Language studies: In search of a coherent framework

Diana Liepa
Riga Teacher Training and Educational Management Academy
Latvia
University of Latvia

Abstract

Over the last years the world has undergone social and political changes the education system needs to follow them. In the European Council Conclusions of 14 December 2017, Heads of State and Government reiterated the ambition of "enhancing the learning of languages, so that more young people will speak at least two European languages in addition to their mother tongue."The Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia has promoted changes in education by proposing to develop new curricula based on the competency approach. Attention is paid to an assessment of the competence at the end of the learning process. The question of the criteria and of competence assessment remains unanswered. The current situation shows that foreign language teachers do not fully understand the advantages of the new approach. The aim of the research: to describe and analyze the experience of foreign language learning in order to promote the implementation of a successful competence approach.

Keywords: whole language approach, an interdisciplinary approach, unity of form and content.

Introduction

The use of a competency based approach to foreign language learning without comparative research and analysis of results does not seem convincing. The study highlights the following contradictions: the contradiction between the experience of learning foreign languages and the theoretical basis of the competence approach; differences between teachers 'and students' views on the learning organization, aims, meaning and use of foreign language learning; missing appropriate methodological and teaching materials.

Based on the analyzes of scientific literature (Krashen, Terrel, 1983; Krashen, 1989; Widdowson, 1990; Larsen-Freeman, Long, 1999; Kramiņa, 2000; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Nunan, 2015; Ellis, 2003; Forrester, 1996, 2006; Cummins, 2001), it is concluded that each theory has its strengths and weaknesses. These theories generally analyze the processes of language acquisition, their factors of influence, language teaching and learning. Language acquisition takes place simultaneously with the cognition of the surrounding world. By trying to find answers to questions on what is language, in what circumstances it is acquired on a certain level, there emerge ideas, which transform into methodological guidelines. Each of the explored theories offers a solution to a more effective language acquisition. It is important to link individual and social, linguistic, sociological and psychological aspects of language acquisition.In order the study process would precede effectively, the unity of learners' cognitive interests and awareness of certain results has to be achieved. The organization and planning of the study process have to consider the acquisition and further development of content, level of knowledge, skills, relations and values of the related course as well as learners' specific features and interests(Liepa, Ratniece, 2013).

Research Methodology

Theoretical methods: analysis of scientific, methodological literature, analysis of existing practice, modeling. Empirical methods: data acquisition methods - observation, surveys, discussions, questionnaires, testing, experiment, document analysis and interpretation; data processing and analysis methods: qualitative (content analysis, coding, grouping and processing of the obtained data), quantitative (graphical representation of data, determination of data frequency, data analysis.

1. Approaches, methods and techniques in foreign language studies

The origins of modern methodology of language teaching and learning lie in psychology. The humanistic approach offers understanding of whole person learning (Curran, 1976). According to Curran (Curran, 1972), language learning is a unified, personal and social experience. Humanistic approach integrates students' feelings, thoughts, and knowledge with the contents of the target language and also emphasizes the importance of fostering a climat of caring and sharing in the foreign language classroom (Moskowitz, 1978).

Learning always takes place in the first person. At the centre there is the person, who is learning reasonably and with a purpose. The learning activity is analyzed from this person's point of view (Helds, 2006). Each subject corresponds to its own learning method. Finding a suitable method for a subject and a person is a special learning task. There is aproblem which canbe solved by learning. The learning subject does not have to use the learning theories of special didactics or psychology. Students personal learning methods and techniques can be developed just as well (Helds, 2006: 34).

