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FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE MULTISENSORY SPACE

Introduction

Foreign language learning at an adult age is a task that requires more than just the knowledge of efficient language learning strategies. Learning a new language implies also learning a new culture and way of thinking, and even learning to think in the target language. Research suggests that individuals may also feel different when speaking different languages (e.g. Koven, 2007). The focus of research on the language learning process should therefore be increasingly placed on the individual and studying his or her perceptions as well as language learning motivation. Kinginger (2010)

states that “the problem of defining motivation is among the most compelling and complex issues related to language learning.” Wilson (2013) has studied positive feelings about using foreign languages, and argues that “discovering — or accessing — new aspects of oneself may indeed be the motivation for some language learners. Part of the performance of language is paralinguistic; linking paralinguistic features to utterances encourages speakers to enter into the world of the target language. Music and images can create a different reality within the confines of a classroom, a reality that literature can create for more proficient second language users.”



Exploring the foreign language learner's intrinsic motivation

Arthur & Beaton (2000) have studied adult foreign language learners' motivation, attitudes and behaviours. Based on their findings "language learners participate in adult education classes for reasons which are primarily to do with personal fulfilment and provide an oasis of time each week devoted to this. This is time which learners have difficulty in creating outside the classroom, when personal and professional commitments dominate." The peaceful and relaxing learning environment provided by a Multisensory Space creates a pleasant contrast to the language learners' traditional in-class environment. The multisensory stimuli consist of auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic elements as well as elements for gustation and olfaction, which concentrate the attention of the language learning process more on the language learner and his or her perceptions.

The Multisensory Space plays a very important role in the language learning process enabling the learner's personal fulfilment and triggering his or her intrinsic motivation to study the language. Wilson (2013) states that "elaborate drama activities may be beyond the scope of many language programmes but even simple touches in the foreign language in class can stimulate the students' imagination." The language

learning methods in the Multisensory Space include different role-play activities, which allow the students to enter the world of the target language and its paralinguistic features. According to the observations the students perform better in these activities compared to traditional in-class learning activities because the threshold to express oneself is much lower in the Multisensory Space. Experiential language learning methods motivate the students, and the more ways something is learned, the more memory pathways are built. Motivated students also have a significantly higher level of interest, which in turn has a powerful influence on the students' learning outcomes. McNamara (2013) agrees that "the emphasis on a capacity for practical, face-to-face communication in communicative language teaching and learning has meant that classrooms have become more lively and interactive, and learners are encouraged to attempt communication that is useful and enjoyable for them even at early stages of learning", but disputes that "the current emphasis in language learning on functional communication divorced from historical or cultural context has led to an impoverishment of thinking about the reasons for language learning in education." Ros i Solé & Fenoulhet (2013) describe learning another language "as the expression of the soul that casts a new magic light on reality", and state that "a 'Romantic' disposition places the individual at the heart of the language learning project, accentuating the personal value of the



intercultural encounter”, as well as “encourages us to learn languages by looking within ourselves, and not only to tolerate the ‘dangerous other’ but also to accommodate the new and the strange.” The creation of a multisensory language learning environment is a development process. It focuses on the learners’ own perceptions of the historical and cultural context as well as paralinguistic features of the language.

