our practices for the benefit of our students matter. (See e.g. Milner (2021) ch. 2 and 3.) This all matters for the well-being of the students but it also can make our classroom management smoother. And not only that positive relationships make classroom management easier, but also classroom management

has a lot of importance since it influences students' learning, as stated by Jerome Freiberg in

the book *Beyond Behaviorism: Changing the Classroom Management Paradigm* in chapter 1

Beyond Behaviorism (p. 5).

Our first responsibility as educators is to make our classroom a safe space. We need to

support our students in their personal growth and guide them towards self-reflection and

mental work. It is not only us educators who have positionalities, everyone of us sees the

world in a different way since we each have lived our unique experiences. That is why it is

more than likely to have cultural collisions or misunderstandings in the classroom, no matter

how engaged we are in culturally responsive teaching. There is no need to be afraid of

conflicts. Cultural conflicts occur even when we share the same cultural background with our

students. That is why it is crucial to be even more aware of this when we are in a

multicultural setting. "Appropriate behavior" is a culturally created construct, as stated by

Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke and Currant (2004) in their article "Toward a conception of

culturally responsive classroom management". What we understand as 'conventional'

classroom management is a construct created by the White middle class, building on concepts

of power and control. And we as modern educators in the 21st century, no matter if we

represent ourselves White middle class, need to disclaim this. We need to come up with more

sustainable, compassionate and humane means. We need to move towards restorative

practices.

In their article From Restorative Justice to Restorative Practices: Expanding the

Paradigm Wachtel and McCold (2004) state that "human beings are happier, more productive

and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of

authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them". In their article they provide us

with a "social discipline window" determining four kinds of approaches in "maintaining

social norms and behavioral boundaries". These approaches differ in the level of control (high

- low) and support (high - low). Restorative practices are determined both with high support and control, highlighting the "authoritative" role of the teacher. The other management models are working to people or for people, or not working to the best of the people at all. Working to people is a punitive model, highlighting the authoritarian role of the teacher. In this model, the students do not have a say. Working for people offers us a permissive model with the emphasis on paternalism, lacking the trust and the belief in the students. Not caring about maintaining order is a model of neglect; I hope we do not have these kinds of teachers in our schools, not a single one. Restorative practices, working with people, are based on relationships, as stated by Wachtel and McCold and they also include "participatory learning and decision making". Conducting restorative practices in the classroom is an ongoing and never ending process of building, maintaining and reinforcing positive relationships. Wachtel and McCold state that the workplaces and classrooms that use restorative practices seem to be more productive and also occurring conflicts tend to be easier to solve.

Conflicts per se are nothing to be concerned about. What matters is our way to deal with them. Milner (2021) encourages us to see cultural conflicts as learning opportunities (p. 112). Tensions arise when people are dealing with sensitive issues. Discussions about the inequalities concerning for instance race, gender or social class, have the possibility to evoke different feelings. Acknowledging our own biases or privileges is a very demanding mental and emotional process. However, we must not avoid talking about difficult issues out of fear. Nothing will change for the better if we do not have the courage to talk about injustice.

We should show utter consideration and sensitivity in situations where a conflict occurs between the teacher and the student(s) because of the power which we as educators have. Even though educators have authority, it does not mean that we have the right to walk over our students and dismiss their perspectives. Culturally responsive pedagogy is based, among other things, on the respect of the students' cultures. The teachers' culture is by no

means superior to the students' culture. When conflicts occur or when a student misbehaves or acts in a disruptive way, we as educators should pause and reflect our own positionality, values and beliefs. We should reflect, whether we are "just" dealing with a disruptive student or we should modify our classroom practices so that they better meet the student's needs. (See eg. Milner (2021) pp. 38-43 and 61.)

We should reflect on our classroom management practices honestly and move beyond behavioristic means if they still are present in our classroom. We should think about whether we still have lots of rules in our class, or if there are consequences and rewards. Does the teacher have the control and are students assumed to comply? If so, we are still practicing behavioral classroom management. (See Freiberg (1999) ch. 1.) Behavioristic methods may seem to work, at least in the short term, but we should not get misguided by that assumption anymore. As Freiberg argues, focusing on student control through punishment, behavioristic methods may have negative effects on students' attitudes towards school. In addition, the short-term reward and punishment system does not support the development of students' self-discipline (p. 8). And, as a matter of fact, the ultimate goal of classroom management at the end of a learner's school journey is to be a fully functioning self-disciplined human being. Thus, we should find the ways that actually support this development. It has also been shown that students find their non-assertive learning environment to be more involving, affiliating and innovative and they also feel more supported by their teacher (p. 8). Furthermore, there might always be reasons beyond the school and the classroom for disruptive behavior, which will never get resolved in a behavioristic classroom.

