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DEVELOPMENT OF PLURILINGUAL COMPETENCIES THROUGH VOCATIONALLY ORIENTED LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SWEDEN

ABSTRACT

The article tackles the problem of developing plurilingual competencies through vocationally oriented foreign language in Sweden. The author analyses the pedagogical conditions of realization of plurilingual education at upper-secondary schools, vocational and higher education establishments and the aspects of teacher education for this purpose. The vocational foreign language education in Sweden is determined by the country's multilingual policy and English is given much priority in many societal domains including educational. English and other foreign languages are used as the medium of instruction while teaching the content of other subjects. At the higher educational level students are encouraged to write research papers in English. Participation of Sweden in numerous multilingual initiatives of the Council of Europe providing the opportunities for both teachers and learners of vocational and higher educational institutions with the opportunities of the cross-border cooperation in this sphere and international mobility. Still, there is a problem of teacher's training for teaching foreign languages in professional spheres. Using skills as a framework of foreign languages for specific purposes teachers are provided with the necessary knowledge and tools to deal with their own students' specializations.

Key words: VOLL, SPRINT, plurilingualism, multilingualism, professional education, competence, labour mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education undergoes transformations in the flow of world and European tendencies, the main of which are integration and globalization. Professionally/vocationally oriented language learning (VOLL) must meet the requirements of the global market and satisfy the language needs of modern professionals in cross-cultural communication in business. In this respect, it is important to study and take into account international theoretical and practical pedagogical experience. Sweden has positive background in foreign language education, in particular in the professional sphere and ranks the top among the suppliers of qualitative educational services. Sweden refers to the problem of developing plurilingual competencies as the key factor of raising its competitiveness in the multilingual world economy.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to consider the pedagogical conditions of developing plurilingual competencies of students through vocational foreign language training in Sweden.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

The issue of development plurilingualism in vocational education was brought up by the Council of Europe (COE) as one of the key competencies at the global labour market and ever since has been in the centre of numerous scientific researches (J. Van Ekk,



V. Mackewitsch, J. Trimm, B. Spolsky, J.M. Vez and others). Swedish scientists H. Söderlundh (2004), B. Melander (2005), J. Kalgren (2003), J. Nixon (2005), I. Lindberg (2007), C. Linder (2008), L. Lundahl (2013), O. Viberg (1993) and others tackled the problems of bilingual education in the multilingual educational surrounding. We will study the experience of Sweden of plurilingual education and in the context of the European multilingual policy.

In the article we refer to vocationally oriented foreign language learning (VOLL) which is provided at upper secondary school (gymnasieskola), on the stage of professional/vocational education and training (VET) at vocational colleges and higher educational establishments.

The research methods we used are: theoretical analysis, synthesis, the method of studying educational and historical documents.

RESULTS

During the last decades, scientific research has been made in the sphere of multilingualism and plurilingualism. The COE recognized the necessity of learning at least two foreign languages for employment and further education saying that international firms lose their business because of the lack of foreign language proficiency among their staff. In 2003 the International Association of Multilingualism was established aiming at raising awareness and interest in multilingualism and third language acquisition for the future employment and scientific research (Erickson, 2006). The COE put forward the idea of developing plurilingualism among the European citizens for successful cooperation in all social spheres, better understanding, empathy and preserving linguistic and cultural diversity. The COE differentiates between multilingualism and plurilingualism, saying that multilingualism is the existence of many languages within one society or societal group while plurilingualism involves broadening of person's language repertoire from mother tongue to other languages, development of his communicative competence while interacting the experience of using these languages (CEFR, 4). Multilingualism serves the basis for developing plurilingualism, which also concerns development of intercultural awareness. In particular, it is very important for international economic cooperation, where understanding partners' cultural background can have a dramatic impact at the business setting.

The statistical data of Eurobarometer (2010) showed that 40 % of the recruiters recognized the necessity of foreign language proficiency for employment (Eurobarometer, 2010, 19). Thus, the Bruges communiqué (2010) called for ensuring "the provision of language learning and intercultural competences in VET curricula, providing the opportunities for both teachers and learners in VET with special emphasis on the cross-border cooperation in this sphere and international mobility" (COE, 2010). The European Commission established the European Business Platform for Multilingualism with the purpose of highlighting the necessity of plurilingual skills in international business and assisting the companies in improving their multilingual business communication. The Business Platform has launched a project called CELAN (Network for the promotion of language strategies for competitiveness and employability) (COE, 2013). Plurilingualism started to be regarded as a part of professional competence of a modern specialist.