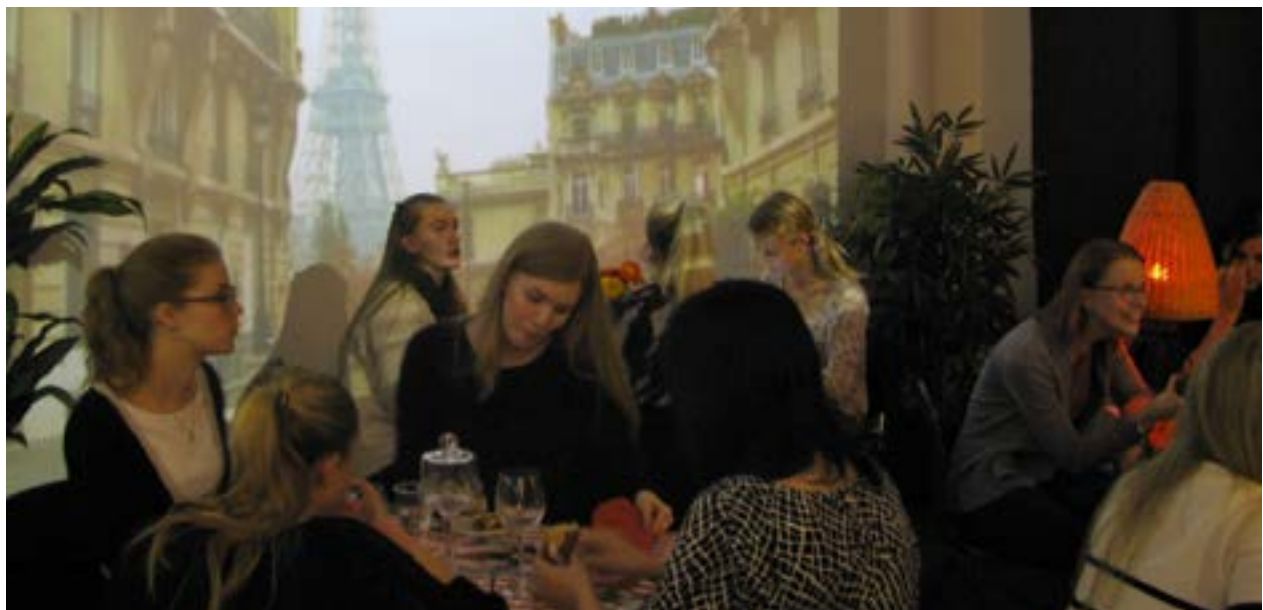
Case study: Le café parisien

In the beginning of the basic French courses the students create an authentic learning environment — *Le café parisien* — for their role-plays. The students choose the colours that would best represent Paris and the French culture for the curtains, canvas walls, carpets and other fabrics in the Multisensory Space. The students’ mental images of the French culture are usually very romantic and sensual, and the music and visual effects projected to the screens are often idealized and romanticised representations of the French world inspired by soundtracks and sceneries from the French films. In addition to various auditory and visual stimuli there are also kinesthetic and tactile elements as well as elements involving gustation and olfaction, such as an assortment of classic French *pâtisseries*, beverages and home fragrances. Coffey (2010) has studied the symbolic value language learners attach to French. Coffey argues that “broadening our understanding of the symbolic values attached to language learning and to the learning of specific languages offers a way to extend our awareness of the socially and historically situated motives that sustain learners’ attachment to a language.” Different multisensory elements encourage communication and interaction, which is not always possible in traditional in-class activities, and are also great tools for

entering the new and foreign paralinguistic features of the target language.

Le café parisien offers a multitude of ways to learn the syllabus of basic French. The role-plays in this learning environment include dialogues between the customers and with the waiters. The students learn to greet each other in the appropriate way, as well as the paralinguistic features linked with greetings; when it is appropriate to shake hands and when a *bise* is more common, and how many cheek kisses are expected in different situations. In customer service situations it is important to use politeness phrases, which are easily practised in everyday situations with the waiter. Food plays a very important role in the French culture, and these issues can be discussed during the activities, and of course tastings are included according to possibilities. Different items can be priced in the café so that the students can rehearse the numbers. The students can use the colours of the French flag in the canvas walls of the Multisensory Space, and learn what concepts the three colours — blue, white and red — symbolise. French pronunciation is learned by listening to the lyrics of relaxing background music.

A group of Finnish students participated in an evaluation that collected qualitative and quantitative data at the end of their basic French course in December 2014. The evaluation consisted of a questionnaire inquiry which discussed the students’ motivation to study French and the effects of the use of the Multisensory Space on their learning outcomes as regards cultural competence, sentence structure, vocabulary and pronunciation. The data consisted of 16 replies to seven questions on a 5 point Likert scale, where five was “strongly agree” and one was “strongly disagree”. The results



show that the students were highly motivated to study French during the course (4.31). They considered that the Multisensory Space benefited their language learning motivation (4.44) and cultural competence (4.69). According to the students' replies the Multisensory Space was regarded as useful in learning sentence structures (3.94), vocabulary (3.75) and pronunciation (4.5).

Conclusion

A French class in the Multisensory Space can really be an oasis in the middle of a busy school week. The Finnish students described their basic French course learning environment in the abovementioned study as inspiring, relaxed and motivating, and compared it to traditional classroom learning environment:

"Tykkäsin, mukavampi tulla kuin tavalliseen luokkaan. Helpompi puhua ja muodostaa vähän tuntemattomampien kanssa pienryhmiä."

"I liked it, and it was nicer to enter than a normal classroom. It was easier to talk to others and form groups with not so familiar students."

"Tilassa oli rento tunnelma, joka helpotti uuden kielen puhumista ääneen. Tykkäsin!"

"The atmosphere in the space was relaxed, which made it easier to speak the new language. I liked it!"

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"Moniaistinen tila toimi hyvin. Tunnelma oli rennompi kuin tavallisessa luokassa ja kuvat Pariisista ja Ranskasta loivat myös mukavaa tunnelmaa ja motivoivat opiskelussa."

"The Multisensory Space worked well. The atmosphere was more relaxed than in a traditional classroom and the images of Paris and France also created a good atmosphere and motivated me to study."

"Todella hyvä! Iso luokkatila on kovin steriili, moniaistisessa tilassa oli hyvä mahdollisuus käyttää kaikkia aisteja ranskan opiskelussa. Erityisesti suulliset harjoitukset olivat kivoja ja helpoja kun tila oli intiimi ja taustalla soi musiikkia."

"Really good! A large classroom is very sterile, whereas in the Multisensory Space there was a good possibility to use all the senses in learning French. Especially spoken exercises were nice and easy, because the space was intimate and music was played in the background."

"Se oli miellyttävä ja mukavaa vaihtelua normaaliin opiskeluun. Tuli jopa ranskalainen filis. Kuvat ja taustamusiikki toivat tunnelmaa. Kiva, uusi idea! Kulttuuri tulee tutummaksi."

"It was a pleasant and nice change compared to traditional studying. I even felt French. The pictures and background music created a cozy atmosphere. A nice, new idea! The culture becomes more familiar."

The Multisensory Space can be easily adapted to any other foreign language class, which promotes Curta's (2010) findings that foreign language teachers should not just be teachers of one particular language, but also teachers of diversity and multilingualism. ■

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