Freiberg (1999) calls for a paradigm change (p. 11). This change, again, starts with the teacher mindset and how we see our students. Do we believe that they are capable, good and well-intentioned human beings and do we trust them? Do we allow our students to make mistakes and learn from them? Do we give them second chances and let them try again? Do

we believe they can do better? Do we build on person-centered classroom management as Freiberg says (pp. 11-13)? Person-centered classroom management is based on care, collaboration and active participation. The goal is to build self-discipline skills in a safe environment supported and scaffolded by the teacher. Again, it is essential to note that more teacher scaffolding is needed in the early stages of self-discipline development. Learning self-regulation skills is not the same as leaving the students without support.

By adopting a more humane classroom management culture we start creating a safe environment. We do want our students to behave in an appropriate manner, but we do not want them to behave out of fear of punishment. We want them to behave well because they feel it is their responsibility, as Weinstein et al. (2004) state. We succeed in this by believing in our students, valuing their unique cultural backgrounds, listening to their voices, showing them care and interest and critically viewing our own classroom practices.

In chapter 6 when dealing with the learning environment, I argued that a classroom needs to be a democratic space. A classroom is a place where the teacher and students come together and creating knowledge is a shared practice. However, this does not by all means intend the teacher to disclaim from their authority. The teacher is still a teacher, a public servant and an educated professional. Bartolomé (1994) supports the idea by stating unhesitatingly the teacher being the authority. It is the teacher after all who is responsible for following the laws and the curricula. But as Bartolomé so well and firmly states: "it is not necessary for the teacher to become authoritarian in order to challenge students intellectually".

Indeed, authority does not equal domination nor oppression. Palmer (2017) argues that in our *culture of technique* it is easy to misidentify power as authority. He claims that true authority comes from within the teacher emphasizing the significance of being connected to our "inner teachers". (p. 34) He further argues that "good teaching is an act of hospitality*"*

(p. 51). I believe that Palmer is trying to say that if and when we truly open our hearts to our students, we will have the authority. This means that we need to trust our students and trust that they will accept us. It also means that we need to see our students valuable enough to be willing to give something out of ourselves for them. Palmer confirms this by saying that hospitality necessitates us to treat our students in a compassionate manner but also to encourage them to speak up and use their voices (p. 82). We need to create and maintain in our classroom a safe and supportive atmosphere where students feel truly included and valued as they are.

Conclusion

Being an educator in the 21st century is not easy. Teaching is a challenging profession and requires a lot of commitment. There are lots of resources for us to learn more about modern teaching and learning and we should be open to our own growth and development as teachers. My research paper guides you in your journey towards a culturally responsive teacher providing a considerable option in meeting the modern requirements of foreign language teaching.

I also acknowledge the challenging reality we as teachers in Finland need to deal with. The Finnish way of executing inclusion has been burdening for the teachers and for the students as well. Throughout the 2000s many special education classrooms have been abolished and the students have been integrated into mainstream classrooms. On the ideological level this sounds amazing but the practice is surely not. Teachers have been left alone and the support that was promised is nowhere to be seen. Teachers' workload has been steadily growing because of the inclusion, big classroom sizes and cutting down on half-class lessons. For me this means as a subject teacher that I have less lessons to teach with more students but I am getting paid less, since in Finland the teachers' salary is based on the

lessons taught, and not on how many students you teach. So I do have less lessons to teach but more students to build relationships with, more parents to work with and more student work to assess. For these issues I offer you as one solution my work in culturally responsive teaching, hoping that many school principals will read it too and start focusing more on well-being.

In addition to the challenges of the current inclusion, we do not have sufficient in-service professional training structures in Finland. Assumably because there are no resources. Teachers usually need to go to training outside working hours and pay for the training themselves if it is not free to enter. This does not support the development of the teacher profession nor the idea of lifelong learning. School leaders and communities should support teachers in in-service training. It should not be a privilege of the fittest, so to speak. I argue that well organized (structural level, built in the system) in-service training would support teachers in their work, decreasing tiredness and preventing burnout.

Indeed, teacher burnout is a serious issue. According to the Finnish educational *Opettaja* magazine 16 % of Finnish teachers reported being severely or moderately tired in December 2022.[13] Even still, not much has been done about it. Having gone through depression and burnout myself I know from my experience how alone you are left. The problem is that teacher burnout is seen as an individual problem and not as a structural matter. Thus, depressed or burnout teachers are left coping on their own. This needs to change soon. I call for immediate action from our government, our communities and our school leaders. In the future, I would like to explore this theme more myself and provide more detailed support on how to develop and organize teacher care in everyday school life at the systemic level.

Teachers need and deserve support. Teaching is a crucial profession in society as we are working for the good of the nation in the future. I try my best as a teacher trainer to do my

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[13] Pandemia vei opettajien voimat – Tutkija varoittaa uupumisen seurauksista • Opettaja.fi

part. Through my website and my hands-on workshops I offer teachers material that is ready to be used in their classrooms. I encourage teachers to try out new things but to start by making little changes first. I offer ideas on how well-being can be integrated in the classroom activities and assignments. I listen to teachers' ideas and hopes and develop my workshops accordingly. I want my workshops to be actually helpful in everyday classroom life. I want to offer teachers ready-made material so that it is easy to start the development. Teachers are already so burdened that the development opportunities should be easily accessible and teachers should feel they truly benefit from the training. Otherwise they will not attend next time nor will they see any point in attending professional development workshops. Nobody wants to have the feeling that they are wasting their time and particularly not the teachers who are already investing a lot of time in their teaching. As a teacher trainer myself I do hope that the schools and the communities would better support the work of teacher trainers and tutors. There should be enough resources for our work, too and we should not be required only to develop our skills on our own time and with our own money. I just hope that the policy-makers would understand that the money invested in supporting teacher care and professional development will pay back as reduced medical costs (less sick leaves) and reduced teacher burnout rates (less sick leaves, healthier teachers, healthier students).