Table 1

Approaches, methods and techniques used in foreign language learning

Cognitive approach - a didactic approach that requires language learners to be aware and reflective with the language system and regularities, methods of communication, ethnic and linguistic variations, language as a means of manipulation, the learning process and its consequences (Maslo 2003).	Grammar-translation method - characterized by learning the system of language rules and memorizing concepts (Harmer,2007). The audiolinguistic method - based on memorizing dialogues; language is understood as an automatically reproducible system (Harmer, 2007). Reading method - reading texts, translating, memorizing, grouping and memorizations of terms, modeling of grammatical structure.
Metacognitive approach – students are able to understand what theyknow, what they have to do, how best to approach the new material. Students are reflective about their way of thinking and activities.	Task based learning -students independent work with meaningful tasks, using the target language. Research learning prepares students independent activityin doing a research, using and improving the target language(Maslo, 2003).
Interactive approach links language learning with personal communication among language learners; the teacher is a consultant; maximum social communication of language learners during lessons is important.	Discussion - purposefully organized conversation on a common topic. Role-play is a method in which language learners, taking roles, act in a typical real situations, acquiring and strengthening the necessary language skills. Group work - learners are divided into groups in order to get common solutions and present the tasks. pair work
Integrated approach - There is interdependence of language acquisitionand content of subject. There is not more importance of one of the sides. Both: language and subject content are importantandimprove students' professional development.	Content-Based learning involves language acquisition simultaneously; Language learning objectives are achieved through learning content. Content and Language Integrated Learning CLIL is used to describe studies in which a foreign language is used to teach certain subjects in the curriculum.

Competency-Based approach. Competence must be considered within an interaction between the subjective and the objective aspect (Maslo, 2006). Competency-based approach is focus on the outcomes of learning as the basis of teaching and the curriculum.	Task-based instruction Project-based learning Content and Language Integrated Learning

"The paradigmatic approach to studies is constituted by: a problematic integrity approach to interdisciplinary studies, a universal paradigmatic approach to the correlation between integration and disciplinarization, suitability and compliance approach to the correlation between the nature, the social environment and the actions of human life and to the study process, and didactical principles and methods interaction approach (Ernšteins, 1999, p. 198). The most significant factors of foreign language studies are: an integrated approach to language acquisition, an interdisciplinary approach to learning, a universal paradigmatic approach to the correlation between integration and disciplinarization, correlation between interactivity and content and form integrity (Liepa, 2011). In the context of today's global development trends, a new view of the notion of competence is activated, and there emerges a necessity for an activity of a creative nature. The process of language acquisition includes actions, through completion of which students develop various linguistic and life competences and stimulate an improvement of experience. Language form, functions and the content are important. Language learning takes place gradually by acquiring comprehensible, meaningful interesting content.

2. Metodological principles

Language learning means becoming competent in it. The competence integrates knowledge and ablity to act on this knowledge in order to communicate effectively. Integrity of foreign language content acquisition and use – knowledge and skills, allowing to understand informative contents in a foreign language and, based on that, to develop an individual attitude and a value system. By using own abilities, skills and knowledge, to achieve the expected aims and results, to consider problems, to search for new alternatives, to cooperate with other people, to listen, to speak, to write, to create mutually positive relationships, to act effectively in various life situations (Liepa, 2011). The research Testifies of the necessity of a unified conception in the development of foreign language course descriptions, planning and organization of learning. The research provides recommendations for the development of foreign language courses, which serve as the basis for the planning and organization of foreign language studies. Based on the principles of language acquisition and pedagogical principles, general conditions for course descriptions have been prepared. Yet, taking into account the uniqueness and differences of each student, each group of students, a single foreign language course description cannot be applied to all groups of the corresponding specialty. By observing the basic conditions of foreign language course descriptions, once starting to work with a new group of students, the course description must be developed anew, adapted to the needs of each student and to the group of students. The process of study course planning must take into account principles of student experience improvement, identification and self-consciousness, determination, regularity and cooperation, personal significance, independent action and reflecting (Liepa, 2011).

Designing language teaching/learning progremmes the following methodological principles might be helpful (see Table 2).

Table 2

Metodological Principles in Foreign Language teaching/learning

Metodological Principles
Connection between learners experience, needs and goal of the programme. Learners' personal involvement and learning motivation.
Relevance of outcome of the programme and content to the learners needs. Planning, proposal of aims and tasks. Variational choice of methods and techniques.
The principle of transferability Planning transferability to other programmes internally or externally (out of classroom) (Kramiņa, 2000).

Metodological Principles
The principle of interaction between student and programme. The design of language programmes should use the target language in order to encourage students activities.
The principle of personal development. The programmes should help the learner to think in the target language (Kramiņa, 2000).
The principle of cross – cultural interaction. Learners share their values, opinions, ways of activities, speech styles.
The principle of autonomy. Learners become independent in their work (Macaro, 199
The principle of realization of action. Exchange of experience and enrichment.
The principle of result. Assessment, (self-assessment). Comparison and analysis of results and aims. Any language activity should result in something.

