

Text alternative for episode 1, “Multiliteracy”, in the podcast series “21st century competences in foreign language (teacher) education in Europe”

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Intro: This podcast series discusses 21st century competences in foreign language teacher education in seven European universities. The series is funded under the Erasmus+ program, and it is part of the project *ConnEcTEd* which stands for *Coherence in European Teacher Education: Creating transnational communities of practice through virtual scenarios*. Each episode in this podcast series focuses on one 21st Century competence in the local context of one or two of the seven partner universities across Europe.

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Kaisa: Welcome to this podcast where the main topic is *multiliteracy* in foreign language education. This podcast is the first in this series where we discuss different 21st century competences. This podcast is one of the resources that are created in the Erasmus+ project ConnEcTEd with seven European universities. My name is Kaisa Hahl, and I lead our ConnEcTEd team here in Helsinki. I'm a university lecturer at the University of Helsinki, and I teach future language teachers. I'm also the head of subject teacher education in the Faculty of Educational Sciences. I have two guests here with me today: a language teacher from a school and a teacher educator from the university. I would like to start this podcast by letting them introduce themselves. Taija, would you like to start?

Taija: Hi, my name is Taija Palokankare. I'm a teacher in elementary school, qualified to teach all the way until university, but have chosen elementary school and been there for 23 years now and really, really enjoy my work. In addition, I work with Kaisa here at the University of Helsinki with the STEP program, and I've been mentoring student teachers since 2006.

Kaisa: Thank you, Taija. And Taija you refer to STEP, and STEP is our international subject teacher education program. Our regular program is taught in Finnish, and we also have a Swedish language program in our faculty. And then Toni.

Toni: Yes, my name is Toni Mäkipää, and I work as a postdoctoral researcher in the Faculty of Educational Sciences at the University of Helsinki. And I'm also a language teacher, and I'm a teacher of English, Swedish, and French.

Kaisa: Alright, thank you, and welcome to both of you. It's lovely to have you here to chat with me. Today we're talking about competences that in the Finnish basic education we refer to as *transversal competences*. These sets of competences are something that are referred to as *21st century skills* by the OECD and as *competences of democratic culture* by the Council of Europe. But why do we need these skills, and what do they really mean?

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Kaisa: The world and societies have gone through major changes in economy and technology in the past decades, and we don't even know what changes are ahead. These changes require the current and future workforce to have different and additional skills and competences than the previous generations. That is why our education needs to change and include the practice of these skills during the school years. Here is a little introduction of what these skills are: These skills or competences are equal to the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and dispositions that form the basis for lifelong learning and social participation. They aim to support students' growth as human beings, develop their competences for participating in the democratic society, and support the development of a sustainable way of life. Students also need support in recognizing and appreciating their own strengths and potential for development.

The basic framework for the OECD divides the necessary skills into four major categories: Core subjects and 21st century themes; Learning and innovation skills; Information, media and technology skills; and Life and career skills. However, these skills or competences have been divided differently by different countries and different school systems. The Council of Europe denotes four key descriptors for what they call the competences of democratic culture. These are: Values, Attitudes, Skills, as well as Knowledge and critical understanding. In addition, however, the Council of Europe has validated altogether 20 descriptors for different skill sets.

So, in Finland, we talk about transversal competences or cross-curricular themes that cut across the boundaries of individual subjects. In basic education, the transversal competences are divided into seven competence areas, while in the upper secondary school, they're grouped a little differently into six competence areas. The seven transversal competence areas in basic education are the following: Thinking and learning to learn; Cultural competence, interaction, and expression; Managing daily life, taking care of oneself and others; Multiliteracy; ICT competence; Working life and entrepreneurial competence; and Participation, influence, and building a sustainable future.

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Kaisa: So, let's first talk a little about transversal competences in general. Taija, what do transversal competences mean in your work, and how do you integrate them into your teaching of foreign languages?

Taija: Well, working in elementary school actually means that these are more or less—most of these are more or less present all the time, and we don't even have to think about them. So, these—at least the 4–5 first ones are present every day at work when you're working with elementary school pupils. You don't even have to think about teaching them or integrating them into your teaching because it just comes naturally. So, thinking and learning to learn: We solve problems. We write sentences on the board. So, these are the sentences; come up with the rule or what's the rule? We take care of each other. We do pair work. We learn to respect others. We do projects using iPads, Chromebooks, whatnot. We make videos in different languages. So, it is very natural for most of these to fall into their places without having to do much planning.

Kaisa: OK, so would you say that they were present in your teaching already before they were actually defined in the core curriculum?

