

Language learning on the job

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Abstract

About two percent of the European labour force work outside their native country for a period of their professional lives, and it is evident that living and working in a foreign country puts great demands on the communicative competences of the people in this group. An ability to participate in society requires comprehensive language skills since a wide variety of situations need to be mastered ranging from daily communications to professional work-related exchanges. It is consequently a big challenge to provide and facilitate learning possibilities to match these requirements. New technologies create opportunities for developing adequate pedagogical methods in second language learning.

1. Introduction

In Denmark the approach to the teaching of Danish as a second language has been reflects conditions on the labour market and the need for employees. In the sixties and early seventies immigrant workers from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia started working immediately after arrival. They were not offered any education in Danish but learned the language at work. After the oil crisis in the seventies they were made redundant and while unemployed they were offered language courses. The refugees who came to Denmark in the eighties and early nineties were also offered courses. Proper education programmes for adults learning Danish as a second language have been widely available for the last twenty years. However, the employers are complaining. The language skills acquired are insufficient and the language taught at the Centre of Language fails to meet the demands of the labour market.

Taught by experience we are now trying to develop possibilities of combining formal education and informal learning situations at work. In 1998-99, when I was responsible for teaching Danish as a second language in the County of Viborg, we launched a pilot project together with a researcher from the university aimed at developing a method of language acquisition on the job¹. The project was supported by the Minister of Education. At that time this approach was quite new. Now, ten years later, most Centres of Language offer Danish courses in combination with traineeship or in-the-plant education. The process of developing combinations of formal education programmes and learning on the job continues. The legal frames have been improved, but we also have to develop adequate pedagogical methods that will allow us to fully exploit the opportunities of the combination of formal and informal learning.

2. How do we learn?

Learning is a continuous process. We are always learning whether we are in a formal educational situation or in informal learning situations such as work. However, it is possible to detect differences in what people are learning, how fast they learn and how much they learn. Anne Holmen, Professor of Danish as a Second Language and Bilingualism has made a survey of the acquisition of language² (fig 1 below.)

A - Knowledge is meta linguistic knowledge. The acquisition is an intellectual process with learning of explicit rules. The knowledge can be used when formulating rules. But having knowledge about a language is not the same as being able to communicate.

C - Knowledge is unanalysed language competence. The acquisition is imitation of phrases. We have all learned our mother tongue by imitating, but when we learn to read and write, we need a more systematic approach. The immigrant workers often learn the second language by imitation. Imitation is an important approach to the acquisition of language but experience tells us that it is not sufficient in the world of today with high demands for competences on all levels. We also know that is very difficult to correct previously acquired but incorrect phrases.

B - Knowledge is analytical competence. The acquisition is formulating and testing hypotheses. The knowledge makes you capable of formulating creative expressions. Interaction takes place between the three different types of acquisition. Knowing rules can lead to new creative expressions and imitated phrases can be abandoned or used in new ways. In her Ph.D 'Do All Learners Acquire Danish in the same Developmental Sequences?'³ Karen Lund discusses different acquisition theories. Her conclusion is that all three acquisitional approaches are used and needed.

Types of knowledge			
	A- knowledge	B - Knowledge	C - Knowledge
Acquisition	Intellectual ↓	Analytic ↓	Imitative ↓
Maturing	Explicit rules ↓	Implicit rules ↓	Holistic knowledge ↓
Using	Formulating rules	Creative expression	Unanalysed units

Fig1

In formal education all three kinds of knowledge can be used. The formal education is excellent for the introduction to the structure of language and culture, for reflection and for the training of language. On the other hand formal education is not adequate for teaching technical language, slang and social norms varying from work place to work place. Communication related to work is quite different from the language taught at the Centre of Language⁴. Interviews with language learners who were in traineeships reveal how they talk about the 'school language' and 'the real language'. It is also impossible for the teachers to know all the variations of socio language and cultural norms.

Another disadvantage of the formal education is the priority given to an intellectual learning style. This may prevent the more practically oriented learner from learning, and experience does present this as a vital problem for people with a short or no education.

