Two general recommendations to improve functional language competences

E. Thürmann, September 22, 2008, Vilnius, Lithuania

Content

• Improving language competences and thinking skills as tools for cross-curricular and lifelong learning
• Empowering the learners to take up (more) responsibility for their own achievement
Language(s) of schooling

Languages and their Varieties Represented in the School

- Regional, minority, and migrant languages (when they are not the language of schooling but recognised within or outside the curriculum)
- Main Language(s) of Schooling (official media of instruction)
- Foreign Languages Taught in School (may become partial or second languages of schooling in bilingual teaching or immersion programmes)

Correlation of language competences and non-language achievement

- Frequency %
- Families with a Turkish background
- Families formerly living in Russia
- German families

Level of mathem. competence
Competence awareness

... teachers’ expectations for language use are seldom made explicit, and much of what is expected regarding language use in school tasks remains couched in teachers’ vague admonitions to “use your own words” or “to be clear”... For these reasons Christie (1985) has called language the “hidden curriculum”.

... judgements about students’ abilities are often based on how they express their knowledge in language.

... teachers need greater knowledge about the linguistic basis of what they are teaching and tools for helping students achieve greater facility with the ways language is used in creating the kinds of texts that construe specialized knowledge at school.


Experiment

putting four green marbles in the track
dropping one glass marble down the track
dropping one steel ball down the track
positioning two glass marbles at the top of the track
Experiment

Well, when we put the first striped one up, an it hit the four marbles... first marble pushed the second marble that pushed the third marble that pushed the fourth marble, but ne... never got very far. When we put one ball "bearian", it got up to - nearly to the end of the white... strip... nearly to the beginning of the... green strip at the other side. When we put... the two... em... striped marbles in... the same happened. But when we put the put... the two ball bearians, it - still the same happened.

Well, when we done... em... that ball, it went up high it went up high there, then it stopped. An' with them it went up, 'n not quite so high except it went back there and up.

When one of the blue... striped marbles came down there, one of the green ones went up, a little way. An'... when... a silver one came down, one of the green ones went up, but further. An' when... two of the blue striped ones came down, two of the green ones went up. An' when both the silver... marbles came down, two of the green ones went up further.

Cummins´ BICS and CALPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BICS</th>
<th>cognitively undemanding communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>context-embedded communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Quadrant</td>
<td>2nd Quadrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Quadrant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cognitively demanding communication</td>
<td>CALP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cummins’ BICS and CALPs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BICS</th>
<th>CALP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interactive texts:</strong></td>
<td>high personal involvement, produced under real-time constraints – low explicitness</td>
<td><strong>Edited texts:</strong> produced under conditions permitting editing and high explicitness of lexical content, but little interaction or personal involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Situated Content:</strong></td>
<td>concrete colloquial style</td>
<td><strong>Abstract content:</strong> detached formal style, with nominalisations and passive constructions,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reported style:</strong></td>
<td>past tense and perfect, 3rd person pronoun; primary narrative emphasis – marked by considerable reference to a removed situation</td>
<td><strong>Immediate style:</strong> high occurrence of present tense forms – descriptive, expository – little reference to a removed situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Format of competences

**Format of curricular standards**

Pupils are able to select data and information from different sources (e.g. print-, electronic media), assessing plausibility and relevance and process the information in a way adequate for a specific purpose, target group and situation.

Data were collected from curricular documents of five German Laender (Berlin, Hamburg, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Sachsen, Thüringen) reaching across primary and lower secondary education and a broad spectrum of subjects. This overall sample contains 2004 individual competence strings of the format explained above.
Activity fields, discourse function, media and linguistic means

Descriptors are used to describe and scale competences

| Media, learning materials, text types, genres | Can participate in classroom interaction and communication | Can obtain and process relevant information | Can (re-)structure and extend knowledge concepts | Can communicate and present learning results | Can evaluate ways, means, and methods of learning |

Thinking skills / Discourse functions

Repertoire:
- Lexis
- Morpho-Syntax
- Pronunciation
- Spelling

Texture:
- Strategies
- Structures
- Reference
- Coherence

Communicative activities:
- Listening
- Reading
- Speaking
- Writing

LaC: Preliminary Results of German Subgroup

Negotiate – Point – Describe – Explain – Argue – Evaluate

name – label – define – point out - specify (details) – summarise – compare – contrast – relate – judge – appreciate – position ...

literary texts and genres – factual prose and genres – discontinuous texts – multimedia texts ...

BICS/CALP:
- lexis – morpho-syntax – means to establish coherence and cohesion ...

LaC: Preliminary Results of German Subgroup

... can follow subject-specific texts / presentations without being irritated by specific terminology, knows which terms are relevant for solving a specific task and how to clarify their meaning, is acquainted with canonical definitions and knows when it is necessary to use them ....

... can read factual subject-specific prose without being irritated by terminology
... can identify passages in a written text which clarify meaning of relevant terms
... can explain elements and their function of definitions by giving subject-specific examples ....

1st step to (more) student responsibility

Clearly identify what the pupils are supposed to be able to do/know at the end of a teaching module: advance organising

Example taken from social sciences:

By the end of the module we should be able to:

• explain what Citizenship is all about
• give examples of topics covered in Citizenship
• identify English speaking countries where different communities live together (e.g. Scotland and New Zealand)
• do research on the different origins of the people in the class/group
• list the ways how people can be active citizens.
2nd step to (more) student responsibility

When it comes to tasks, unambiguously specify what pupils are supposed to do, how and why – if necessary specify conditions under which the specific task should be solved: transparency

Example taken from geography:

Analyse the thematic map of California and explain why the Central Valley is very well suited for farming. Sum up your findings in a two minutes’ presentation.

3rd step to (more) student responsibility

Set complex tasks in such a way that students have the opportunity to experiment and to discover things on their own. (discovery and experimentation: learning by doing)

Whenever they come to the conclusion that they have discovered regularities and insights which can be generalised, let them formulate „rules“ with their own wording. (= Grammar!)

Exploring the language used in the news on tv: How do we know things have really happened? (indirect speech, mode, modifiers)
4th step to (more) student responsibility

Supply students with enough support, information and language means so that they are liable to succeed solving a task on their own: **scaffolding**
5th step to (more) student responsibility

When formulating tasks make coherent use of a compact set of recurrent operators which clearly signal the nature of the competence to be applied or acquired: operators and linguistic operations.

Students can associate with these operators language means and text types.

e.g. describe, summarise, explain, report...

Language means? Text types?

6th step to (more) student responsibility

Thank you very much for your attention