Based on the general aim, which has been proposed, taking into account the integration approach to language learning and having mapped the student levels of language skills, needs and interests, individual aims must be proposed and priorities must be set in the work with the students of the corresponding group. A successful learning process is attributed to a regular observation of the individual growth of students, an assessment of their achievements and difficulties, proposal of new aims and objectives. Portfolio should follow philosophy that language acquisition occurs naturally. The student development and achievements in the everyday study process are reflected in the language learners' portfolio. The portfolio should contain information on the language acquisition experience of students (when and where the foreign language is acquired, what certificates have been awarded), documents (course descriptions of foreign language studies and professional studies), the study process (self-evaluation of language acquisition skills, an integration).

3. Conditions of planning foreign language courses

The foreign language learning outcomes should be stated by level, as opposed to by class, thereby providing a flexible structure to cater for different learning paths and contexts. Each of these experiences has got positive and negative features. Within the language study process teachers use and integrate different modules. In foreign language acquisition process interaction between the teacher, the learner and the content is necessary. The teacher's main tasks are: organisation of the study process, to create a suitable environment, encouragement and the selection of the study content. The content must satisfy the learners' needs and interests as well as suits their learning experience. It must be topical, promoting understanding of moral values as well as striving for them. The selection of the content should be flexible with changes and variations in the long run.

The study develops recommendations for planning and organization of foreign language studies. Based on the principles of pedagogy, the general conditions have been developed (see Table 3).However, taking into account the differences and uniqueness of each student and each language learning group, one plan of a foreign language learning course is impossible to use for all groups of the respective subject. Using the basic conditions, starting work with a new group of students, the plan of the learning course should be redesigned, applicable to the needs of each student, group of students. During the planning process, the principles of cooperation and participation should be taken into account. On the basis of the common goal, established following a holistic approach to language learning, after identifying the students' language acquisition levels, needs and interests, individual goals and priorities should be set. Students' objective needs (language levels, learning experience, content, competencies) are diagnosed according to The European Common Framework of Language Acquisition. Students' subjective needs are expressed in their desires, hopes, attitudes, mental characteristics, which cannot be diagnosed with the help of levels or tests.

Table 3

Conditions of planning foreign language courses

Subject Class	English CLIL subjects Projects
Number of hours	
The goal of the programme.	Improving students' foreign language skills for the development of competencies (communicative, intercultural, learning competencies, etc) and language use in different life situations.
Learnerslanguage levels, learning experience, needs and motivation	1. Self assessment in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, Teaching and Assessmen. 2. Student survey questionnaires. 3. Discussions
Authors of the plan	Teachers, students
Setting individual goals	Student A Student B e.t.c.
Expected results	Individual growth of students: 1. In accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, Teaching and Assessmen 2. In accordance with the curriculum.
Integration of linguistic andthematic contents Cross – cultural interaction.	Themes: • teachers determined; • optional; • self determined. DAreas of language use: • personal; • public; • professional; • educational; • upbringing.
Realization of action	1. Defining a meaningful result. 2. Defining an evidence of the achieved result. 3. Planning how to achieve the result.
Personal development	Self-assessment, teachers assessment, peer assessment.Comparison and analysis of the results and aims.
Suggested teaching/learning approaches	• Integrated approach • Competency-Based approach • Interdisciplinary approach • Metacognitive approach
Requirements for the acquisition of the course	Language portfolio, regular self assessment and analysis of individual results.
Materials	differentiated materials
Sources	Periodicals, databases, Internet resourses and other sources.