Taija: Pretty much. And I think that it is also because being a language teacher in elementary school, you need to adapt to a different kind of role as opposed to being a subject teacher in upper levels. If you think about the fact that the class teachers have got a very close connection with their pupils, and elementary school world is based on the fact that they've got their own groups, they've got their own safe adult, and everything evolves around those units. And I think that if you want to work in elementary school, you have to have certain qualities that are closer to that of a class teacher. So, if you know what I mean. [laughs]

Kaisa: OK, yes. Thank you, Taija. So, now almost the same question to Toni. So, what do transversal competences mean in your work, and how do you integrate them into your teaching?

Toni: As Taija said, I don't have to think about them constantly, so that they are present pretty much all the time. So, for example, learning to learn; that's an instrumental learning goal of all education. And we are all—or we all should become—self-regulated lifelong learners. And for that we need learning-to-learn skills. So, that's why that skill, particularly, is present in all the courses. But, of course, the other competences, too: well-being, et cetera. So, it is an important aspect of all learning. When my new course starts, I always present the learning goals and the content of the course, and then I encourage my students to set their own personal learning goals and then reflect on the process regularly during the course. So, in that sense, I at least try to enhance their learning-to-learn skills.

Kaisa: OK. And in general, what do you think Toni, how does foreign language teacher education prepare future teachers for the teaching of transversal competences?

Toni: I think that it prepares them really well because in many courses we discuss the transversal competences in diverse ways, and many students often say that the text of the core curriculum might sometimes be a bit tricky. So, that's why it's really important that we discuss together the meaning of the core curriculum and what the transversal competences actually mean in practice. In many courses we discuss them and then try to come up with useful ways to enhance them in learning.

Kaisa: All right, thank you, Toni. I think it would be really interesting to talk about these various transversal competences, but for today, we've decided to talk about *multiliteracy*. So, now we'll go into a little bit more detail about that.

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Kaisa: Multiliteracy, as already mentioned, is one of the seven transversal competence areas in basic education in Finland. It's also included in one of the cross-curricular themes in general upper secondary education. In a nutshell, the aim of multiliteracy is to promote students' capacity to interpret, produce, and make value judgments across a variety of different texts and to interpret the world around them and to perceive its cultural diversity. But it doesn't sound very simple, though. The concept of multiliteracy, or multiliteracies in the plural, was created due to globalization and digitalization. The way texts were produced and interpreted changed and became much more multifaceted. Text is no longer only written or spoken language. Nowadays, text is understood as entities or information that is expressed by systems of verbal, visual, auditive, numeric, and kinesthetic symbols and their combinations.

These definitions of multiliteracy and the broad definition of texts are really a mouthful. [laughs] But let's discuss them now in the context of school and teacher education.

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Kaisa: So, Toni, why is it important to learn multiliteracy?

Toni: It is really important because there are different kinds of text types and different forums for finding information. And, of course, we have to be able to value and then assess the nature of the information and whether, for example, it's reliable or not and where can I find a certain type of information. Text, as you said, is a very broad concept, so it's not just written text. There's visual, and we have videos, songs, posters... So that those kinds of texts are different, obviously, and it depends on the context. That's why we really need to focus on multiliteracy so that we understand what kind of information we can find in a particular place and what kind of texts we can find in certain contexts.

Kaisa: Thank you. And, Taija, do you have something to add to this question of why is it important to learn multiliteracy?

Taija: Well, I would just like to add that I'm very lucky because I've got my colleagues in elementary school which is like... They take care of teaching this in Finnish, so I only get to enjoy everything in English without having to go further into the details or anything like that because they're so used to analyzing data when it comes to songs and adverts and different text types, for example. So, for us, it's just easy to start using them in a meaningful way in foreign languages.

Kaisa: So, you've found it easy for the pupils to transfer their knowledge and skills from the Finnish language classroom to the English language class or the foreign language classroom?

Taija: I would say so, but I think that it also means that you need to be aware of what they're doing. So, like this close cooperation with the class teachers, knowing what's going on, and, for example, when it comes to teaching languages, I've found it very strange—this is slightly off topic, but I need to have this discussion because, for example, when I'm teaching them the objective forms like “me”, “you”, “him”, and they haven't even learned it in Finnish. It's going to be super difficult that, you know, what is an objective? I need to start by teaching them Finnish first because, for some strange reason, it comes a bit later. [laughs] In Finnish.

Kaisa: Yes. So, that way you probably want to coordinate and collaborate with the other teachers in your school, so that you can do the timing?

Taija: Yeah. Or then I ask my pupils. I say, “Well, what do you know about this?” or “Tell me what you've studied”. And then they start remembering what it is, so I don't have to explain it because it's them that do the work. And then they remind each other if they don't remember what it was.

Kaisa: Yes, and it's probably so that it's not enough that they only get it taught once. They probably need to practice it throughout their schooling.

