

OBTAINED GENERAL COMPETENCES OF STUDENTS IN LANGUAGE IMMERSION CLASSES

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Abstract

One of the key ideas of the language immersion methodology is to guarantee sustainable development for children from non-Estonian families in respect to their linguistic and social development. The most important conditions are creating flexible possibilities to participate in language immersion groups and classes and applying the language immersion methodology in everyday teaching process systematically. The present research seeks to highlight teachers' views on the sustainability of general competences of children who have completed the language immersion group in the kindergarten. The domain of general competences includes 32 sub-skills related to learning to learn and social skills, which were assessed by the teachers on a 5-point scale. For the sake of comprehensive data analysis, the general competences were divided into general competences fostering learning and learner-centred general competences. The present study reveals that language immersion methodology favours applying child-centred pedagogy in the actual teaching process and supports the sustainability of children's linguistic and social development.

Key words: *language immersion, general competence, sustainable development, teaching process, coping*

Introduction

After Estonia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian speaking children in Estonia maintained the right to receive basic education in Russian but can opt for education in the Estonian language or in the bilingual programme. However, Estonian language of instruction policies are exemplary because they offer a range of options for language minority students: Russian-speaking schools, which are the mainstream schools for Russian-speaking children, Estonian-speaking schools and bilingual classes within Russian-speaking schools that use both Russian and Estonian, such as immersion programmes, most of which have only existed since 2000 (Kemppainen & Ferrin, 2002).

Estonia has chosen to implement its language immersion programme by adapting the Canadian model to reflect its own particular set of political, social and educational circumstances.

Language immersion is an approach to foreign language instruction in which the usual curricular activities are conducted in a foreign language (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004). Estonian language immersion programmes have been developed with Canada and Finnish support. The model of early language immersion in school has been used in Estonia since 2000 and in kindergarten since 2003.

In a language immersion programme at least 50% of subjects are studied in the target language. The methodology permits children to gain proficiency in the Estonian language while also developing their mother tongue. One-third of the Estonian population constitutes of non-Estonians. The majority do not speak the Estonian language and are not fully integrated in the social, political and cultural life of Estonia.

Multicultural society has encouraged looking for new possibilities in providing education for children raised in non-Estonian families in order to guarantee their sustainable development in the Estonian society. Parents and teachers devote an increasing attention to the question of how to support early official language acquisition for children from non-Estonian families. Year after year, the language immersion methodology has gained more popularity and it has become customary in Estonian schools and kindergartens. The methodology is used in 17 kindergartens and 31 schools. By now, studies have been conducted (Kukk, Talts, & Muldma, 2009), which highlight the viability of language immersion as a way of teaching. Undoubtedly, language learning should not be the only goal raising a child to become a fair citizen. It should rather support children's native origin and respect their native language.

Pedagogical bases of language immersion

The language immersion principle is not only language-centred, but it is also an approach centred on children's development that attempts to support their activeness and natural desire to learn (Marzano, 2004)

The aims of language immersion as a way of teaching can be viewed from different angles. McKay (2006) points out several beliefs, which researchers hold important in learning a foreign language. For instance, some researchers consider cognitive and motivational factors of utter importance, while others – social and cultural factors. Some researchers point out the importance of the aspects of teaching and learning, while a number of researchers – the approach to the process as a whole. The authors of this article highlights the development a children's personality as a whole during the study process, and the language immersion methodology promotes it every way (Bennett 2004; Genesee, 1996; Potowski, 2002). Focusing on developing general competences, which include basic skills needed for learning and coping in life also create prerequisites for learning a language more successfully. The general competences can be promoted by child-centred pedagogy. Barnes (2007) points out the following aspects as prerequisites for children's successful self-determination in the 21st century:

1. Certainty about the future as an important prerequisite for a child's happiness. For the children participating in the language immersion programme this primarily means the possibility to be able to learn a second language in a safe

and versatile learning environment, where also their native language and culture are valued.

2. The central part of children's study motivation is personal cognition to control different aspects of their everyday life. In the teaching process, children's experiences can be interpreted, for instance, in terms of significance of the knowledge and impressions obtained through the mass media.
3. Possibilities to build and to intensify positive relations with one another. Language immersion programme as a whole is built on positive values, the important issues being reckoning with others, accepting differences and friendly cooperation. These values are transferred to children in every lesson.
4. In respect to children's mental and physical health their positive self-appraisal is highly important. Children in language immersion classes need support and recognition from their teacher to actively participate in the study process, because it helps them to experience success.