I hope to continue my own journey with this research paper. I am hoping to publish it as a book or continue to Ph. D. studies. In either of the cases, it would make sense to include my students' voices by interviewing them or having them fill out a survey. It would also be interesting to learn more about how the Finnish teachers are already meeting the requirements of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. It would be crucial to find out where teachers still need support and then offer them some well targeted help. It would also be beneficial to find out more practical ways of implementing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in the Finnish foreign language classrooms. I am sure there are already plenty to be found.

The latest PISA results from 2022 were released on December 5th 2023. The performance of Finnish students keeps declining. The gap between the highest and lowest scoring students keeps growing and the number of weaker students is growing, too. Also, we see that socioeconomic background has more and more impact in favor of more advantaged students. Discussion about what should be done in education started immediately back in Finland. There were articles right away published in the media and discussion started on social media, too. I am not surprised, but still disappointed, about the way people are handling the results. They seem to find blame, again, in the curriculum and the use of digital devices. There is still a very strong belief among educators that the current curricula require more self-regulation skills from the students than what they are capable of managing. This is a mis-belief or mis-understanding, since it is always the teacher's responsibility to offer enough support and scaffolding for the students. So, if we examine the "failure" in the self-regulation demands, the blame falls to the teachers, unfortunately. Many students reported that the use of digital devices - their own or someone else's - disturbs their learning. Banning digital devices or students' mobile phones is not the solution. Offering teachers support and training in integrating digital devices into teaching and learning in a pedagogically appropriate way is. The PISA results show that "Students who spent up to 1 hour per day on learning on digital devices at school outperformed those who didn't by 14 points[14]", supporting my argument. One worrying note about the PISA results was that "23% of students in Finland were in schools whose principal reported that the school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered by a lack of teaching staff (and 13%, by inadequate or poorly qualified teaching staff)". There is a steep growth in these numbers from 2018 with 7% and 6%. What do these numbers tell us? It means that more and more unqualified teachers are working at schools, but what is the reason for this? Are more and more teachers quitting their jobs? And if so, what are the

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[14] afda44bb-en.pdf (oecd-ilibrary.org)

reasons behind this phenomenon? Hopefully we finally are able to start a real, critical

reflection about our schools and education and finally start supporting our students better.

Practicing Culturally Responsive Education is the solution that I am suggesting.

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Appendix 1

Author biography

Maarit Kolehmainen is an English and French language teacher currently working at a Finnish elementary school in the city of Espoo. She graduated in 2008 from the University of Jyväskylä as a Master of Science and has been working ever since. She has specialized in Teaching and Learning in Digital Environments at the University of Helsinki (2021). Since the fall 2021 she has been working as an ICT teacher instructor in the City of Espoo. She has offered workshops mainly for other language teachers in the city of Espoo but some of the workshops have been offered for all teachers. In the workshops Maarit has given guidance in the use of Google Classroom and the tools provided in the Google environment, such as Google Forms, Slides, Sites, Drawings and Sites. She has also trained teachers in creating videos with iPad apps in language learning and using these videos in assessment. She has also offered workshops in gamification, which is an area of special interest for her. Her other interests are versatile use of ICT, collaborative work in the language classroom, developing foreign language assessment, well-being and the joy of learning. Maarit loves learning new things herself and is interested in reading about versatile educational topics. She is always interested in participating in interesting workshops and seminars herself particularly about language teaching and assessment and the many uses of ICT. She would love to learn more about coding and one day to be able to integrate it into language learning in a natural and efficient way. In fact, she has been learning about coding from her students in the ICT club that she founded last year with her students in her school. Maarit always has in her mind something interesting that she would like to learn next. She wants to transmit this love for learning both to her students and to other teachers.

Appendix 2

Alex, Iamile, Dasha, Faith, Mikayla, Jaylen, Junior, Thalia, Ceci, Kenn, Daevion. With you I experienced something unique. Together we created something unique. And I want to thank you all for that. I still want to say thank you to Ellen, Andreea and Dr. Peterson. You were important people on my journey here, too. I also want to thank Nashville. During these four months I fell in love with you. Last but not least I want to thank my family and friends back home for believing in me and supporting me. Mum, dad, Marika and Marko. I love you guys. Without you, there wouldn't be me. And Kimmo, my husband. Without you my love, nothing would be possible. Thank you for your endless support and love for me. You taught me how to believe in myself. You taught me how to live.