Informal learning as an approach to acquisition of language and social norms at work has not been described in the research, but we know it plays an important role. The acquisition will often be unanalysed knowledge and it is up to the learner to make his own reflections and conclusions. It is a huge challenge to systematize, organize, automate, formulate and test hypotheses concerning language besides learning and performing a specific job. Still, there are great advantages of learning a



new language on the job. It is in these specific contexts that you will hear the intonation and the accent, and you see the body language, which plays a mayor role in all communication. The learner tests his language and gets feedback in authentic communication situations.

Many immigrants and refugees are isolated and have very little contact with the native Danes. Work gives possibilities for contacts and communication. When you are working or need to communicate in other situations, you will also be motivated for language learning. You also have the possibility of testing your language. Motivation is crucial for all acquisition. You learn what you need to learn. Language acquisition is therefore also an aspect of integration. In the Danish integration policy the success of the integration strategy is often measured by the employment rate. That view is simplistic but there is a close connection between the two.

3. How can we combine different acquisition strategies?

As I see it, the major task is to facilitate acquisition where you combine formal education with traineeship or in-plant education. Here we are dealing with more than two parallel learning situations; we are aiming at a total acquisition, where the formal education programme complements the informal learning situation. Formal education offers a Meta-linguistic knowledge and a time for reflection and training which is vital for all kinds of acquisition. The traineeship offers a field for observation and imitation and possibilities for testing the language in genuine communicative situations.

The teacher's task is to prepare the learner to be an observer with linguistic and cultural awareness. The teaching includes focusing on relevant themes and on how to make observations. After the traineeship the education must offer room for communication and reflection. The experiences from work are put into perspective together with other learners. It is important that the learners are active and aware of their own process of acquisition.

The traditional role of teacher/learner will change. The learner is the expert on reporting from his work and the teacher is the facilitator/coach. It is not easy to change either for the learner or the teacher. Some of the methods used in ethnographic approaches to field work can be used in the acquisition process. The ethnographic method includes preparation and awareness of expectations, observations and reflections. Observation of language is another method, where the learner observes different types of communication. The technical development with cell phones with cameras, digital cameras and dictaphones are important tools for observation.

In the last ten years we have seen a focus on the teachers focus⁵. Courses have been organized for the teachers and pilot projects have been launched for the development of their education, but no focus has been put on how the work place can facilitate and improve training. There has been training with a focus on how to do the job but not how to learn language while you are working. I believe the next step is to focus on how a mentor/trainer can improve the acquisition of language.

In Denmark the firms can be paid for integrating and training unemployed people. This year the legislation has been changed and this situation creates new possibilities. Authorities at local government level can pay an employee to support a trainee with social and language problems, if this creates a barrier for employment. The trainer/mentor can help define subjects for focus, he can offer help with reading, or explain unfamiliar words, and he can motivate the learner to socialize and communicate with colleagues, give feedback and help set new aims for acquisition.

4. Informal learning connects with formal education via ICT

ICT creates new possibilities for learning based on authentic communicative situations. During the period of traineeship or in-plant education the learner records instructions and conversations with a cell phone or a dictaphone. The recordings and photos subsequently become the subject of formal learning. For instance an instruction can be heard several times both to secure an understanding the instruction itself and to pick up the structures of language in an instruction as such. Obviously



permission from the firm and the colleagues is needed before recording. Photos can be used in telling about the working process or products in the classroom.

Together with two Centres of Language and a number of firms Bifrost has developed digital material for language teaching closely linked with a given workplace. (Dansk på arbejde - Danish on the Job)⁶ The pedagogical aim of this material is to create frameworks for learners within which they may improve their competences of observation and reflection towards language- and culture issues.

Danish on the Job contains exercises specifically designed for the phases 'before', 'during', and 'after' a traineeship or a period of employment. The themes included are 'New on the job'; 'Beginning and concluding a workday'; 'Break time'; 'Instructions'; 'Safety'; 'Wages and working conditions'.

ICT is an important tool and Danish on the Job includes a toolbox with various methods of using ICT in language learning. The material also describes how mentors can support the learners' informal language acquisition on job, and instructions for teachers on how to prepare learners for the initial meeting with the workplace, and subsequently evaluate and integrate the experience from the actual working situations on the job. The project was financed by the Danish Ministry of Integration.

References

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[⁴] Sørensen & Holmen (2004):*At blive en del af en arbejdsplads*, DPU

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