Undoubtedly children in language immersion classes need an environment that would support their developmental potential (Gordon, 2005; Epstein & Janshorn, 2004). The physical factors of the environment, the educational conditions and the interaction between the environment and the individual should be taken into account (Hytönen, 2001). Teachers play a key role in guaranteeing children's consistent and sustainable development, while, according to McLean (2006), the success in their effort is dependent on four principal factors: 1) how a teacher tries to understand and value a learner; 2) the curriculum that determines the goals and tendencies; 3) motivating learners; 4) a teacher's feedback to students, which enables the learners to understand their development. All the four factors are connected by the dimension of relationships, within which contexts essential for learning are created (Kukk & Talts, 2008). The task of pedagogy is to reveal children's activeness on the level of everyday activities. Valsiner (1988) accentuates the idea that children are passive objects reflecting different environmental impacts. The children are a part of an operation, the active side of counteraction, which has an impact on processes in the surrounding environment, and the changes occurring in the environment also influence the way the children act and develop.

Children who have completed their studies in the kindergarten have already passed one stage of studies in their life, and now they are entering the second one. Coping with the next stage is highly dependent on the level of children's mental, social and physical development and how good is their psychological preparedness to meet the conditions and requirements of the school environment. The adaptation of children from the non-Estonian home environment in a study environment with the Estonian language instruction is undoubtedly more complicated than in the case of children raised in Estonian families, but, irrespective of the differences regarding the language level and culture, the children entering school can be characterised by a number of developmental peculiarities.

Methodology

This study focuses on the children who, in spring 2007, attended language immersion groups in the kindergarten and who finished the 1st form in spring 2008. The children's learning results were assessed by 27 class teachers, whereas 11 of them had experience in working with a language immersion class. At the end of the study, 76 children were assessed. These children had the possibility to choose between the native-language school, the language immersion school or the Estonian-language school.

The children's educational objectives in the 1st form were studied in nine target areas: general competences, language, mathematics, natural sciences, human studies, art and craft, music, physical education and assessment on subjects. This study focuses only on the area of general competences, which include learning and social skills (Talts & Kukk, 2008). The teachers who work with the children can adequately assess the children's overall development. Therefore, the authors of this study gave a preference to the teacher's assessment that has been formed through constant surveillance of children's development. Thus, each statement was rated on a scale from one to five (1=very low level, 3=medium level, 5=excellent level). The descriptive statistics shows the average level of the children's target areas of the general learning competences. Since the number of constituent skills in the area of general competences is rather large, the area is divided into two – general competences fostering learning (Figure 1) and learner-centred general competences (Figure 2), for the sake of clarity.

Results of research

Figure 1 depicts general competences fostering learning, which reveal the learner's horizon, capability of intentional activity and specific learning skills. Figure 1 shows that, generally, the students have acquired the general competences for learning, because the averages of the assessments are predominantly over 4.0 points. Among the observed constituent skills, a very high assessment ($\bar{x}=4.52$) should be stressed in regard with openness to new things, events and situations. The teachers have positively assessed the children's readiness to feel themselves as a part of the group, act with others ($\bar{x}=4.36$). The same can be said about enthusiasm about learning ($\bar{x}=4.36$). It is also notable that, along with the children's enthusiasm about new things, they also feel satisfied about completing an activity, which testifies to the children's readiness and understanding of the outcome of activities, which is due to their age-related maturity. The lowest assessment is given to the children's ability to look for and find information from different learning materials and reference books ($\bar{x}=3.97$).

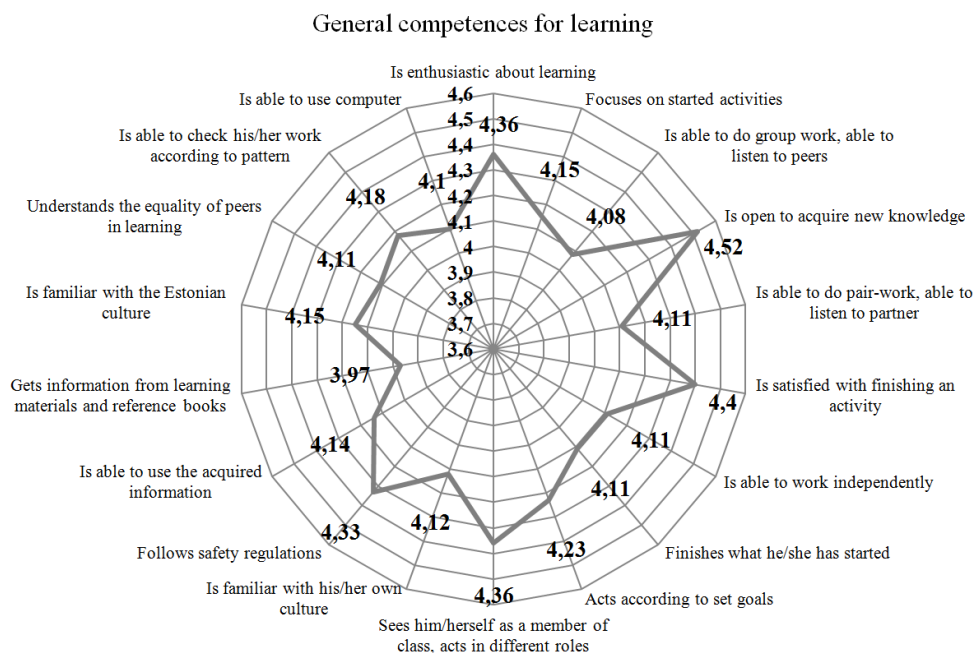


Figure 1. Teachers' assessments on general competences related to learning

Learner-centred general competences

We are dealing with highly important basic skills, which characterise the attitude of a learner as a personality towards himself/herself and other people. The learner-centred general competences, as articulated in this study, can be viewed as one part of students' value education: the present-day Estonian school is facing a challenge – shifting from knowledge-centred school to values-centred school. It is very important to raise awareness on the issues related to values (Sutrop, 2009).