The research shows, that at upper secondary and tertiary levels of education in Sweden there is strong emphasis of contemporary policies on serving economic functions by promoting employability, flexibility and enterprise. First, VOLL in Sweden is shaped by the European strategy of foreign language education for employment, mobility and life-long learning. Second, Sweden has always tried to build up a highly competitive, smart and sustainable economy due to effective education and prioritization of foreign languages in its contents. In 1950 Sweden recognized its multilingual situation as a result of rapid influx of



immigrants to the country and introduced the multilingual policy according to which Swedish became the official language; English was prioritized as the main foreign language, mandatory at all stages of education; and the Swedish citizens obtained the right to be educated in their mother tongue (Marklund, 1979, 18–19). The position of English in the Swedish community has actually become comparable to that of a second language rather than a foreign language, since many people in Sweden today use English on a daily basis in different contexts (Lindberg, 2011). Thus, 89 % of the population can communicate in this language in everyday life and for professional needs, which testifies to their being bilingual (Eurobarometer, 2006).

In 2005 the Swedish parliament reinforced the privileged position of English in higher education (Ricksdag, 2005). English started to prevail in such domains as banking, engineering, informational technologies and in scientific research. With the development of international businesses the economic faculties and universities of the country introduced various courses of business English. For instance, to apply for the master's degree program in economics at the Stockholm School of Economics a bachelor has to reach the level of Proficiency in English (equivalent to C1 as defined by the CEFR). Some bachelor programs require satisfactory grades in TOEFL. Thus, at the end of the course, the students must understand the concept of conducting negotiations, analyze each specific situation, create and apply the corresponding strategy, which incorporates the appropriate language means. The students are encouraged to write master's theses in English. The requirements for the second language are exam result of B2 (commercial equivalent) or successful completion of an accredited course at a CEMS school. The third language has an extension and exposure requirement (which can be met through a 5 ECTS course, a significant period of working in the language, or A2 results on a commercial exam) (SSE, 2012, 13).

The syllabus for the subject of English for upper secondary education says that the knowledge of this language increases the individual's opportunities to participate in different social and cultural contexts, as well as in global studies and working life (Skolverkett, 2007, 1).

Despite the priority given to English, Sweden recognizes the necessity of building up plurilingual skills of pupils in other languages. For instance, starting from the 7th grade of the compulsory school three foreign languages are taught: German, French or Spanish by choice. By the way, Swedish is taught as the mother tongue to the Swedes or as a foreign language to ethnical minorities, which reflects the plurilingual aspirations of the country.

Sweden has a long-standing tradition of VOLL in a multilingual society. In the last decades more and more upper-secondary and vocational schools use content and language integrated learning (CLIL), which is the use of a foreign or a second language as the medium of instruction. SPRINT (*Språk – och innehållsintegrerad inläring och undervisning*) is the Swedish equivalence to CLIL. SPRINT is a so-called umbrella term, which embraces both learning and teaching the content of a non-language subject with the help of a foreign or a second language and a bilingual education, based on the immersion programs initiated in Canada. With the increasing demand of the population for proficiency in other languages, SPRINT started to be applied with reference to German, Spanish and French. Nowadays the use of SPRINT ranges from some subjects of the curriculum to the whole curriculum. SPRINT is now considered as the step towards plurilingual education since the great number of the Swedish pupils and students are exposed to learning by means of English as the mandatory language at all stages of education, or other foreign languages. SPRINT is mainly used in the upper-secondary and vocational education, when the students have already acquired the fundamental knowledge in the majority of sciences. Furthermore,



almost all Swedish universities offer training in English, which makes Sweden very much attractive to foreign students. According to J. Nixon, 122 upper secondary schools (23 %) offered some kind of SPRINT education in Sweden of the total amount of schools in 1999 (Nixon, 1999, 6). SPRINT embraces such languages as the medium of instruction: English – 75,0 % of schools, German – 8,0 %, French – 6,0 %, Finnish – 2,0 % and others – 4,5 % correspondingly (Nixon, 1999, 18).

There are several reasons for using SPRINT at vocational education. First, English cannot take up half of the curriculum. Secondly, teachers use the native language as well when teaching the content of other subjects in English. Third, while learning professional fields through the medium of a foreign language students acquire professional foreign language proficiency which will be necessary for further education or future career with regard to increasing labour mobility.

If we compare the required language proficiency of the secondary school leavers according to the CEFR and those of Sweden, we notice that the Swedish standards of proficiency in English upon leaving the upper-secondary school are higher and in some programs, where English is taught as the target language, correspond to the level C (Erickson, 2006, 8) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Correspondence of the Swedish school syllabus for foreign languages with the language proficiency levels according to CEFR

Stages of foreign language teaching in the Swedish school system		Levels of proficiency according to CEFR
Compulsory school	1-st stage (1–3 grades)	A1–A2
	2-nd stage (4–5 grades)	A2
	3-rd stage (6–7 grades)	A2–B1
	4-th stage (8–9 grades)	B1
Gymnasia	5-th stage (course A) (10-th grade)	B1–B2
	6-th stage (course B) (11-th grade)	B2
	7-th stage (course C) (12-th grade)	B2–C1

The study of English and other modern languages (German, Spanish, French or Russian) at the upper secondary school comprises three courses (A, B and C). Course A is a mandatory course for all professional programs taught at Swedish gymnasia, while the higher course B is compulsory for such programs as “Social sciences”, “Natural sciences”, “Arts and Esthetics” and “Technical”. Every program has from two to 4 orientations, so that students can have wider opportunities for choosing a university or a college for further training.

