



Silence and the relevance of differing discourse cultures in language teaching

**A quest for strategies to enhance conversation in
language courses**

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Development Project Report



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Abstract <p>From the perspective of a German language teacher working at the language centre of the University of Jyväskylä, this report investigates the relevance of differing discourse cultures in language teaching. Based on frequent observations showing that particularly Finnish students are rather hesitant to actively participate in class conversations, I have reflected on the reasons for this noticeable reticence.</p> <p>Assuming that classroom discourse generally follows certain guidelines of established national curricula, I believe that we can find culturally differing discourse conventions, which are engrained in the enculturation process and promoted by the respective national education systems. A comparison between the German and Finnish education systems indicates that active participation and oral skills play indeed different roles in both countries. One major conspicuity is that Finnish students prefer discussions in pairs or small groups to an outstanding extent, while discussions in the whole class are seemingly doomed to failure. Beyond, presentation assignments frequently cause stress and anxiety among students. Thus, creating an invitational environment in the classroom is of utmost importance.</p> <p>The social and cognitive organization of verbal communication, including turn-taking or backchannel behaviour, will vary in different cultures and can lead to erroneous pragmatic interpretation; also in the intercultural setting of the language classroom. While the notion of the ‘silent Finn’ is today often assigned to stereotypical imagery, this is likewise a very interesting aspect worth exploring further and is therefore considered in this report.</p> <p>That reality is often different from the supposed ideal is exemplified by challenges concerning Grice’s cooperative principle. Even though teachers and students might have a vision of what classroom discourse should ideally be like, meeting everyone’s expectations can be difficult in practice. Very relevant in this respect is the students’ motivation towards attending compulsory language courses. A survey I have included in this work reveals that students’ intrinsic motivation is generally rather low and thus, teachers might face additional challenges.</p> <p>In order to develop students’ communicative fluency, activities for pair and group work; but also panel discussions and presentation exercises intended for the whole class are suggested.</p> <p>While trying to enhance communicative fluency in language courses, teachers should take differing speech conventions and the cultural context of teaching into account, and sensitise students to related issues.</p>		
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1 Introduction

Although academia is today more than ever a communicative network of scientists, teachers and students from different countries around the world, the exchange of ideas in this specific multicultural arena is prone to pose communicative challenges. While any academic environment predominantly profits from its multicultural nature, cultural differences might nevertheless be rather a source of conflict than of synergy.¹

This report is about communicative challenges I have encountered during my first sixteen months as a German, teaching English and German courses at the language centre of the University of Jyväskylä. More precisely, I am concerned about students' passivity and silence in the language classroom. While communication skills, conversation, and speaking are without doubt essential constituents of language courses, it seemed that the students' willingness to express themselves in class and in front of their peers was generally surprisingly low. Silence, however irritating it can be in this context, has usually different meanings and we have to be careful when making inferences.² Beyond, cultural differences likely come into play and foreign teachers certainly have to be very careful when drawing conclusions about Finnish communication styles. From a German perspective, it could seem that Finnish students need more time to make up their minds and will generally not comment as readily in front of the whole class as German students might. I am aware that this first impression certainly sounds vague and very much subject to superficial, stereotypical thinking. As a foreigner, my judgment about certain features in the Finnish academic culture will likely be impaired by subjective cultural bias. Therefore, I want to emphasize that by no means could I, nor do I want to claim that my observations in this report have general validity. By applying a pragmatic approach, thus considering language use, the speakers and the situation, the focus in this assignment is on discourse in academic context and does not account for other communicative settings outside the classroom.³

¹ Cf. Hofstede (2003), at <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>. According to Geert Hofstede, cultural differences can be a nuisance at best and often even a disaster.

² Students' silence should not automatically be regarded as disinterest or negative behaviour. Of course, silence in the classroom can also be very beneficial and in fact, many German teachers wished for more silence in class. While silence could be a sign of anxiety, negativity and conflict, it might under certain circumstances also be a positive communicative item (cf. Jaworsky; Sachdev 1998: 286).

³ I assume that the communicative behaviour of students inside and outside the classroom will likely differ to great extent and is subject to various aspects, such as communicating in one's mother tongue or a foreign language; or the degree of formality, which has influence on the applied register.

Teachers usually reflect about what they could do in order to improve the quality of classroom discourse; after all, they are in charge of classroom management and are responsible for determining the direction that a lesson will take.⁴ However, since communication is naturally a mutual process, I do think that also students bear responsibility regarding classroom discourse.⁵ Therefore, it is certainly important to consider teachers', as well as students' perceptions, expectations and motivation in this regard. Along with cultural varieties, I believe that also differences in education systems play important roles regarding classroom discourse and should therefore be considered as well.

In the literal sense of the title of this assignment, namely 'development project', I want to describe my personal development as a foreign language teacher in Finland; more precisely, my personal quest for strategies to enhance conversation in language courses. Following a reflective report of what I consider relevant aspects concerning this topic, I provide some ideas for communicative fluency activities at the end of this assignment. However, having worked on this report does not mean that my quest is already over. On the contrary, I feel that I still have to go a long way to find more techniques, tools and ways in order to improve the atmosphere in the classroom and motivate students to express themselves.

While I am aware that my description of communication differences is subject to individual perception, I feel that this topic is worth being explored further, both for my personal, professional development and for organisational reasons. I hope that this report serves as a useful contribution in the exchange of experience among everybody involved in teaching and learning. After all, only a constructive and sincere exchange of ideas can help us to improve the life-long process of learning and teaching in the future.

In this spirit, I want to express my gratitude towards students and especially towards colleagues and friends of mine. By sharing their viewpoints, they have provided great support and valuable ideas.

⁴ This includes that teachers could be considered to be 'primary knowers', who have to make decisions about the activities that will be conducted in class, the questions that could be relevant, and appropriate answers to these questions. Thus, teachers are guides for the students, who could be considered as 'secondary knowers' within the space of learning (cf. Marton et al. 2004: 113).

⁵ In other words, classroom discourse is not only dependent on the input of the teacher, but particularly also on the active participation and reaction of students. Ideally, the teacher's and the students' contributions form a constructive dialogue, which serves like an engine to keep the learning process going.

2 All beginnings are difficult

At the beginning of my teaching career I slightly felt like I was thrown in at the deep end. Even though I got great support from my colleagues, for example in form of ideas and material; planning and designing my own material in the hope that course contents are covered in the best possible way was the first big challenge I faced. Secondly, a bigger challenge seemed to be the actual teaching, the getting messages across to students. In other words, I was wondering how I should best combine the ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ in class; and whether there will be a good flow in the turn-taking between me and the students. Indeed, it turned out that discussing about relevant contents was to a certain extent problematic since, on many occasions I was confronted with rather passive students.

Before I draw attention to cultural differences and communicative challenges I faced as a teacher in Finland, I want to describe the setting of my teaching shortly.

2.1 *Teaching at the language centre*

Since all university students in Finland take language and communication studies as a mandatory part of their degree programmes, students of all faculties at the University of Jyväskylä are at some point of their university career also our students. Ideally, students graduate with such language skills that they are able to communicate to others in a confident way and are able to cope with various intercultural contexts.⁶ The courses I have taught in English and German required all a rather high level of proficiency. In English, I have taught a course entitled *Academic Reading and Communication Skills* for students of Early Childhood Education; and *Communication Skills* for students of Business and Economics. The German courses I have taught were all designed for students of Business and Economics; and embraced ‘Business German’ and ‘German culture and society’.⁷

⁶ See also <http://kielikompassi.jyu.fi/main.php?d1=274&d2=275>.

⁷ ‘German culture and society’ is a paraphrase for the German term “Landeskunde”.

2.2 My students

Since I have worked with students from two different faculties, Education and Business and Economics, I believe it is noteworthy that I perceived the group dynamics and the atmosphere in the classroom as somewhat different facultywise. Basically, students of Business and Economics seemed to be more ambitious and interested in course contents than students of Early Childhood Education. Beyond, future economists were apparently more independent learners, i.e. they would not need as many motivating incentives or instructions repeatedly, as students of Early Childhood Education did. While drawing this comparison, it might seem obvious that students of Business and Economics see immediate value and more demand concerning language skills regarding their future careers.⁸ Thus, students of Business and Economics engage usually more in language learning, attend several courses in different languages, while the schedule of students of Early Childhood Education only allots one obligatory English course. As such, future business people have seemingly more intrinsic motivation for language learning; and are already in their studies more exposed to English. Even though I have also observed a certain passivity regarding active participation among students of Business and Economics, communicative interferences were more challenging for me while working with students of Early Childhood Education. Therefore, in this report I am a lot more concerned with the aforementioned silence and passivity among Education students. In the following, I want to give a brief description about Early Education students.

2.2.1 Students of Early Childhood Education

When attending the course Academic Reading and Communication Skills, students of Early Childhood Education are usually in their second year and they might have just completed their second job practice. While their first training consisted merely of observing Kindergarten teachers at work, the students had to plan lessons and were more in charge in their second teaching practice. In discussions about their experiences made, it turned out that many consider their practice periods far more important than the rather theory-based studies at University. Within their study programme, the students certainly read English academic texts. Beyond, however, language-contact with English seems to be very limited as the students are naturally instructed in Finnish. While many seemed to be motivated and willing to revive their

⁸ In contrast, I had students of Early Childhood Education questioning the purpose of the English course I taught.

English, some appeared to be critical about having to attend this mandatory course. It is always important for me to know whether the students attend courses on a voluntary or mandatory basis as this might affect the level of students' motivation. In fact, in a survey I have made 50% of the students declared that they would not have chosen this language course if it had not been compulsory.⁹

In general, the students' English language skills varied to some extent, however, active participation was not necessarily an indicator of advanced fluency. At times, students with less English skills would participate more in class than students with advanced skills. Of course, I considered the students' contributions throughout the course and active participation was an important aspect in the final assessment.

Although the students' language skills varied distinctly, I have not noticed particular special needs. Apart from one Greek exchange student, all the students were Finnish and had at large homogenous language backgrounds. Having described my students, I want to continue with a short description of the course and relevant contents.

2.2.2 The course “Academic Reading and Communication Skills”

The 40-hour course *Academic Reading and Communication Skills* is, as mentioned above, a mandatory part of the study-schedule. Students are expected to participate in classroom activities including individual, pair and co-operative group work. Further contents comprise working with academic texts, research information, and preparation as well as delivery of a field-specific professional presentation. Reading strategies involve skimming and scanning techniques and; in this regard, we work with online resources in order to make students aware of where to find field-specific texts and how to fast-read and process academic literature. Beyond, we also perform various tasks aiming at spontaneous oral communication and work on exercises designed to expand the students' vocabulary in English.

As the students have to give presentations during their University careers and likely also in their future work-life, special attention was given to planning, preparing and giving a professional presentation.