Taija: Yeah.

Kaisa: So, which aspects of multiliteracy are emphasized when teaching foreign languages to different age groups? What do you think, Taija?

Taija: Well, the younger the pupils are, the less important the text is in the sense that they need something to support their understanding. So, pictures, maybe movement, doing things, singing... Just so that it's not just based on text. And then, of course, when you start working with older pupils, then

you can start producing your own presentations, you can start making videos when you've got the skills in that language. So, it's very different, and it changes a lot during the four years that I get to spend with them.

Kaisa: All right. You already gave some examples of how multiliteracy is practiced in the classroom. Would you like to still elaborate a little bit how different texts are used and produced?

Taija: So, the younger the pupils are, the more versatile, I would say, are the ways of practicing these. We need a lot of pictures. We need movement. We need songs. And of course, based on their level of English—or Finnish because we might have problems with pupils understanding Finnish as well. And then, of course, when you're older and you've got the vocabulary and you know how to produce text. For example, at the moment, with my sixth-graders we have just finished reading novels in English. They've chosen a book that they're interested in and suits their level. That's where I come in; I help them to choose the book that they can enjoy. That it's not too easy or not too difficult. They read the book. We have some exercises, for example, describe the person, describe the location, explain the plot to me briefly. And they write all these things down, and then they make a presentation. So, they have a book review. Or they might want to choose a different type of, let's say they might want to make a video. They might want to react. Whatever they've—let's say it's Cinderella or something like that. A few years back, my class did a play about Henry VIII because they found the story super interesting. And I was integrating history. We were talking about Tudors with our friends in Nottingham. We had this project together, and we had an excellent play in English. So, they did the manuscript and acted and filmed and... Yeah. So, it's like the possibilities are endless. I think that this is just such a vast topic.

Kaisa: Well, it definitely sounds like it. Yeah, [laughs] it sounds great! Lots of opportunities to practice it in multi-faceted ways. So, how about Toni? What do you think? How are the use of different texts and the practice of multiliteracy integrated in language teacher education?

Toni: Well, we try to use a range of different text types. Of course, when it's a university that we are talking about, we often read articles and books. But, of course, there are other types of text, too, so we use videos, maybe even songs sometimes, and then posters, and photos, and other visual stuff because, as Taija mentioned, especially with younger students, and of course with older ones, too, we need these visual aids and they often might include text, too. So then, in this way, we as teacher educators set them an example of how to use a range of text types and texts in their teaching. So, that's how we try to encourage it.

Kaisa: OK, thank you. And also, one of the skills within this multiliteracy is to make value judgments across a variety of different texts. So, that's likely something that's also included in your teaching, right?

Toni: Yes, definitely. And all this critical reading and how to value the text and how to decide if it's useful for me and whether the information in it is correct or not or reliable or not. So, that's a primary skill for every teacher.

Kaisa: Alright, thank you. What about... if we think of challenges, do you see any kind of challenges in the learning of multiliteracy? Do you want to start, Toni?

Toni: Well, sometimes, especially with the critical reading, it might be difficult to know whether this text is usable, whether I can use it in my teaching or in my thesis or whatever. So, sometimes that can be a

bit tricky for some students. How to assess, how to know whether the information in this text is valid and useful. That might be challenging for some students.

Kaisa: OK. And what about Taija? What kind of challenges do you see in your pupils' learning of multiliteracy?

Taija: I think that what affects learning in general as well is the fact that we do have quite a lot of pupils whose language skills are not good enough in any kind of language. That they might not have words for anything. And that is a problem. So, they cannot express themselves. And then, we've got pupils who don't, for example, when you're looking at the time, they don't recognize the clock, they don't know what time it is, in any language. So, that might be challenging when it comes to using different kinds of texts. But then, of course, we have the pictures to help. We've got different ways of working our way around that. And then, I think that being an English teacher, I'm very lucky because the publishers have noticed this and they are producing material. They're producing videos, they're producing songs with certain vocabulary, certain grammatical aspects that I can use in my teaching, English being the most taught language in Finland. But when it comes to teaching Spanish, for example, the resources—it's super hard for me to find material that suits second language learners. So, I think that that's challenging. And, of course, because you need to know enough of the language to be able to tackle that. But, luckily, there are some nice videos produced by someone else [laughs] that we can use. Yeah.

Kaisa: OK. Well, that sounds really good that at least some publishers are then helping the teachers out and providing proper resources and good resources to use in the teaching. But it sounds like, certainly, teachers of different languages are in a little bit different situation.

Taija: Well, money talks.

Kaisa: So then, yeah, when everybody learns English, then there's also more resources and more textbooks produced for that.