A successful study process is attributed to a regular observation of the individual growth of students, an assessment of their achievements and difficulties, proposal of new aims and objectives. The aim of the study is to identify the levels of foreign language skills and their improvement possibilities within the language learning process. The practical task is to stimulate student knowledge of language acquisition, pedagogical conditions of

foreign language studies and their transformations within the study process. Stages of the empirical research experiment: diagnosis of the objective needs of students by using the self-assessment criteriain accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, as well research of student objective needs and priorities by analyzing student survey questionnaires (questionnaire development, completion, analysis of obtained data); teacher and student cooperation and co-participation in the foreign language (English) study course planning, organization and realization. The study was conducted in the study year 2019/2020. The assessment was performed by analyzing the activity of students and results of various completed tasks. Data reliability and validation were tested in the SPSS program by determining the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (a). The results of the field evaluation obtained in the field study: at the beginning of the course a >0.8 (0.893) shows that the set of results is reliable with the assessment ''good'', at the end of the course a>0.9 (0.964) shows that the set of results is reliable with the assessment ''exellent''. In order to find out whether students' skills have improved and the increase is significant at the end of the course, the same assessment was made at the at the beginning and at the end of the course, which determines the use of Wilcoxon's T-test. The beginning and end of the period of research do not differ significantly (significance level 0.05). The results obtained in the SPSS calculations with the Wilcoxon T criterion show that the experimental significance level is<0,05. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, which shows that there is a difference between the beginning and and the end of the research period (see Table 4).Therefore the null hypothesis is confirmed and there is no significant difference between the student levels of language acquisition at the start and at the end of the course. The results can be explained by the lack of time devoted to foreign language studies (60 contact hours).

The student experiences of foreign language learning are very different. The language learning experience of students contradicts the needs of foreign language use, which must be solved by exploring the experience of students by developing the process of planning in correlation to previous experience of students and processes in the society by observing the interactivity correlation between contents and the unity of content acquisition organization. At the end of the study course, the students wrote reflections on the course.

SP2 'I have worked very hard and gained a lot. The lessons were interesting. Participation in the preparation of the study process promoted a responsible attitude.'

SP1'The opportunity to choose topics was useful. The lessons were interesting because important and necessary topics were chosen.'

SP6 'I could shoose topics, find songs and teach them to others.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Listeningat the beginning	212	1,00	3,00	1,5849	,52190
Listening at the end	212	1,00	3,00	2,0755	,36940
Reading at the beginning	212	1,00	3,00	1,6745	,49902
Readingat the end	212	1,00	3,00	2,0566	,35984
Speaking (dialog) at the beginning	212	1,00	3,00	1,2783	,45965
Speaking (dialog) at the end	212	1,00	3,00	2,0189	,45626
Speaking(monologue) at the beginning	212	1,00	3,00	1,1792	,40838
Speaking (monologue) at the end	212	1,00	3,00	1,8255	,61783
Writingat the beginning	212	1,00	3,00	1,1934	,41915
Writingat the end	212	1,00	3,00	1,7123	,59000
Valid N (listwise)	212				

Discussion

Different language teaching/learning approaches are selected and introduced to foreign language programme, not always the language teachers fully understand the basic ideas. Language teaching and assessment requires a supportive language teacher education programme which will introduce to critical language pedagogy, reflective thinking about policy and practice, will help teachers to become autonomous professionals. The language teacher education should empower teachers by encouraging them to develop an insight into what is perceived as good practice, and how good practice can be achieved. Borg (Borg, 2006) has found that teachers' cognition and beliefs are central to their practice, and therefore to influence their practice, educational programmes must start with addressing cognition and beliefs. In order to encourage an evidence-based and research-supported approach to teaching, teacher education programmes play a significant role in introducing teachers to the research evidence on successful teaching methods and how such evidence can be translated into classroom practice (Tavakoli, Jones, 2018). Discussion questions guiding our research.

1. How to help teachers to become more autonomus professionals in order to achieve good practice?
2. What kind of support do foreign language teachers need for the implementation of a differentiated learning?

Conclusions

Study process is affected by learners life's experiences: memories, various events, relations and former study habits etc. Learning that is based on students' own initiative and responsibility have been defined in several ways: self-directed learning, self-planned studying, independent studies, autonomous studying. Self-planned studying implies learnerss' responsibility for taking it up. He/she plans, carries out the plans and evaluates them. Each person's goals differ that is why results and evaluation depend on each learner. Autonomy is a process within which learners realise their independence in organising their learning. Self-guided learning involves both external as well as internal factors. Individual's self-directed level depends on self-determined study opportunities. External factors have real impact on possible starting time to learn; internal ones or personality traits foster the desire to learn. Self-directed learning is based on 3 main factors: self-control, motivation and responsibility (Knowles, Holton, Swanson, 2005). The learner should know why it is significant to study, what is necessary to study and how to study. In order to the study process would proceed effectively, the unity of learners' cognitive interests and awareness of certain results have to be achieved. The organisation of the study process is based on students' self-studying whereas the educator performs a consultant's role. Starting work with the new group, the teacher has to explore it previously, to plan and to predict its further performance and progress. In order to carry out the study process successfully, the teacher should interact with the group as a whole as well as each learner separately. Within these theories further development of the personality is regarded as action-oriented subject who himself/herself keeps growing in the action and in mutual relations with others, determines the features of this activity and mutual relationship as well.