Concerning the target goals, students should know how to communicate orally in informal and formal situations in academic and workplace contexts. To name but a few other goals, students should develop own communication and reporting strategies, communicate in teams and do collaborative tasks; use dictionaries in a critical way and develop own vocabulary and terminology; locate necessary

⁹ For viewing the whole questionnaire, please see Appendix, Fig. 2.

information in a text and organise information for a summary or synthesis. By the end of the course, students ideally know how to cope with basic intercultural differences in communication; and make a professional presentation that follows internationally accepted norms.

2.3 Language learning requires speaking

In the course of my work as a teacher in Finland, I have gone through a process in which one aspect caught my utmost attention: the passivity and silence of students in the language classroom. Having studied English linguistics with focus on pragmatics, I am interested in what people say and how they express themselves in a certain context. In this regard, it is likewise interesting to reflect about why people remain silent, even though they should participate actively. I believe that actual speaking and communicating, implying also spontaneous reactions to what our communicative partners say, are crucial when learning languages. In other words, learning a language requires speaking and practice.

Every language is a system of a limited number of sounds, which a native speaker can distinguish without difficulty. However, languages vary in the number and nature of these sounds. If a contrast between two sounds does not exist in our native language, it can be difficult to distinguish between them in another language. For example, Asian beginners learning English might not have the contrast which makes the difference /l, r/ or /b, v/ so obvious for a native English speaker. Not being aware of the contrast, Asian language learners might say 'I rob you' instead of 'I love you'.¹⁰ If we cannot hear a particular contrast in a certain language, we likely have no chance of reproducing it. Therefore, listening is very important. In addition to that, learning a language means speaking it. Very likely, it takes time to adopt new speech habits. The performance of a new contrast, once it can be heard, requires a new orientation of the motor control centre in the brain to produce unfamiliar muscular movements. By nature, we might feel awkward when learning a foreign language and having to pronounce unfamiliar sounds. While my students are not beginners; many of them do not speak either English or German very often. In fact, many students declared that they rather use foreign languages passively; for example, while watching a foreign programme on television, many will hear the foreign language but rather follow the plot by reading Finnish subtitles. Therefore, it might

¹⁰ Cf. O'Connor; Fletcher 1989: 6ff.

take some time for students to get used to certain pronunciation patterns again and speaking might be a challenge at first. Generally, I feel the need to promote the idea that it takes active practice in speaking while learning a foreign language; and needless to say, foreign language teaching should be a lot more than just grammar and word acquisition. It should help students achieve some kind of communicative skill in the foreign language, which they can apply in their studies, their future professional careers, or generally in life. While students are naturally very concerned about their academic progress, I am afraid that this notion bears the risk that at least some students ignore to get involved with language learning in a playful, yet useful approach. Therefore, one of my major concerns is to facilitate learning by creating a friendly, positive atmosphere in the classroom. Ideally, continuous learning takes place in a cooperative environment, in which constructive interaction is common practice. However, practice taught me that this is easier said than done. In fact, teaching is a challenging field, where we constantly have to juggle with various influences, many of which we could not necessarily anticipate. For instance, it was very surprising for me that an open exchange of ideas in the classroom was frequently impaired by students' unease and even fear of speaking, not only regarding presentation skills but also concerning brief statements in class. Since major weight in the courses I teach is on communication and presentation skills, I feel that I have to be particularly cautious under these circumstances. In fact, in the meantime I had to change my didactics to great extent.

Having got the impression that a considerable amount of my Finnish students remained seemingly too passive in class, I was wondering about why the atmosphere and communication in the classroom seemed to be so different to what I had expected.

3 What is so different? – A comparison between education in Germany and Finland

Since communication is highly culture-specific, I think a comparison between my German background and my present work as a teacher in Finland can provide an insight into why I perceived classroom discourse in Finland so differently.

In fact, I believe that certain discourse conventions are promoted by national curricula, and that we can consequently find different academic discourse cultures in different countries. The promotion of certain conventions, however, might not necessarily be an obvious process but rather engrained in hidden national curricula. While I am aware of the rather subjective nature of the experience I have made concerning classroom discourse in Germany, i.e. more precisely in Bavaria,¹¹ and Finland, I hope that the following description helps to illustrate and understand differences concerning Finnish and German discourse conventions in this regard.

3.1 *The Bavarian education system*

While primary and secondary education are in Finland largely comprehensive, the Bavarian system is tripartite at secondary level. Elementary school takes four years and after that, pupils will, according to their achievements, continue their compulsory education in three different types of schools.¹² The ‘Hauptschule’ (secondary school), ‘Realschule’ (secondary modern school) and ‘Gymnasium’ (grammar school) are considered hierarchically different in terms of requirements and demands.¹³ Performance-orientation is already of great importance at elementary school, as the decision concerning which type of secondary school pupils will continue their education at is based on grades.¹⁴

¹¹ Since every federal state in Germany has her own education system, especially with focus on primary and secondary education, there are in fact sixteen different education systems. Concerning the communicative culture, however, I believe that it is justified to assume that active participation is expected to a similar extent in every federal state and that we can find certain ‘typical’ features of classroom discourse in the whole of Germany.

¹² An overview of the Bavarian education system is to be found in the Appendix of this assignment. Please see graphic Fig. 1.; or <http://www.stmuk.bayern.de/km/schule/schularten/>.

¹³ See Appendix, Fig. 1; Please note that the English translations provided for the German secondary school types might vary in different sources. Due to the different school systems in Germany and the anglophone countries, these German terms cannot necessarily be adequately translated into English and therefore, I will provide the German terms along with the English explanation in the running text above.

¹⁴ Pupils are usually ten or eleven years old when they leave elementary school.

3.1.1 Three types of secondary schools

The “Hauptschule” is mostly regarded as the lowest type of secondary school students will attend if their previous achievements at elementary school were rather poor. Unfortunately, students at the Hauptschule suffer from being stigmatised as incompetent and unintelligent. As a matter of fact, students with a degree from Hauptschule face severe difficulties at the German labour market.

Therefore, it will be important for many parents that their children make it to the “Realschule”, which is an intermediate type of secondary school. With a degree from the Realschule, students can continue their education at the “Fachoberschule”¹⁵, and from there at higher vocational institutes, e.g. at the “Fachhochschule”¹⁶.

Thirdly, pupils with good grades at elementary school can continue their education at the “Gymnasium”, which is considered to be the highest form of secondary compulsory education. With a degree from secondary higher school¹⁷, students acquire admission to study at University.

Naturally, this way of selecting students and separating them after only four years of elementary school is causing repeatedly criticism as the ‘crossroads’ of where to continue in the compulsory education system after primary level comes at a relatively early stage and stands in contradiction to a comprehensive education system, as we find it, e.g. in Finland. German students can theoretically move up in the tripartite system of secondary education, e.g. from “Hauptschule” to “Realschule”, and make it to University in the course of second-chance education, but that requires hard work, long time and is rather achieved by an evanescent minority of students.

I believe it would be fair to say that grades and performance-orientation play a very important role in the Bavarian and in many other German education systems. While grades at elementary school are mostly based on written assignments, active participation and oral communication are essential parts of the assessment of students’ performance at any type of secondary education.

¹⁵ The Finnish term for “Fachoberschule” is “Ammattiopisto”.

¹⁶ The Finnish equivalent for “Fachhochschule” is “Ammattikorkeakoulu”.

¹⁷ The degree of this kind of grammar school is called the “Abitur”, or in Finnish “Ylioppilastutkinto”.

3.1.2 The importance of oral skills and active participation

Many teachers I have had emphasised the importance of active participation in class and oral contributions were considered in the assessment of students' work.¹⁸ Thus, speaking was promoted as positive value and in order to attain good grades, students had to be active participants. Beyond, also oral examination played an important role, especially in secondary education. From fifth grade on, teachers would question one student at the beginning of each class.¹⁹ The student called had to come to the front and answer spontaneously to questions about subject matters covered in the previous class. This form of testing students' knowledge was stressful and could end in embarrassment, e.g. if the student had not learned the contents of previous classes and did not appear to be well-informed. As far as I know, some students including myself felt they had been put on the spot by certain teachers, especially if the relationship between teacher and student seemed to be problematic. In this respect, I would like to criticise this form of assessment, since it could include humiliation of certain students, literally in front of the whole class. However, the positive side to it was that students learnt to get used to oral exams and to express their knowledge in a formal and likely also stressful situation. Beyond, frequent contributions in class were usually positively acknowledged and induced a vivid exchange of ideas in the classroom.

Furthermore, also from fifth grade on, giving presentations was a definite part of the schedule. While in lower grades presentations had to be given in German, e.g. in the field of literature; students would later give presentations also in any other subject and naturally also in foreign languages. As such, the spoken word was a major constituent of the learning process and gained increasing importance throughout education, especially so later at University.

¹⁸ Usually, grades of written assignments would count two-thirds; grades received in oral exams one third in the final evaluation.

¹⁹ This form of questioning was done in all subjects, apart from Sports and Arts. The students usually would not know when they were going to be questioned.

3.2 A comparison with Finland

In Finland, however, students' oral contributions at secondary education seems to be valued differently. Many Finns I have asked told me that there was no questioning of particular students at the beginning of classes as mentioned above; hardly any student had to give presentations; and Finnish teachers would apparently consider oral skills and contributions rather to minimal extent in the final grading. Thus, it seems that the assessment of students in the Finnish education system is mostly based on written assignments and exams. Even though I have heard that changes of the Finnish curriculum at secondary level are under way, i.e. towards more emphasis on oral skills, I got the impression that the University students I have met still went through an education system, in which oral communication was maybe not considered as significantly as in Germany.

This is admittedly a very limited and not academic comparison of the Finnish and Bavarian education systems; and unfortunately, it is seemingly very difficult to find reliable scientific research and data in this field. However, I assume that the spoken word is valued differently in the two countries; while active participation is an important aspect in the assessment of students in Germany, students in Finland rather seem to be assessed on their performance in written exams.²⁰

My suspicion, and I have to admit that this is only an assumption, is that verbal skills play a less important role in the Finnish education system than they do in the German. In addition, I would argue that the different valuation of the spoken word in the Finnish and German education systems results in different communication cultures, which are established at early stages of the respective education system and likely maintained throughout education. Therefore, the differences between these discourse cultures can likely also be perceived later at higher education.

²⁰ A German exchange student from Leipzig who is currently studying at a secondary higher school in grade eleven in Finland, approved that the assessment is based on written exams only. In addition, she pointed out that her current Finnish peers did not have to give any presentations and described them as generally a lot more passive in class than her German peers in Leipzig. Of course, this is only a subjective impression of one German student and I would not like to draw general conclusions based on the information of an individual informant. However, it was interesting for me to receive further impressions and opinions concerning the comparison of the Finnish and German discourse cultures in secondary education.