The teachers have highly assessed (Figure 2) the children's positive self-appraisal ($x=4.52$), which is of utter importance for their well-balanced development and courage to express their own thoughts ($x=4.49$). These children also tend to believe in themselves ($x=4.38$), which is connected with high self-appraisal and courage to be open. In the teaching process, the teachers of language immersion classes take into account the children's natural activeness, which guarantees their readiness to focus on the teacher, as well as on their own activity in the group.

The teachers have assessed the children's skill to peacefully solve conflicts not very highly ($x=3.75$). The same also applies to waiting one's own turn.

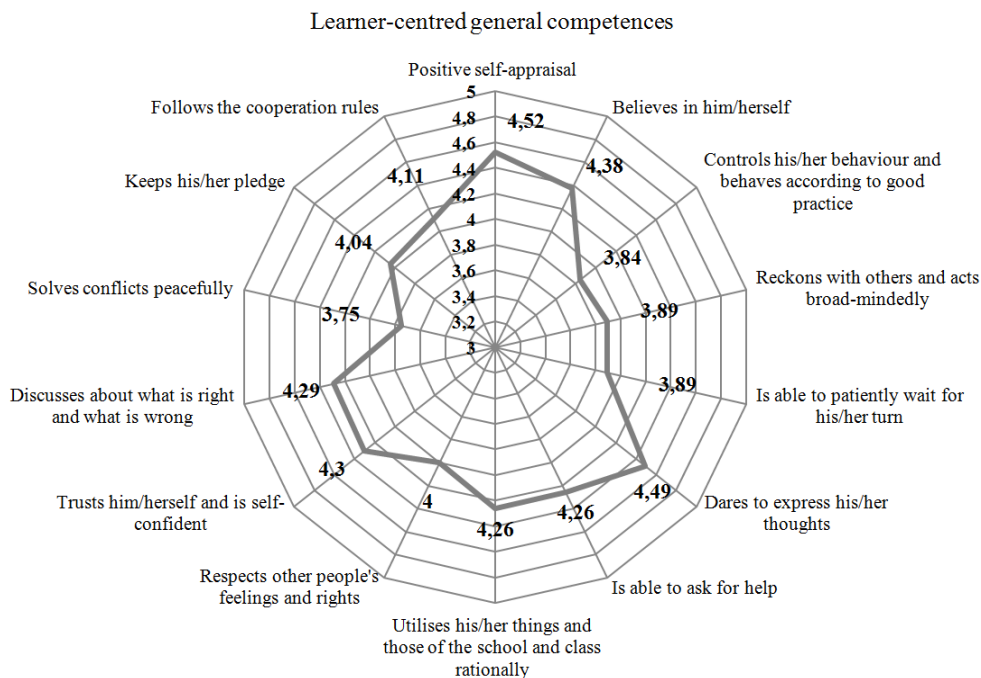


Figure 2. Teachers' assessments on learner-centred general competences

Discussion and conclusion

Based on the basic needs of the children in the 21st century – safe environment, an ability to control different aspects in everyday life, positive self-appraisal and relations with peers (Barnes 2007) – we can claim that the children who have completed a language immersion kindergarten are tended to be open, creative and active in various learning situations. These children also have positive self-appraisal and faith in their coping. Thus, these children are more prepared to adapt to the new stage in their educational life: the school environment, irrespective of the language of instruction they choose. The teachers have highly assessed the children's readiness to be a part of the group, act with others, and the children's attitude to learning is enthusiastic.

The results of this study show that culture awareness is of utter importance for teachers in the teaching process in order to help them provide suitable ways of learning and communicating, which would promote achieving the educational objectives that are realised through teachers' practical activity and which reflect their pedagogical understanding and attitudes. Basing on this study, we can claim that early language immersion creates necessary preconditions for children's sustainable development and promotes achieving the educational objectives.

The research findings are connected with the principles of language immersion as articulated by many researchers (Barnes, 2007; Bennett, 2004; Genesee, 1996; Genesee et al., 2004; McKay, 2006). It should also be noted that a child studying in a language

immersion group needs to have the same preconditions to commence school as a child studying in a regular class. These preconditions are interest in the surrounding world, readiness to study and a wish to communicate and act with peers and adults. Children-centred pedagogy expects both children and teachers to be actively involved in the process of learning. The driving force for developing study environment is the relationship between the child and the teacher.

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