References

Borg, S. (2006) Teacher cognition and teacher education. London: Continuum.

Cummins, J. (2001) Language, Power and Pedagogy. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Currant, C.A. (1972) A whole - person model for education. Apple River IL: Apple River Press.

Dubin, F., & Bycina, D. (1991). Academic reading and the ESL/EFL teacher. English as a second or foreign language Ed. M. CelceMurcia. Boston:Heinle & Heinle, 195-215.

Ellis, R. (2003) Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching.Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellis R. (2008) Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ernšteins, R. (1999) Videszinātniskās izglītības attīstība. Rīga: Vide.

Forrester, M. A. (1996) Psychology of Language.London: SAGE.

Gudjons, H. (2007) Pedagoģijas pamatatziņas. Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC.

Harmer, J. (2006) English Language Teaching.Malaysia: Longman.

Harmer, J. (2007) How to Teach Writing.Malaysia: Longman.

Helds, J. (2006) Mācīšanās kā konstruktīvs un sistēmisks jēdziens/No zināšanām uz kompetentu darbību. Zinātniski pētnieciskie raksti, Ed.I. Maslo.Rīga:LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 31–35.

Knowles, M., Holton, E., Swanson, R. (2005) The Adult Learners.USA: Elsevier ButterworthHeinemann.

Kramiņa, I. (2000). Linguo-Didactic Theories Underlying Multi-Purpose Language Acquisition. Rīga: University of Latvia.

Krashen, S. D. (1989) Language Acquisition and Language Education.New York: Prentice Hall International.

Krashen, S. D. (1988) The Natural Approach in the Classroom.New York: Prentice Hall.

Krashen, S. D., Terrel, T. D. (1983) The Natural Approach. California: The Alemany Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000) Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching. Hong Kong:Oxford University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D., Long H. (1999) An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research.USA: Longman.

Lieģeniece, D. (1999) Veseluma pieeja valodas apguvē. Rīga: RaKa.

Liepa, D. (2011) Integration of foreign language acquisition components in the study process. Rīga: LU.

Macaro, E. (1997). Target language, collaborative learning and autonomy. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Marsh, D., Marsland, B. (1999) Learning with Languages.Finland: University of Jyvaskyla.

Maslo, E. (2003) Mācīšanās spēju pilnveide. – Rīga:RaKa.

Maslo, I. (2009) Studiju procesa didaktiskie modeļi/Lekciju materiāli.Rīga: Latvijas Universitāte.

Maslo, I. (2006) Mācīšanās kā integratīvs introspektīvas process/No zināšanām uz kompetentu darbību. Zinātniski pētnieciskie raksti, Ed. Maslo I. Rīga:LU Akadēmiskais apgāds.

Moskovitz, G. (1972) Caring and sharing in the foreign language class. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Nunan, D. (1992) The Learner – Centred Curriculum. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (2015). Teaching English to speakers of other languages: An introduction. New York, NY: Routledge.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. (2001) Approaches and methods in language teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tavakoli, P. and Jones, R. (2018)An overview of approaches to second language acquisition and instructional practices. Cardiff: Welsh Government report number 12/2018

Widdowson, H. (1991) Aspects of Language Teaching. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.

Widdowson, H. (1996) Linguistics. China:Oxford University Press.

Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages of 22 May 2018.

Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/cellar_36ae2f05-5dc7-11e8-ab9c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02_DOC_1.pdfhttp://www.aic.lv/rec/lv/new_d_lv/bol_dec.htm

Skola 2030. Retrieved from www.skola2030.lv. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/cellar_36ae2f05-5dc7-11e8-ab9c 01aa75ed71a1.0001.02_DOC_1.pdf.