3.3 From traditional research to Service University

There can hardly be any doubt that universities are undergoing changes due to administrative reforms and will be exposed to economical development more intensely than ever before. While universities have earlier mainly been financed by allocations on national level, they will to a growing extent have to provide their own financial arm space by selling research or knowledge-based services to interested economic clients. Therefore, the term Service University implies the installation, delivery and maintenance of knowledge-based applications to certain clients. This development as such is not new, the dimension of it, however is. While this change seems to have its roots in the United States and Canada, it has effects worldwide, particularly in the technology sector.²¹ Likely due to globalisation effects, the economy will have a tighter grip on educational institutes; and thus greater influence in the administrative affairs of Universities. This particular course of reforms could also result in a different appreciation of various disciplines, with the arts running the risk of becoming less valued since they are in economic terms not as profitable as, e.g. modern technical sciences. With less state allocations available and with an increasing influence of economic trends, the arts including languages are likely at odds with the ever more profit-oriented concept of the service university as described above. While foreign language skills are highly respected from a humanistic perspective, the increasing cost-effectiveness puts a lot of pressure on everyone involved in arts. As a result, language teaching might likely become an increasingly privatised sector, which adds a different quality to it for teachers and students. Thus, teachers might consider themselves more as salespeople and students as clients. While some could argue that this change is a logical and harmless consequence of economic and political development, I am afraid that language teaching runs the danger of being specifically and increasingly tailored to economic demand, with less and maybe almost diminishing focus on classical arts, e.g. including philosophy.²²

I feel that comparing my own educational background with the situation of my students now is necessary in order to relativise and consider the students' as well as

²¹ Today, state allocations in higher education are being reduced in many countries and thus universities are more exposed to trends of the economy. Beyond, political as well as economic changes have great influence on the education sector. According to Tjeldvoll, e.g. the University of Kemorovo in Siberia registered a reduction of 60% in State allocations after the fall of the Soviet Union, and in order to survive, the University had to start marketing its services to the region (cf. Tjeldvoll 1997: 14).

²² The offer of many private English language institutes is mainly designed for the field of business and economics; this impression is sometimes even explicitly conveyed in the company name, e.g. "Wall Street Institute" (cf. <http://www.wallstreetinstitute.com/>).

my expectations in language courses. Clearly, my background of linguistic studies and interest in related fields cannot necessarily be compared to the situation of the students I teach now. As the students have various majors but languages, I take into consideration that their motivation might vary to great extent. Since most of the courses I have taught at the University's language centre are a mandatory part of the study schedule, it seems that some students lack intrinsic motivation to great extent. In discussions about motivation, a minority of students indicated that they were never good at learning foreign languages and considered the obligation of having to attend a language course as an unnecessary burden.²³ Needless to say, it can be very difficult to motivate students who are not interested in languages; and teachers likely have to take this into consideration. Beyond, I suppose the development of the service university can have negative effect on the social valuation of the humanities including language learning. I have indeed sensed that the relationship between me and my students seems sometimes to be comparable to that of a salesperson and clients. I am afraid that this notion can create a very different, too formal atmosphere in the classroom; with the students perceiving languages rather as technical products than human means of communication. At University, I find the promotion of critical thinking particularly important. In contrast to secondary education, tertiary higher education usually expects students to be self-monitoring, self-directing and self-correcting to greater extent; at least we can assume that these are the premises that benchmark what is implied when being educated in academia.²⁴ Barnett (1997) points out that university in late modernity has become a site of multiple discourses and higher learning involves among others pragmatic, critical, liberal, experiential, humanistic, technological, professional, technical, reflexive and other forms of discourse. Thus, the critical discourse becomes one among many and we can hope that at best, it fights for its place.²⁵

Generally, I believe that my educational background in Munich can be associated with the notion of a traditional research university, while my teaching environment in

²³ I will go into students' motivation in more detail later.

²⁴ Cf. Gregory 2006: 206ff.

²⁵ See Barnett 1997: 41.

Jyväskylä is clearly more related to the concept of a service university.²⁶ In other words, I never felt like a customer when I was a student in Germany. Also the notion of teaching staff being salespeople hardly occurred to me. Studying in Munich rather implied collaborative learning, where students were expected to be independent, critical thinkers, who participate actively in academic work. For example, a seminar was typically conducted in the way that professors introduced the seminar's theme and outline in the first session, which was usually followed by the distribution of presentation topics. Often, from the second class on to the end of the seminar, students had to give presentations and were thus very much in charge of the following progress of the seminar. Of course, professors would constantly provide support and further ideas. Again, I do not intend to assess either the German or Finnish higher education system as one being better than the other, but simply want to illustrate how different the two systems actually appear to me. Personally, I am critical of many details concerning the German education system, for example also about the already mentioned way seminars were run in Germany.

In contrast, being both a teacher and student in Finland, I got the impression that students indeed adopt more the role of clients who expect to be serviced to great extent by the teaching staff. This entitlement is definitely fair to some extent; however, it becomes critical if students retreat in silence and become rather passive participants in the learning process. I have frequently observed that my expectations concerning students' active participation and critical thinking stood very much in contrast to those of my students. As a result, we can assume that it might take time for foreign teachers and students to realise, consider and attune to different discourse approaches in the classroom.

²⁶ However, I want to point out that state allocations in Germany's higher education were reduced in recent years, which called for the introduction of study fees in several federal states in 2006. Regarding natural sciences and particularly information technology, Germany's universities certainly are service universities. However, concerning classical, humanistic disciplines, students will still find a very traditional educational setting, which can be seen in various details, e.g. studying arts in Munich will almost always require qualifications in Latin. Even though there is a constant discussion about whether to abolish Latin as mandatory requirement in arts studies; and while many students I have met felt that the compulsory requirement of Latin is antagonistic to current language needs, the union of classical philologists has argued successfully in favour of Latin and defended it as an essential part of the schedule in various arts disciplines. In fact, the union of classical philologists seems to be particularly influential in Bavaria.

4 Discourse, silence and cultural cognition

It is important to keep in mind that all communication, including professional communication, is interdependent with culture. If we consider culture as the norms, values, and even material goods characteristic of a group, we should also be aware that communication within an academic context, for example discourse in the language classroom, functions as a system within the broader system of culture.²⁷ In other words, I had to learn about Finnish classroom conventions, which can in detail be decisively different from German norms, for example concerning silence .

While there are ubiquitous proverbs suggesting that silence has positive values, whereas speaking is rather prone to cause negative effects, e.g. ‘Speech is silver silence is gold’²⁸, the general motto I promote for my courses is the contrary, simply due to the fact that learning a language requires speaking it, as described earlier. Beyond, whenever students remained silent while I expected them to talk, I felt very awkward. At first, I often interpreted long periods of silence as students’ disinterest. However, silence does not necessarily signal disinterest, it certainly goes beyond the non-communicative absence of speech and is a very complex linguistic item, whose functioning can be explained with various pragmatic and sociolinguistic frameworks; for example discourse analysis, narrative analysis, ethnography of communication, or politeness theory.²⁹ The context of teaching naturally sets different standards in comparison with other communicative settings, such as informal communication with parents and siblings at home, or with friends.

While giving English and German language courses designed for University students, I encountered difficulties which I assume are mainly based on cultural differences concerning discourse conventions; more precisely, on different expectations of the nature of classroom discourse.³⁰ There can hardly be any doubt that academia likely shows differing features in various European countries, not to mention its diversity on a global scale. The Bologna process, as well as many other projects promoting a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA), with vivid international exchange on higher academic level, aims at the facilitation of the recognition of courses and certificates on an international scale. In other words, it is

²⁷ See Hautala et al. 2004: 102.

²⁸ Cf. Soares 2006: 25.

²⁹ Cf. Jaworsky; Sachdev 1998: 273.

³⁰ So far, I have taught rather homogeneous groups of Finnish students; in fact, in all my courses I had only two exchange students, from Greece and Russia.

proof of an academic diversity, where hindering differences might have to be bridged, likely not only in administrative but also in sociocultural respect.³¹

Despite the efforts of standardising academia on an international scale, I assume that every culture likely maintains certain communicative, scholastic features, which are reflected in the classroom and are a cultural commodity of the education system of a specific culture. Since the nature and value of talk, and likewise of silence, can be very different in various cultures, we can assume that there are differing, socially acceptable rules of classroom interaction.³² While certain features of discourse will be supported in the education system of a culture, people likely become familiar with specific ‘rules’ far earlier, namely in the acculturation process.

4.1 Silence as part of the enculturation process

A child’s acquisition of language generally involves learning how to speak, but also learning when not to talk. In different speech communities, silence is valued and appreciated differently. Therefore, the relative amount of silence versus talk expected of children in different cultures is partly related to various child-rearing practices, and partly to different, individually appreciated values. According to Saville-Troike (1985), it seems that children talk more when they are being enculturated into societies which place a high value on individual achievement, such as the USA and Britain; whereas children talk less in societies where family and group achievement is valued, such as in the Chinese and Japanese cultures.³³ Hofstede’s study supports Saville-Troike’s notion of the USA and Great Britain being among the most individual cultures. Finland is also a comparatively individual culture that ranks seventeenth among 53 different cultures.³⁴ However, Hofstede’s cultural dimension of

³¹ The Bologna Declaration was signed on 19 June 1999 by ministers in charge of higher education and first involved 29 European countries, today it unites 46 countries. The aim of this intergovernmental reform process is to establish the so-called European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, which allows students, graduates, and higher education staff to benefit from unimpeded mobility and equitable access to higher education, while assuring high quality in the learning process. As the recognition of degrees obtained in different countries, as well as the appreciation of other higher education qualifications, is still problematic in practice, the Bologna process is designed to provide more transparency and cooperation in quality assurance among the undersigned countries. Beyond, the development plan of the European Higher Education Area embraces a social component with an emphasis on equality regarding participation and employment of graduates in a lifelong work context. In global terms, the Bologna process should help to create an attractive European Higher Education Area that displays openness to the world (cf. <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/about/>).

³² See also Gilmore 1985: 139.

³³ See Saville-Troike 1985: 11.

³⁴ Hofstede considered in his study fifty countries and three specific cultural regions. The cultures were compared according to Hofstede’s dimensions: Individualism/Collectivism; Power distance; Uncertainty avoidance; and Masculinity/Femininity. Concerning the dimension Individualism/Collectivism, both Finland

Individualism/Collectivism can not necessarily provide a reliable parameter for knowing how silence is valued in a certain culture; and admittedly Hofstede neither claims that. Interestingly, Hofstede suggests that Finland and Germany are generally very similar cultures, apart from the dimension Masculinity and Femininity.³⁵

Yet, I believe that silence is appreciated in very different terms in both cultures and their education systems play an important part in the promotion of communication behaviour.