Due to globalization of business faculties of finance, accounting and economics, level B (Vantage) of proficiency in English is demanded from future students as many of their courses are taught in this language. The syllabus for English for the gymnasia pupils states that at the end of the course B they should:



- understand longer sequences of connected oral discourse communicated directly, or via the media where the content may be unfamiliar, and of a relatively theoretical nature;
- have the ability to present contents in writing in a clear and well-structured way, as well as be able to express themselves in a varied and personal manner with respect to the audience and situation;
- have a knowledge of current conditions, history and cultures of the countries where English is spoken;
- be able to present aspects of their own culture and country to persons from a different cultural background.

These skills will be needed in future professional activity for creating company's presentations, presentations of products, negotiating various business issues, run business abroad, successfully communicate with foreign partners.

Optional course "C" is designed for those who enter the faculties where languages will be major subjects. Thus, as we see in Table 1, some students who are enrolled to Swedish universities already have level C (Effective Proficient) in English (Skolverkett, 2007, 9–11).

As for other foreign languages, the levels of proficiency have a slight shift and are correspondingly lower, varying from A1 to B1. Still it testifies to the fact of developing plurilingual competence of Swedish schoolchildren with the respect of necessity of this competency in the globalized professional world. This tradition continues on further stages of education, including university and university colleges with the shift to VOLL.

Thus, faculties of business and economics of Swedish universities of Malmö, Linköping, Gothenburg as well as Stockholm School of Economics and others maintain further development of foreign language proficiency with respect of the future professional activity of students. For instance, on the website of Stockholm School of Economics we find a lot of listed programs or courses taught by means of English: "The specializations in Applied Economic Analysis and International Economics have a joint intake. Once accepted to the M.Sc. in Economics, you choose your specialization after completing a common first semester. The program is best suited for students with a strong undergraduate background in economics. It demands an excellent analytical ability and the ambition to put your work to the test with the best people in the field. All courses are given in English by the internationally renowned faculty" (MSc, 2014).

It goes without saying bilingual teaching should be constructed on well thought of methodical approaches and carefully constructed lesson plans. According to O. Viberg, when exposed to bilingual teaching students acquire fluency and show better usage of language and subject specific vocabulary, while pronunciation and grammar skills lag behind, as the stress of learning is put on the first two issues. O. Viberg has the opinion that when fluency of the speech is reached and the subject specific vocabulary is acquired the content of the subject can be learnt to a full extent (Viberg, 1993, 340–385).

In order to facilitate efficient teaching in English lecturers in profession specific subjects must have a very good command of this language as they teach students with ethnically and educationally heterogeneous background. Language teachers need to understand the context in which the language will be used as well as any specialist concepts and terminology. In many cases, this involves a thorough revision of current methodologies. It will also require a new approach to teacher training. There are two kinds of teacher training for this method. Teacher training is often provided at university departments with little awareness of what is needed to teach language for non-academic purposes. Stockholm university provides the



necessary training of teachers who choose to teach a foreign language and other subject. Foreign language teachers' training comprises among subject specific programs also the course of "Business English", which can last from 5 to 20 credit weeks. Teachers for upper-secondary schools and vocational schools study for 5–5,5 years and can choose up to three subjects to teach. At the same time, many teachers of other subjects follow courses in English, without ever considering the possibility of using that language as a language of instruction (Munklinde, 2008, 25). There are also indications that using a native speaker of the target language to teach SPRINT is beneficial both for students and teachers (Munklinde, 2008, 30).

Besides, all the Swedish universities participate in student exchange programs. Stockholm School of Economics can offer about 170 students a year to go abroad to one of its Partner Universities. Most of the partner universities are members of the two networks PIM (Partnership in International Management) and CEMS (The Global Alliance for Management Education). The majority of the exchange places are part of the Master's program, but a few places are on offer at the Bachelor's level. The exchange normally means that students go abroad for one semester (autumn or spring) during year two. When recruiting, companies tend to ask for a proof of language competences such as long stays abroad, standardized tests, exchange programs, internships, professional experience, or post-graduate degrees.

CONCLUSIONS

The vocationally oriented foreign language learning in Sweden is consistent with the key strategy of the COE aimed at promoting plurilingualism in a professional sphere. To increase mobility of the future specialists in the global labour market, enable growth of international business and effective communication a great number of schools, vocational and higher educational establishments integrate teaching the contents of profession specific subjects through a medium of foreign languages. The problems that need further consideration and attending include the lack of time to achieve the study goals set by bilingual programs.

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