One of the dimensions of multiliteracy is *multiculturalism*, and one of the goals of multiliteracy, or one of the skills within it, is to perceive the world's cultural diversity. Obviously, cultural diversity and culture is part of foreign language learning, but can you tell us some practical things of how you include that in your teaching? Maybe Toni can start.

Toni: Yes. With my student teachers, for example, we quite often discuss textbooks and what kind of information they contain related to cultural issues. Quite often, they include a range of stereotypes about the country which are not always so accurate, and as a teacher, it's really important that we emphasize that even though this stereotype does exist, it doesn't mean that it applies to every person from that country. So, that is something that I find really important in my courses, so that... When we use the textbooks, they have a lot of useful information and a lot of good exercises that we can use as teachers. But then, we also have to be a bit critical with them and mention—because especially younger students don't necessarily understand that these are stereotypes and not all persons from that country are like that stereotype says. So, that is really crucial in my opinion that we remind our student teachers of that.

Kaisa: That's certainly a really important point. And what about Taija? What would you like to say in relation to diversity?

Taija: Well, I agree with Toni. The material at the moment, the newer material that is being produced; the authors are very well aware of the fact that there might be some cultural issues that, as you said, are stereotypes and they try to avoid it. So that we're not necessarily having this kind of issue when it comes to teaching cultures. But whereas we might talk about Tuvalu, so there's a section that we familiarize ourselves with the biggest festivals of that country that everybody celebrates and not necessarily talking about cultural stereotypes that much. And I think that, especially in elementary school, it is essential to teach our young ones about the diversity of cultures. And, sadly, very very many books still cover the most well-known cultures: British, American, Australian, maybe Indian. But then, I would like to see a lot more other cultures as well and the kind of text that is suitable for especially younger pupils so that they understand. So that we can then teach them about cultures but also about maybe supporting their own culture because Finland is a multicultural country, especially the Helsinki-Espoo area. So, we've got a lot of pupils with immigrant backgrounds or that their grandparents might live somewhere else or... So, respect—or others to respect their culture as well—so that [imitating pupils], “OK, so this is what my country is like” or “this is what we are celebrating.” “Ah, that's interesting!” And when we are all talking about it together, it's not as we are taking it as something like, “So, this is what *these* people over *there* do”. Because we have got all those cultures within our own communities. And this language awareness, cultural awareness is something that is happening in schools all over Finland whether it's language teaching or anything else.

Kaisa: Yes, that's right. Yeah, and we definitely should have this wider perspective into the cultures and remember how really multicultural Finland is as well that we would get past the idea of being monocultural and monolingual as that we are obviously not and rare country is like that, anyways. So, now we've discussed these issues from different perspectives, but is there something that I haven't asked that you would like to add before we end?

Taija: Well, I would like to say that when it comes to these opportunities of multiliteracy, I think that, from my point of view, the most important things are that they're increasing the understanding of everyday life. They're the skills that we need no matter what we study. And of course, when pupils get the material and they get to choose. So, they can choose what type of text they like or they would like to work on. They might want to choose a theme. And then they can decide, they get this opportunity to go and do something that they're interested in which means that it increases motivation and it's meaningful. It's not just studying a language because we need to study a language, but we're studying this language because we're going to do fun stuff with it.

Kaisa: Mm-hm. And so, involving the pupils in the planning is an important factor in school, yes. And what about Toni? What would you like to add?

Toni: Yes, regarding these transversal competences and multiliteracy, I think that our role as teacher educators is really crucial because with the support that we provide, we make it easier for our student teachers when they are in basic practice or advanced practice, when they are giving maybe their first lessons ever. So, with the examples that we provide them with, they can have more tools for trying to enhance these skills with their own students. And it's also really vital that we discuss these issues in many courses so that it's not just for the first course of the semester or something like that so that they have to be continuously involved with these competences.

Kaisa: Yes, so that the responsibility is also shared among the different teacher educators.

Toni: Yes, definitely.

Kaisa: All right, so now we've discussed the transversal competences and multiliteracy from multiple perspectives both in the context of school and teacher education. And we can see that incorporating them into the daily teaching requires planning and purposefulness and also the inclusion of pupils' perspectives or students' perspectives. Thank you so much to our two guests, Taija and Toni! We really appreciate you taking the time to come and chat with me today. I really enjoyed our discussion; it was really interesting and thought-provoking and also, I think, educational and valuable to hear of these different points of view. It's one thing to have these themes and guidelines, for example, in the core curricula and another thing to really have them realized in the teaching of the subjects or within teacher education. I also want to extend a warm thank you to all our listeners. Thank you for joining us! I hope you've enjoyed this podcast. Don't forget to look up and listen to the next episode in this series!

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