4.2 Procrastinating talk – seeds of the education system?

Apparently, there are certain social rules which are considered acceptable in classroom discourse and these rules have likely been established at early stages of education and might differ from culture to culture. It is not only about the academic knowledge that must be present in the classroom, but people should also know when and how to display that knowledge according to the aforementioned rules.³⁶ As internationalisation at higher academic level is of increasing importance, we can imagine that people of different cultural backgrounds perceive certain features of classroom interaction as different from what they are used to in their home-culture.

While I have taught mainly homogeneous groups of Finnish students, I remember particularly two courses with foreign students from Greece and Russia. I could not help noticing that in comparison with their Finnish peers, the foreign students contributed their ideas more actively.

While I usually perceived Finnish students of Business and Economics as self-confident speakers, I could notice that in comparison to the only foreign student from Russia, they appeared to be rather hesitant and reserved. Mostly, when I had asked a question, it was the Russian student who would reply, while his Finnish peers did not respond that often and spontaneously. Could it be that verbal skills play a bigger role in the Russian education system than in the Finnish? A newspaper article published in Helsingin Sanomat supports this view. In an interview with journalist Juhani Saarinen, the 22-year old student Artur Setko from Saint Petersburg, who is studying

(ranking 17th) and Germany (ranking 15th) offer individual cultures to an almost similar extent (cf. Hofstede 1997: 69).

³⁵ According to Hofstede, Finland constitutes a rather feminine culture (ranking 47th), whereas Germany is a rather masculine culture, ranking ninth and tenth in his masculinity ranking list; together with Great Britain (cf. Hofstede 1997: 115f.) For a direct comparison of the German and Finnish cultures, please see also: http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php?culture1=34&culture2=32.

³⁶ See Gilmore 1985: 139.

in Lappeenranta, points out that while in Finland most exams are done in written form, in Saint Petersburg there are many oral exams, where students meet their examiners face-to-face. Setko remarks that in oral exams, students should better not be shy and that particularly this situation can be challenging for those who are not good at expressing themselves orally.³⁷ In the same line, I believe that also in Germany, oral communication is given more academic weight than in Finland. For example, a major part of my final exams were conducted orally.

I first assumed that particularly foreign teachers might experience the amount of silence in a Finnish classroom as 'different', since foreigners are likely used to different communication patterns.³⁸ However, also Finnish colleagues of mine have reported about similar experiences with passive students, problematic turn-taking and too much silence in class.³⁹ This notion is supported by earlier studies of teacher-student interaction in Finland, which showed that classroom interaction tended to be highly teacher-directed and highly directive in nature. Students at primary and secondary levels of education were described as responsive but passive, and only in group work was a lot of student-oriented talk.⁴⁰ Although Hakulinen and Sorjonen's (1993) study focuses on classroom discourse in primary and secondary education, I was often told, and noticed myself, that pair and group work seems to be the best way to make also University students become involved in discussions. While I consider students' work in pairs and small groups as valuable and important in the classroom, I was likewise surprised about the fact that discussions in the whole class were far more problem-bound, since a majority of students would seemingly not express their ideas in the whole group, but only in a small circle of peers.⁴¹ The following experience I have made will illustrate that culturally different discourse practices play in fact a very important role in the classroom.

On 14.4.08, after two students had given a presentation on language immersion, they had prepared five questions for a discussion with the audience. These questions were projected on two consecutive slides, with the first slide containing two, the second

³⁷ Cf. Helsingin Sanomat, 6.4.08, p. E 5.

³⁸ In her work on forms and functions of definitions in classroom language, Martina Temmerman studied the cognitive academic language proficiency of Dutch pupils aged between 10 and 12 years old. She mentions that students' contributions in form of definitions occurred often in classroom interaction, every 2,5 minutes on average (cf. Temmerman 1999: 170). This value is likely different in various classrooms, but certainly also bound to cultural conventions of classroom discourse.

³⁹ During a communication skills workshop I attended from 19.-21.10.2007 in Vaasa, 'silence in the classroom' was indeed a topic, which was brought up by a Finnish senior colleague from Helsinki.

⁴⁰ See Hakulinen; Sorjonen 1993: 411.

⁴¹ My students also replied in the questionnaire that they preferred conversation in small groups. See also Appendix, Fig. 2, questions 11 and 12.

three questions. The presenters asked their peers to discuss about the two questions first in pairs, before discussing them in the whole class. After the first two questions had been shortly discussed, they changed slides so that the remaining three questions were projected on the screen. Again, the presenters asked their peers to discuss the questions first in pairs.

At this point, an exchange student from Greece, who was the only foreign student in this group, made an interesting remark by asking why we always had to discuss in pairs or small groups first and could not simply discuss the questions spontaneously in the whole class. After a short moment of silence, some Finnish students replied that they are used to this manner of discussion and that they would not like to express their thoughts right away in the whole group. I asked the group why they wouldn't feel comfortable to express themselves in the whole class but did not get a concrete reply. In addition, I wanted to know whether they used the same approach for discussions - the 'first in small groups, then in the whole group-approach' - also in other, Finnish seminars. Surprisingly, the students confirmed that they indeed also adopted this method in Finnish seminars and courses. The Greek exchange student openly adopted a rather critical view towards this approach and remarked that if students discussed a question right away in the whole class, the discussion would take a more efficient flow, and that no time was lost on repeating certain ideas which were only discussed in the small group before.

I understood the Greek student since I am also used to open discussions in the whole class. We had in fact an interesting talk about this issue, which I found very fruitful since it again revealed that different discourse practices are applied in different cultures and their respective academia. To be honest, I was relieved that it was not only me who felt that the way of discussing certain subject matters could also be done differently, and not always in small groups first. After all, it actually occurred to me frequently that some students were rather tired of having to contribute their thoughts again in the whole class, if they just had discussed them in the small group or even only with a partner. Eventually, I let the students decide which way they wanted to choose to discuss the questions following the aforementioned presentation. There was immediate consent that they wanted to discuss in pairs first, and only then in the whole group, in other words, the Finnish way.

One Finnish student still emphasised that it was difficult to discuss spontaneously in a foreign language, which could be regarded as a fair point.⁴² But still, it was very interesting for me to hear that discussions in pairs and small groups were apparently also appreciated and common in Finnish seminars, where the handicap of having to express oneself in a foreign language is not present for Finnish students.

The notion that a certain communicative pattern seems to prevail throughout the Finnish education system was given support by the fact that Hakulinen and Sorjonen's findings were identical with my observations at tertiary level. It seems that Finnish students are so used to group work because it was an established part in their education system earlier.⁴³ Thus, the Finnish approach towards communicative fluency could be regarded as different from what I was used to as a student in Germany.

It seems that written and spoken forms of communication are valued to different extent in different cultures. Personally, I feel that in Finland it is very important to provide most of the information covered in a course in written form, e.g. on handouts on paper. However, integrating oral communication seems to be more difficult; a discussion about a specific topic needs to be planned in good time, e.g. concerning different viewpoints and vocabulary; and spontaneous talk is apparently less common than in other countries. In a study comparing Finnish and British seminars, Mauranen (1994) suggests that Finnish seminars are research-oriented, with great emphasis on written paper, while British seminars are rather education-oriented, with emphasis on students' participation in discussions. Thus, British seminars are conducted in a talk-intensive manner; the input to discussion comes from suggested readings associated with the topics selected by the teacher; and students participate in lively discussions with possible disagreement, argumentation and interest in related issues. In addition, some seminars in Britain might include short presentations at the beginning which cover the main issues and get the discussion started.⁴⁴ Mauranen's findings correspond with my experience as an exchange student in Glasgow. Many

⁴² However, I personally feel that spontaneous talk should definitely be part of a language course, at least to some extent. Naturally, we usually have to express ourselves spontaneously in everyday situations; and especially when learning a foreign language, some spontaneous exercise to practice adequate timing in turn-taking and responding could be useful.

⁴³ I have heard that change concerning classroom discourse in the Finnish education system is currently under way, aiming at a promotion of students' oral contributions in the whole group. However, I am still working with students who passed through primary and secondary education in the 1980s and 1990s, where individual contributions might not have been encouraged as they are presumably today.

⁴⁴ Cf. Mauranen 1994. This description of British seminars reminds me very much of the way German seminars are conducted.

seminars were conducted in the form of lectures, which were in turn accompanied by study groups, in which the taught contents were actively discussed among students and the professor.

The language classroom is in its nature a setting of intercultural communication, where different rules of interaction, e.g. Finnish, German, or British conventions of talk and register use have to be considered. In this regard, also stereotypical notions might play an important role and thus, especially foreigners have to be careful concerning misconceptions about the host culture they live in.

4.3 The relevance of stereotypes

Intercultural communication is often affected by stereotypical notions. Stereotypes are standardised conceptions or images with specific meanings, which are often held in common by one group of people about another.⁴⁵ These oversimplified images or notions can be perceived as true or wrong, negative or positive, and thus also as compliments or insults. It is indeed interesting to think about how certain stereotypes evolved and why these generalised ideas about cultures are so persistent. Societies might change faster than stereotypes, which might be a reason why we often perceive certain stereotypes as annoying, untrue, or outdated. Talking about the Finnish culture, one prevailing stereotype is that Finns are a very silent, almost timid people. If we assume that societies might change faster than stereotypes characterising them, we likely have to be very careful when labelling cultures on the basis of stereotypical imagery. Individual incidents and cases might either support or contradict the notion of ‘the silent Finn’. Likewise, the Finnish culture provides manifold images and impressions, where the stereotypical silence might either be affirmed or negated.⁴⁶

I want to emphasize that I do not intend to assess silence as a definite positive or negative characteristic, as this notion has to be carefully considered in context. I believe we all know of occasions where silence can be very pleasant and comforting, while in other situations it might evoke feelings of unease. In addition, I do not want to prove a certain stereotype true or wrong, and I would certainly not be in the position to do so. I assume that particularly foreign teachers working in Finland might undergo an acculturation process, in which they perceive silence in the

⁴⁵ Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotype>.

⁴⁶ Finnish public life, in the form of icehockey matches or celebrations on holidays such as May Day will definitely prove the stereotype of ‘the silent Finn’ wrong.

classroom differently than in their home countries. Generally, the amount of silence is part of the enculturation process children experience from early age on while acquiring a certain mother tongue. Since I perceived the majority of my students as rather passive, I want to look into the stereotypical notion of the ‘silent Finn’ and how it might apply in the context of classroom discourse.

5 The silent Finn – a dated, untrue stereotype?

When learning foreign languages, we should consider that every culture has its own norms concerning acceptable and aberrant speech behaviour in social interactions. Certain values regarding appropriate behaviour and outstanding features are often reflected in popular sayings, proverbs, and jokes. Regarding silence, the following Finnish proverbs and sayings support the notion of taciturnity and reserve being appreciated values:

“One word is enough to make a lot of trouble.”

“A fool speaks a lot, a wise man thinks instead.”

“A barking dog does not catch a hare.”

“Listen a lot, speak a little.”

“One word is as good as nine.”⁴⁷

According to these sayings, a common Finnish opinion seems to be that wise persons keep silent and that speaking a lot is not desirable. I have frequently observed that students were very hesitant to contribute their ideas in class and thus, there might indeed be an undercurrent truth in what is reflected in the sayings above.

In situations where I expected students to express their thoughts, the result was an exceedingly long period of silence; however, maybe it was only me who experienced these silent moments as long and awkward. Even though I have little empirical data from different societies regarding the limits of silence, which will be tolerated by participants in conversation before they feel compelled to speak, we can certainly assume that the tolerance towards silence varies from culture to culture. Apparently, there is more tolerance of silence in the Finnish culture than in English speaking cultures.⁴⁸ Beyond, according to Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985), studies comparing

⁴⁷ Cf. Lehtonen, Sajavaara 1985: 193.

⁴⁸ See McArthur-Mortell et al. 2001: 34.

the situation in Finland with America or Central Europe clearly indicate that the duration of silence tolerated by Finns in conversations is much longer.⁴⁹ Also Finns living in Sweden reported that they had to be particularly alert in order to be able to take part in conversations carried out in Swedish, because the tempo of the turn-taking was much faster than in Finnish discourse.⁵⁰

5.1 Different communication patterns

While we might be aware of culturally different communication patterns such as faster or slower turn-taking, we can also assume that the roles of speaker and listener might be considered differently in various cultures. Naturally, a conversation requires that one of the participants is speaking, while at least one other interlocutor is listening. Speakers can only accomplish a successful speech act if they first manage to attract the attention of the listeners, to whom the speech act is addressed.⁵¹ Listening, though, does not necessarily equal silence. Usually, it includes various types of backchannel behaviour; for example listeners might shake their heads, nod, or make use of vocal backchannel signals such as ‘yeah’, ‘I see’, or ‘right’ in order to show that they are actually listening. A crucial part of conversation is encouraging a speaker to continue by giving them positive feedback.⁵² Speakers want to be sure that the listeners understand what is being said; which requires cooperation from the listener. Thus, it is part of the communication process that speakers regularly interpret the backchannel behaviour of their listening interlocutors.

As the social and cognitive organization of conversations varies in different cultures, we can infer that cross-cultural differences in feedback cues can easily lead to erroneous pragmatic interpretations of the interlocutors’ intentions in an intercultural setting. Since the use of verbal backchannel signals and vocalizations is less frequent in Finnish than in Central European languages and in British and American English, we can assume that difficulties arise in intercultural communication.⁵³ Interestingly, Finns backchannel mainly by nonverbal means, interruptions are usually not tolerated and too frequent use of backchannel signals is negatively regarded by Finns as intrusive; therefore, Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) describe the typical Finn as a

⁴⁹ See Lehtonen, Sajavaara 1985: 194.

⁵⁰ Understandably, the duration of silence is generally longest in conversations dealing with abstract topics involving contemplation and reflection (cf. Lehtonen, Sajavaara 1985: 195).

⁵¹ See Lehtonen; Sajavaara 1985: 195.

⁵² This advice on backchannelling and encouraging a speaker is given in English language books designed for Finnish learners for good reasons. For example, see McDonald-Rissanen et al. 1997: 61.

⁵³ While verbal backchannel signals do exist in Finnish, for example *joo*, *kyllä*, *niin*, or *aivan*, they are rather used in informal discourse (cf. Lehtonen; Sajavaara 1985: 196).

‘silent’ listener.⁵⁴ This description also corresponds to my situation; as a language teacher I encountered many silent listeners in the classroom.

5.2 Interpreting silence and becoming aware of linguistic conventions

It can be difficult to interpret silence since silence is not a simple unit of communication but rather composed of complex structures.⁵⁵ Generally, the quantity of silence versus speech will likely be interpreted differently across cultural boundaries and thus, varying norms regarding appropriateness as to when to remain silent and when to speak can easily give rise to cross-cultural misunderstanding. As academia is increasingly becoming a multicultural environment, and as particularly language courses at University are mostly intercultural settings, classroom discourse can be impaired by differing patterns of communication.

Hence, it is very important to take communicative cultural differences into account and to integrate them in language courses. If we consider the perspective of a foreign teacher who is a native speaker of the taught language, it is very useful for the teacher to know about the communicative patterns of the students or the host-culture. For example, a German native speaker teaching German to Finnish students should consider cultural differences and prepare the students for what communication is like in a German setting; for instance, concerning politeness, Germans use courteous formulations such as ‘*Excuse me..*’; ‘*Could you please...*’, ‘*Thanks a lot*’ to different extent and maybe even on different occasions than Finns. I have noticed that sending someone one’s regards, which is frequently done in German, is not that common in Finland and might even appear odd in certain situations. This is only one example of many but we can see that the way we use words or phrases might differ considerably in different languages, and likewise, also the amount of appropriate silence can be very different.

Saville-Troike (1985) mentions an example of different temporal patterns of silence between Navajo speakers and non-Navajo interlocutors. In an English language context Navajo speakers occasionally transfer the Navajo temporal pattern of silence in turn-taking between questions and answers. This means that the pause between

⁵⁴ Ibid. While people might today question the relevance of Lehtonen and Sajavaara’s findings in 1985, I believe it is fair to say that the described features of Finnish communication behaviour hardly changed decisively within 23 years. Therefore, I consider these studies still as relevant and adequate.

⁵⁵ Cf. Saville-Troike 1985: 4.

question and answer among Navajo speakers is significantly longer than among monolingual English speakers. Apparently, Saville-Troike has observed non-Navajo interlocutors in group discussions answer questions they had asked to Navajos, because the period of silence following the question was too long for non-Navajos and went beyond their own limit of tolerance.⁵⁶ Similarly, non-Navajo questioners talking with Navajos frequently repeated or rephrased their questions, because of the long periods of silence. This difference in turn-taking results in many Navajo speakers considering the non-Navajo paralinguistic behaviour as rather impolite, and therefore, they would not like to add it to their bilingual repertory.⁵⁷

I believe that this example perfectly reflects what I have experienced as problematic in classroom discourse between me and my Finnish students. Like in the above-mentioned example, the pauses between questions and answers were far too long for me, which is why I often rephrased my questions. While I first thought that the students might not have understood a question, I know today that I have to give them more time to think. Still, it seems to be very difficult for me to get used to the Finnish temporal pattern of silence, which marks a decisive difference to the experience I have made in classroom discourse in Great Britain and Germany. I know that, being a foreigner in Finland, I have to respect the rules of Finnish communication, at least I have to take them into account when teaching either German or English to Finnish students. However, I also consider it important to make the students aware of these differences since learning a foreign language also requires learning when to be silent or not in a foreign language.

5.3 Potential misunderstandings in the classroom

Since language classrooms can be regarded as intercultural settings – usually, communication takes place in the taught foreign language and the teachers might be foreigners and native speakers of the respective language – students' use of Finnish interaction strategies can lead to misunderstandings. Of course, teachers will be aware of the fact that the students mostly communicate in Finnish and naturally use Finnish communication strategies daily; however, the language classroom can also be perceived as room for learning interaction strategies of the taught language, be it English, German, or Spanish. Thus, Finnish students might feel that they cannot rely

⁵⁶ See Saville-Troike 1985: 13.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

any more on their innate Finnish communication behaviour, but have to sort of adapt to the discourse culture of the language they are learning, i.e. especially so at advanced level. We certainly have to differentiate between ‘natural’ intercultural settings, for example as they might occur on holidays or during business travel; and the language classroom, where teachers and students should in a metalinguistic sense be consciously aware of the differences their native and the foreign discourse cultures imply. Beyond, since the awareness and knowledge of potential intercultural differences form important contents when learning a language, it is worth discussing about them in class. However, I am afraid that even if we consider aforesaid relevant differences conscientiously, the language classroom is still not immune to communicative misunderstandings. Beyond, maybe teachers simply don’t know where communication problems originate, as the following example shows.

At the beginning of my teaching career, I wanted to create a “no lose” situation for students, in order to instill confidence and achieve a greater willingness among the students to participate.⁵⁸ From the start, I mentioned that there are no stupid questions and invited every student to ask questions whenever anything seemed to be unclear.

It took some time until I realized that apparently the students did not take my invitation to ask questions seriously. The reason for this seems to be embedded in the Finnish discourse culture. According to Kakkuri-Knuuttila (2006) the invitation for asking questions is in Finland actually not considered a sincere invitation; thus, Finnish students might regard it rather as an empty phrase, which does not mean that questions are truly welcome.⁵⁹ Vice versa, even Finnish teachers might not be aware of the consequences of this notion. Interestingly, Kakkuri-Knuuttila suggests that Finnish teachers, apparently without noticing it themselves, experience questions from students as attacks and thus respond negatively. Students notice this rather nonverbal and intimidating reaction immediately, which might be the reason that - after having gone through the Finnish education system - students do generally rather not ask or comment. As Kakkuri-Knuuttila admits, it was hard work for her to overcome this negative spontaneous reaction of interpreting students’ questions as attacks against her being a teacher.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Cf. Petress 2001.

⁵⁹ Cf. Kakkuri-Knuuttila 2006: 133.

⁶⁰ Cf. Kakkuri-Knuuttila 2006: 133f.

While even Finnish teachers have to become aware of very implicit and hidden communicative patterns in Finland, we can assume that it is even more difficult for foreign teachers to understand and get accustomed to certain communicative features of the students' culture. Particularly foreign teachers might have different expectations of how language learning and communication should happen in the classroom. Considering that there is more frequent use of vocalizations and verbal backchannels in Central European languages and in British and American English than in Finnish, this might have effects on how Finnish students might appear as learners to a foreign teacher in the language classroom. While I emphasize the importance of active participation in class, my concept of what 'participating actively' actually meant was apparently different from the students'. Thus, active participation may mean for Finnish students delayed attempts at turn-taking, disfluency, slow speech, and silent observation of what is going on in class.⁶¹ Silent participation, however, is problematic, since the student's language skills will likely not improve as they ideally could. Beyond, it can be difficult for teachers to concentrate on silent students in a language course, because a person who does not speak remains almost invisible.⁶² This might result in students' entire withdrawal from discussions in class, which again can easily be misinterpreted by a teacher as students' disinterest, indifference, or even hostility towards the course or the teacher, who might react accordingly.⁶³ Therefore, there is a relatively high risk that different interaction strategies and differences in discourse cultures cause a vicious circle. Primarily, it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure that relevant communicative problems are discussed and explained, so that no such vicious circle could ever occur. However, as described above, it can be difficult for teachers to detect potential misunderstandings, let alone being constantly aware of them. After all, this required also knowing what the students actually think, what they misunderstand, or where they might be overchallenged with certain requirements. Long periods of silence that tend to occur in interactional situations with Finns can easily be interpreted by foreigners as indicating that the Finnish interlocutor is feeling anxiety, considers the topic as annoying and wishes to conclude the interaction.⁶⁴ Contrastive linguists could infer that Finnish students might transfer behavioral conventions from the native

⁶¹ Cf. Lehtonen; Sajavaara 1985: 196.

⁶² See Lehtonen; Sajavaara 1985: 196. While this description of invisibility sounds drastic in this context, I think it applies more to situations outside the classroom.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

language in ways that do not meet the expectations of the foreign language teacher. If we are not aware of the nature of the conflict, the result could be a breakdown in communication, and thus in the learning process. Therefore, it is of great importance for teachers to know about potential problems deriving from different discourse cultures in order to anticipate them, avoid them and thus create a constructive learning atmosphere in the classroom.

5.4 Further reasons for students' reticence

We could see from the examples above that cultural conventions play a decisive role when it comes to assessing potential reasons for students' passivity. However, since reticent people can be found worldwide, we can also assume that there are other causes for people remaining silent. The reasons why some people are perceived as passive might not necessarily be closely connected to culture in a collective sense, but rather to individual characteristic traits of students. For instance, teachers should consider whether a student has low self-esteem. Some students might think of themselves as unable to comment on certain matters and therefore remain silent out of shame. In this regard, students might suffer from fear of being ridiculed, if their contribution is inaccurate or inappropriate. In addition, shy, inexperienced, or less competent students might rely upon silence in avoiding conflict scenarios. A rather contrary but similar problem is the fear of success. When students interact successfully, they might feel the pressure of having to continue to interact with similar or even superior success.

The above-mentioned kinds of avoidance can usually be easily diagnosed by alert teachers and alternative strategies have to be offered as substitutes for unwanted silence. Finding suitable strategies, however, can be difficult in cases where students suffer from a clinical fear of communicating in the presence of others, which is in my opinion the most serious reason for students' silence.⁶⁵ I can remember one student who could suddenly not talk any more during her presentation and had thus to abort it. Even though I have to be careful with inferences related to this incident, I believe that this student suffered from a clinical fear.⁶⁶ I tried to ease this rather awkward

⁶⁵ See also Petress 2001: 104ff.

⁶⁶ According to a BBC documentary broadcast by YLE 1, which was about chances of surviving a plane crash and safety measures for flight passengers, speaking in public is the greatest fear people have and more common than the fear of flying. The documentary was broadcast on 25.2.08 in the program Prisma: *Kun lentokone putoaa*. Cf. <http://yle.fi/tv1/ohjelmaopas.php?date=20080225&time=1910>). While these two fears are not at all

situation by providing further ideas connected to the presentation topic and igniting a discussion among the whole class. Luckily, some students were supportive and engaged in the discussion, which had the positive effect that the aforesaid nervous student calmed down relatively quickly.

Another student I remember could not give her presentation at all in the language course. On the day her presentation was due, she was not present and even though I had contacted her by e-mail, it took about five days until I received an e-mail including an apology. Allegedly, the student got ill. So, I offered her an alternative time to present her presentation, which had to be the final class of the course. Also then, she did not appear and again, it took surprisingly long until she reacted to a message I had sent her earlier. Eventually, we agreed upon her giving the presentation in my office. This time, the student appeared but was in a very nervous condition. I tried to calm the student down by some small talk and fortunately, it was seemingly not too difficult for her to finally give the presentation.

Still, I feel rather overchallenged when it comes to thinking about how to help a student, who presumably suffers from a clinical presentation fear. In feedback sessions, I have raised this sensitive, yet natural issue and it seemed that the respective students were not only aware of it, but also appreciated talking about nervousness.⁶⁷ While I naturally felt that I had to address the problem of stagefright when giving feedback in confidence to students after their presentations, I felt that my advice could only be limited. At the end of the day, further professional support is likely more appropriate for students, who are probably suffering from a clinical presentation fear; especially if they might have to give many presentations in their future careers, e.g. in the field of Business and Economics.

related to each other, I believe that this comparison shows that the fear of speaking in front of others can become a very serious matter, also in the classroom.

⁶⁷ I tried to approach this topic in a sensitive manner and, of course, never referred to it as a 'clinical fear', but rather as a form of stagefright, which is a very common issue when giving presentations.

6 Grice's maxims – cooperation and challenges in the classroom

Just as each culture maintains its own norms regarding acceptable and unacceptable speech behaviour in social interactions, we can infer that also the nature of classroom discourse will follow certain established, yet hidden rules, which might at first be invisible to the eye of a foreigner. Therefore, I assume that it takes time for foreign students and teachers to observe and discover the norms of what is considered acceptable classroom discourse in a certain culture. For example, the stereotypical notion that people in Finland should never ask anything, because if they did, they might be lost for good,⁶⁸ could be regarded as alienating to German students and teachers. Of course, it is very difficult to describe the nature of classroom discourse in a certain culture in detail. We could as well argue whether this is at all possible, since classroom discourse depends on individual teachers, students, and group dynamics. Therefore, instead of focusing on differences, I want to use another approach and look at seemingly common, international guidelines concerning communication.

Generally, I believe that Grice's cooperative principle (1975) can offer us orientation in order to know what we should keep in mind when communicating with others.⁶⁹ As sincerity plays a decisive role in teaching, I believe that Grice's maxims could be considered as very relevant in an educational setting at the outset. Talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, but they are characteristically cooperative efforts. At each stage of a discussion, we try to make suitable conversational moves. Based on this idea, Grice formulated four general maxims, which he subsumed in his "cooperative principle".⁷⁰ However, some of our utterances or conversational moves might be considered as conversationally unsuitable in a certain setting. In the following, I want to illustrate, how Grice's principle is being challenged in the context of classroom discourse.

⁶⁸ In their article entitled "The silent Finn", Lehtonen and Sajavaara mention this example quoting a pseudoscholar paper published by the Finnish linguists Auli Hakulinen and Fred Karlsson on "Finnish Silence" (cf. Lehtonen; Sajavaara 1985: 194). Even though this portrait of stereotypical characteristics of communication among Finns is intended to be a rather humorous exaggeration, Lehtonen and Sajavaara regard it as not without basis in fact (ibid.).

⁶⁹ See Grice 1975: 41ff. Needless to say, critics could question the international validity of Grice's maxims. However, Grice did not intend to provide prescriptive maxims that people should constantly follow; but he was himself interested in settings where his principles would be breached (cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gricean_maxim).

⁷⁰ Cf. Grice 1975: 45ff.

6.1 Maxim of quality

The maxim of quality implies that a speaker tells the truth or that their comments are provable by adequate evidence. In other words, we should not say what we believe to be false or for which we lack adequate evidence.⁷¹

At first sight, it might be easy to follow the maxim of quality, assuming that teachers and students hardly say anything deliberately they believe to be false, especially concerning main course contents. Yet, people are not always sincere with their utterances; some students might enjoy making ironic remarks, or others might even lie in order to apologise, e.g. for their absence, or for not having done certain exercises. We can see that classroom discourse is far more complex and we cannot always assume that people make truthful comments.

6.2 Maxim of quantity

The maxim of quantity includes that a speaker should be as informative as is required for the current purposes of the communicative exchange. Ideally, we should not make our contributions more informative than is required.

This maxim sounds very logical, but I am afraid it is easier said than done; especially when considering the additional specification that we should not make our contributions more informative than is required. Getting messages across to students and limit the wording ideally, so that there is not more information than required, can be very difficult in didactics. Teachers likely have to repeat certain information in various ways, e.g. when students seem not to understand, we have to paraphrase a message and find a different, suitable wording. I have made the observation that advanced students seemed occasionally bored, when I had to rephrase certain aspects to peers, who had apparently not understood what I had said earlier. For some advanced students, teachers might seem to provide more information than required; and the danger is that these students feel bored.⁷² However, teachers naturally have to rephrase certain ideas, so that all the students are able to follow. Thus, the reality of classroom discourse shows that teachers likely have to breach Gice's maxim of quantity repeatedly.

⁷¹ See Grice 1975: 46; or: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Grice.

⁷² I have made the observation that few students of Early Childhood Education adopted a rather self-centred perspective and seemed not to understand why I had to rephrase certain ideas other students had not understood. Regarding their future profession, I think this is interesting.

6.3 *Maxim of relation*

This third maxim suggests that any contribution should be relevant to the topic of discussion. Considering Grice's maxim of relation, it seems natural that any of the teacher's or students' contributions will be relevant, either to main course contents such as academic reading or communication skills, or closely related to students' major studies. In a survey I have made among Education students, 85% of the students declared that they liked discussions about study-related topics.⁷³ We can assume that teachers naturally agree that classroom activities are ideally relevant to students' circumstances and needs. Sometimes, however, students might actually prefer to work on topics that are not necessarily relevant for their studies. Kidd (2004) discussed the question of relevance concerning language classroom activities. With the example of a meeting simulation, which is set in a pretend English village and about a town-planning dispute regarding traffic, he relativises the importance of relevance. In the simulated meeting, language students adopt roles of English farmers and county councillors and it is very unlikely that these roles relate to any future reality of most of the students. Still, the students seem to like this role-play; and while Kidd apparently intended to redesign the simulation so that it was set in Finland, his students responded that if the setting had been in Finland; and if the problem of the meeting had been real and current, then the matter would apparently have been too close to some students, which again might have made it difficult or uncomfortable for them to express their feelings and opinions.⁷⁴ Of course, the simulation has linguistic relevance, i.e. the students learn oral skills, the language of meetings, agreeing and disagreeing, expressions and vocabulary. However, the structural essence of the task, putting oneself into the role of an English local resident, farmer, or shop keeper and discussing about a traffic problem, is not necessarily relevant for Finnish students.⁷⁵ Therefore, it seems that relevance has in fact many guises in classroom activities and it can be arguable to decide what is really relevant for students.⁷⁶ Again, there is always some potential for us to breach

⁷³ See Appendix, Fig 2. Again, some students pointed out that conversation should take place in small groups only.

⁷⁴ See Kidd 2004: 130.

⁷⁵ Kidd sees low relevance in the setting, to which he refers as structural micro-level (cf. Kidd 2004: 129).

⁷⁶ Concerning relevant discussion topics, one of my students of Early Childhood Education gave written feedback that he or she wanted to discuss about gardening. Assuming that this student did not deliberately breach Grice's maxim of quality, I was afraid that this particular topic is too detached from course contents. Beyond, I thought that many students lacked interest or reasonable knowledge to discuss about gardening; and I did not see much potential to integrate this topic in a setting, where students could practice specific language skills, e.g. debating skills.

Grice's maxim of relation. In reality, this can also be discovered in the fact that certain exercises, tasks, or role-plays work well with some students, whereas other groups might not find the same exercise relevant at all. In other words, in order to follow this maxim, we had to be able to clearly answer what relevance is, however, the answer to this question is not necessarily clear or definite.

6.4 Maxim of manner

The maxim of manner requires that a speaker avoids ambiguity or obscurity of expression. As communicators, we should be direct, straightforward and make brief contributions by avoiding any prolixity.⁷⁷ However, in the language classroom, we might sometimes discuss complex issues which likely allow various opinions and neither teacher nor student might be able to provide adequate evidence for certain ideas. For example, a very popular topic in the pedagogical field is Finland's success in the PISA studies. The Wall Street Journal online published recently an article asking in the headline about what made Finnish Kids so smart?⁷⁸ While there are many speculations concerning Finland's success in PISA, it is definitely not easy to answer this question in a direct, straightforward manner.

Beyond, students need time to make up their minds and; needless to say, in a foreign language it might take far more time for students to find suitable words, so that they feel comfortable speaking about a certain topic. The following written feedback I received from a student shows how difficult it can be at times to follow Grice's maxim of manner:

"[...] for me, it is very difficult to be quiet, and it was very difficult to be here [in the language course] because I am so shy that it is difficult to speak English in a big group. I would like to say something all the time."

Obviously, the student's feedback is rather contradictory than straightforward. While she first indicates that she is rather talkative, since it was very difficult for her to be quiet, she remarks in the following that she was so shy and that it was in fact difficult for her to engage in conversations. As such, this is rather a nebulous contribution and

⁷⁷ See Grice 1975: 46ff.

⁷⁸ Cf. Gamerman 2008; or http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB120425355065601997-7Bp8YFw7Yy1n9bdKtVyP7KBACJA_20080330.html.

apparently, it is not always easy to be direct, straightforward and to avoid any prolixity.

Having shortly provided an overview of Grice's maxims and related challenges, we can assume that teachers and students constantly either have to, or will breach the cooperative principle in classroom discourse. In other words, while we might have idealistic maxims of how communication should take place, we often deviate from these rules in reality.

7 Motivating students

It is very important to keep in mind under which circumstances teaching actually takes place. The language courses I have taught so far were obligatory for the students, which means that they might not have a very authentic, sincere interest in learning and speaking English or German; and therefore, their willingness to discuss and make comments might be impaired by even blatant disinterest. I have learned to keep this potential lack of motivation in mind and it helps me to understand that it might take a lot more incentives to make students participate in class, than if they had chosen their language studies deliberately out of interest. In reality, some students do not necessarily have any other motivation but to pass a certain language course for their degree.⁷⁹ Naturally, I wish I could make students become interested in the course contents I teach. Still, occasionally, this goal seems to be difficult to reach. Some students apparently do not see much purpose in learning English within their University study programs, as the following written feedback by a student of Early Childhood Education reveals:

“It was difficult to be motivated because in the future in our profession we don't have to communicate in English or in our studies. We don't have to do pro-seminar work or pro-gradu⁸⁰ in English. We only have to read English books for our exams, but we have done it from the first grade and we've got used to it.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Some students told me that they only wanted to pass the course, regardless of the grade.

⁸⁰ A “pro-gradu” is a Master's thesis.

⁸¹ I have received this feedback during my first year as a teacher in spring 2007, when I taught the course Academic Reading and Communication Skills for the first time.

This response was certainly surprising and truly irritating for me. While I have generally tried to design tasks that are specifically related to the students' major, for example Early Childhood Education, I have also covered practical issues concerning studying at large. Regarding effective reading skills, I have given the students advice on how they can scan and skim academic texts and become fast readers, which will most likely help them to process the given information in academic texts in less time and should allow them to prepare efficiently for their exams. No doubt, the students will have to read and understand English academic texts in the future, which the student cited also admits. In response to the student's statement above, I would like to add that many students seemed to need specific instructions and practice in reading, processing and understanding academic articles; and therefore, I very much doubt that they had got used to reading English texts, even though they allegedly have done so since first grade. Thus, I consider the offer of a course including academic reading and communication skills as indeed useful for the students.

Concerning communication skills, the above-mentioned student seems yet not to be aware of the fact that English will without much doubt become even more important in the future and on the labour market generally, also in kindergartens. When we covered the topic intercultural communication, I tried to raise the students' awareness by emphasizing that they will most likely have to take care of immigrant children in their kindergartens. They might also have to discuss important matters with immigrant parents, and if the parents don't happen to speak Finnish, today's lingua franca English might be of great help, at least it is an expectable alternative. I have provided various explanations throughout the course, in order to rule out any doubts the students might have about the sense and benefit of certain tasks and taught contents. Naturally, students should know why we are doing certain exercises and be aware of the learning targets.

I can truly think of several occasions during my courses, in which I have tried to make the students interested in the contents we covered. When it comes to language learning, it is sad that some students seem to only focus on their main studies and do not see the instantaneous benefits of studying a foreign language for their studies, their future careers, and for their life in general. Some students' disregard of the relevance of language skills and demographic changes and - even worse - their neglect of the given chances to learn for life, is a drastic reality teachers have to face also in tertiary education. In other words, it can be difficult to motivate uninterested students. Since I wanted to know more about the students' interest in language

learning, I had designed a questionnaire for Education students regarding motivation.⁸²

7.1 A questionnaire on motivation

In the questionnaire I conducted in the course Academic Reading and Communication Skills, eight per cent of the students declared that they were neither motivated nor interested in the language course and never had been. Of course, there can be many reasons for this result. Maybe these students have received rather poor grades in languages at school; and in fact, 15 per cent indicated that they did not receive good grades in languages earlier. Maybe their former language teachers at school adopted a punishing or threatening attitude when students made mistakes, which would naturally do more harm than good; and could result in students being afraid to speak in the respective foreign language even today.⁸³ Thus, the atmosphere in the language classroom at school was maybe spoilt for certain students and consequently, they might not have only grown to dislike their former teacher but also the taught language.

Equally worrying for me was that twelve per cent of the students had apparently lost interest during the language course. Interestingly, some students added feedback saying that this course had caused a lot of stress because of the presentation assignments and the conversations in class. As giving presentations is a definite course requirement in almost all language courses offered by the language centre, students have to do this task and I hope that I could ease any of their fears in that respect. However, particularly noticeable is that conversations seemed to worry the student cited above so much. I feel that conversation, either in pairs, small groups or in the whole class, are essential contents in a language course. It would be wonderful if I could reach likewise challenged students more in the future, so that they become motivated and interested.

A majority of the students, 64 per cent indicated that their motivation and interest changed. While some students added comments saying that their motivation was 'usually good', others declared that, even though they liked the language course, they were unfortunately too busy and involved in 'too much work' in their majors.

⁸² Please see Appendix, Fig. 2. Altogether, 81,25 % of the students gave feedback in this survey, which was conducted in April 2008.

⁸³ Cf. Cross 1992: 69.

Occasionally, certain students seemed to be very tired. Having inquired about how many hours of contact teaching they had had that day, one student answered rather desperately 'twelve hours, from eight o'clock in the morning to 8 p.m. in the evening'. Needless to say, the resources for a four-hour English class seem to be very limited, if students attend an additional eight hours of seminars and lectures. Many students also admitted that they attended third-year courses already in their second year, since they wanted to finish their degree quickly. Discussing about the students' schedules opened my eyes. My initial reaction was sympathy for the students, however, while I understand that some students want to finish their studies quickly, I recommended that they consider the planning of their study schedules carefully. After all, the risk is high that they overstress themselves with too much work. Especially attending third-year seminars in the second year seems to be dangerous and unwise, since study schedules have been carefully planned by the respective faculties. Ignoring these recommendations likely leads to a poorer performance in the studies. Naturally, students' have limited resources and in stressful times, they have to prioritise and likely devote less input and time to a language course.

More optimistic results were that eight per cent of the students declared that they were highly motivated in the language course and always had been. Beyond, an equal amount of students responded that they were not interested at the beginning, but became motivated throughout the course. It is certainly easier to work with motivated students who are interested in learning and improving their foreign language skills. However, the challenge for a teacher lies in motivating the unmotivated student.

7.2 Key findings

The results of the questionnaire are indeed interesting for me.⁸⁴ Apart from the findings concerning students' motivation mentioned above, it was very relevant for me to see further details.

First of all, 50 per cent of the students responded that they would not have chosen this language course voluntarily. Imagining that every second student would not have participated in this course made me as teacher feel challenged regarding motivation.

Secondly, concerning course contents, likewise 50 per cent admitted that they did not like giving presentations. Only three per cent agreed that they like giving presentations, while 47 per cent responded that even though it could be difficult for

⁸⁴ The complete questionnaire is included in the appendix.

them, they would not mind giving presentations. Therefore, a majority of students can be regarded as challenged and likely unmotivated concerning presentation assignments. However, having asked how useful the students considered presentation skills in their studies and their future careers, 27 per cent responded that presentation skills were very useful, 62 per cent regarded these skills as useful to some extent, while the remaining 11 per cent did consider presentation skills as not useful at all.⁸⁵ Thirdly, the survey revealed that a majority of students consider oral skills as particularly important. In fact, 65 per cent responded that oral skills should be developed more intensively. This is an interesting result, which is consistent with my earlier observations that students indeed lacked confidence in their oral skills. Therefore, I considered it important to implement useful exercises so that students could develop their oral skills.

⁸⁵ Please see Appendix, Fig. 2; question 14 of questionnaire. In this context, one student wrote the following feedback: *"I can talk without giving a presentation."* Apparently, this student missed the point.

8 Developing oral skills

I believe that, at University, it is of utmost importance for students to discuss subject matters and to state their opinion in front of others in a constructive way. After all, it is this vivid exchange of divergent views and creative ideas that makes academia so interesting. This likely requires a sense of self-directiveness and critical, independent learning and thinking, which I again consider to be an intrinsic part of the learning process at higher academic level. In favour of a constructivist approach, I believe that learning should not be separated from action; and that perception and action work indeed together in a dialogical manner.⁸⁶ Thus, in my opinion, speaking is the essential action in the language classroom. Beyond, the students' feelings and ideas should be at the centre of attention, around which a lot of their foreign language activity revolves.

8.1 *Working in pairs and small groups*

Having taught languages in Finland for 16 months now, I feel that I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for students to work in pairs and small groups. Research widely supports the idea that people need to talk in order to learn and to become competent and self-confident language users.⁸⁷ Therefore, the role of talk in learning, particularly language learning, is very crucial. If we discuss about subject matters, we are likely able to better understand complex issues and will retain the learnt contents for a longer time. According to Darn (2007), communicative language teaching comprises a methodology, which emphasises communication in the classroom by means of pair and group activities and thus results in greater student involvement in the learning process.⁸⁸ At the beginning of my teaching career, I thought that students would comment freely in class. In the meantime, however, my expectations regarding classroom discourse have changed. Today, I focus a lot more on pair and group work; however, the course contents, as they are formulated in faculty requirements, naturally remained the same. My mission is to sensitise students for communicative fluency, and to achieve that they feel at ease giving an individual presentation. Thus, warming-up exercises intended for pair and group work are useful in order to enhance communication skills from the start. Beyond,

⁸⁶ Cf. Richardson 1997: 8.

⁸⁷ Cf. Cullinan 1993: 2. This idea does not only apply to young children acquiring their mother tongue, but also to foreign language learners regardless of their age.

⁸⁸ Cf. Darn (2007), http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/teacher_talk.shtml.

they also help to induce socialising among students who might not know each other at the beginning of a course. Students need time to get to know each other, and more importantly, to feel comfortable making comments in front of the class. The value of group work should in this respect not be underestimated. In the following, I want to describe some useful pair and group work exercises, which helped to increase students' communication in class.

8.1.1 Logic-problem solving

Logic-problem tasks are usually good means to have students engage in oral pair or group exercises. Finding suitable material can at times be difficult, however, quiz books as they can be found at kiosks might offer good sources, not to mention equivalent material available online; or source books specifically designed for communicative fluency activities for language teaching.⁸⁹ At times, the material might have to be redesigned, so that for example two students, who work together as players A and B, receive different information on two different handouts. I usually let students simulate a telephone call; so, they should not look at each other's handouts but have to share the given information orally and thus communicate effectively. Ideally, phone calls are simulated in a language lab, where students sit apart from each other and can only communicate via a headset. While I have occasionally conducted telephone simulations in classrooms without any technical equipment, I have noticed that some students would not follow the instructions and look at each other's handouts. Thus, they would share the information in a manner they could not apply in a real phone call. Therefore, without any technical means, it is important that students turn away from each other. However, even if the students do not follow the instructions precisely, they still have to communicate effectively and think logically in order to solve a certain problem; which naturally requires more communication than the mere exchange of information given on different handouts. I have definitely made positive experience and think that the students appreciate logic-problem solving, as they can combine mnemonic exercise while improving their language skills. The first pair or group to solve the logic problem might then explain the solution to the class and receive a little prize for their effort.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ See Klippel 1993.

⁹⁰ I have sometimes distributed liquorice bars to the winning team. This is naturally a small prize, yet it makes a big difference and contributes nicely to the atmosphere in the classroom.

8.1.2 Discussion games

Discussion games are very useful tools that help to initiate and improve students' oral skills in an interactive way. Usually, the games can be efficiently played in groups of three or four students. Beyond, they can be flexibly implemented either at the beginning as a warm-up, during, or towards the end of a class. Thus, discussion games serve as useful complements that make foreign language lessons more interesting and lively. Naturally, the discussion topics should be safe and by no means perceived as too personal, critical or embarrassing. Ideally, the issues discussed are related to the students' major, but they can also be relevant in a day-to-day context.

In order to provide some examples, I have used board games that did not require any detailed knowledge, nor particular language skills and thus, all students can participate regardless of their linguistic abilities. One board game, entitled "*Values topics*" can be played in groups of three to four students. Each player throws a dice and moves their counter forward accordingly. If the counter lands on a topic square, the player tells the others in the group something about the topic on the respective square, e.g. '*Your happiest moment in the last year*', or '*A good book you have read*'.⁹¹ If a player lands on a '*free question*' square, one of the other peers may ask him a question. While the students practice their language skills, they get to know each other and might discover common interests.

Admittedly, in some exercises students are asked to tell the others about their thoughts and feelings. Yet, speaking about yourself is not something that every student does with ease. Beyond, if a course has just started, some groups might not develop a pleasant kind of group feeling *ab initio*. If the atmosphere in the class should in some way be hostile, it might even become impossible for the most extrovert person to speak about their own feelings.⁹² Therefore, a friendly and relaxed atmosphere must have top priority. Naturally, any student may refuse to answer a personal question without having to give any explanation or reason. While I generally try to avoid any threatening topics, there may still be a few details which could fall into this category for very shy students. However, I have never faced any difficulties in this respect and thus, I believe that it is fair to say that most of the material and related topics I choose are safe.

⁹¹ See Klippel 1993: 95 and 175.

⁹² Cf. Klippel 1993: 7.

Of course, the range of discussion topics and questions is almost indefinite. In order to get to know students, Finland could be an interesting theme? I usually let students play a discussion board game that includes questions like:

Who are the best Finnish performers around just now;?

Is it a lotto win to be born in Finland?; or

What kind of misconceptions do foreigners often have about Finland?

In all the discussion games, I consider it important that the students discuss the question they 'land on' for at least a minute before they can move on.

Also card games can be good for discussions. I use one card game entitled "*Viele Dinge (Many Things)*", in which students have to use associative skills and can expand their vocabulary. "*Many things*" contains 60 topic cards showing different topic images, e.g. a Christmas tree for the topic "Christmas"; a fish dish and a slice of pizza for the topic "food"; or a sandy beach for the topic "holiday". At the beginning, 30 topic cards are spread on the table. One player turns over one of the topic cards and the group will find one letter on the back of it. Now, all players immediately start thinking for things that begin with the determined letter and match the visible topic cards. One round is finished as soon as one player has collected six cards. The main idea and aim of the game is that the students try to think of things that fit these topics. However, the associated things must not necessarily be shown directly on the cards. The player who can think of the most things eventually wins the game.⁹³

Whatever the game or the discussion topic, during pair and group work I usually adopt two roles as a teacher.⁹⁴ The first is that of an auditor who listens to the pairs or groups and notes any persisting errors. Since I have noticed that students might feel disturbed if I correct them during the game, I rather refer to serious errors another time, perhaps after the game or at the end of the lesson. It is very important that the students do not feel observed and that their discussions are not interrupted in any way.⁹⁵ However, they can, of course, ask me at any time during the game and so, my second role is that of a tutor or resource person, providing help, feedback and information upon request.

⁹³ Cf. Naegele; Adlung 2003.

⁹⁴ Cf. Cross 1992: 49.

⁹⁵ Cf. Cullinan 1993: 3. For good reasons, Cullinan points out that students are more likely to explore the possibilities of talk in small groups of peers than in discussions led by teachers. If a teacher said "Just ignore me – I'll just be here but won't say anything", students are affected by the teacher's presence. Needless to say, when students are among themselves, they will talk more freely.

8.2 Panel discussions

In order to prepare students for a vivid discussion in the whole class, I have implemented the idea of a panel discussion, where students apply debating strategies and discuss about an interesting topic while adopting certain roles.

The benefit of panel discussions is that students adopt certain oppositional roles; however, they are counterparts in a rather playful approach and do not necessarily have to sincerely express their opinion. I have made the experience that panel discussions work well for debates and the students usually enjoy the fact that they are acting according to a certain role, which naturally gives them some freedom to conceal their true opinion on an issue. However, the disadvantage is that panel discussions have to be carefully planned. The students might first have to become acquainted with a topic or theme, so that they can identify with certain roles. Preparing students for the actual panel discussion can take two or more teaching units and thus, it can be time-consuming. However, I have made positive experience with the following example.

In a German communication skills course I have taught in spring 2008, I implemented a panel discussion on Nokia's decision to shut down a factory in Bochum. The company's decision was announced earlier in January. This current case gave us very good insight into the differences of business communication and students could practise debating skills on a relevant issue. The panel provided room for interesting discussions about business ethics and the communicative behaviour of the parties involved: the protests by the German employees and their call to boycott Nokia products; public announcements by German politicians, for example by chancellor Angela Merkel; and, of course Nokia's proceedings in this matter. Interestingly, Nokia's announcement of the workplaces in Bochum being outsourced to Romania and the annual review, with CEO Kallasvuo announcing record profit in the following week, stood in harsh contrast to each other from an ethical point of view. Prior to the actual panel discussion, I distributed journalistic articles and readers' opinions from different media reporting about this case. Beyond, we covered debating skills, including argumentation and ways of agreeing and disagreeing as they might occur in such a setting. Thus, the students acquainted themselves with the situation and the arguments of the different parties involved: the employees, who would soon lose their jobs, politicians, Nokia's executive board including CEO Kallasvuo, and a public audience. One student took the role of a moderator and managed the turn-taking. The students had indeed good arguments, considered this

case from various perspectives and played their roles very well and convincingly. Preparing the panel discussion took time, but since students participated conscientiously and contributed lots of ideas, I will give panel discussions definitely more attention in future courses. In fact, during the whole discussion, which lasted for about 45 minutes, all the students contributed interesting ideas and seemed to enjoy this learning experience.

8.3 The power of presentation skills

Expressing ourselves can be very difficult, also in our native language. However, no matter which language we use, we are able to take ownership of ideas by putting them into our own words. This is in my opinion a very important point, which I always emphasize when I teach about presentation and communication skills. Following a presentation as part of the audience and understanding what is being said might be very easy, just as it might be easy to read a text. However, it is far more complex to express ourselves in an elaborate, rhetorically versed manner. Giving a good speech or presentation is usually considered as challenging and difficult. For good reasons, great speakers are usually given credit for their rhetoric skills.

I consider it good advice for language learners to speak out loud, also for physical reasons. While thinking about how we should express ourselves when preparing a presentation, it is not only our brain that needs to know the information, but our mouth needs to know the feel of the information. In other words, silently reading a text on paper will likely be easier and less time-consuming than reading it aloud. As presentation skills are essentially important in many of my courses, I apply exercises where students discuss in groups not only about field-related issues, but also about presentation techniques. For example, in my English course for students of Early Childhood Education, we analysed a presentation by Gever Tulley (2007), in which he speaks about child safety regulations.⁹⁶ In brief, Tulley talks about the current wave of overprotected children and promotes the idea that children should get the freedom to explore potentially dangerous things, such as fire, knives etc. His main idea is that letting children explore seemingly dangerous things will make them smarter, stronger, and indeed safer.⁹⁷ I have chosen this presentation since it provides

⁹⁶ Gever Tulley's talk carries the provocative title „Five dangerous things you should let your kids do” and can be viewed on TED Talks at <http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/view/id/202>.

⁹⁷ Ibid. Of course, Tulley suggests that, e.g. when using knives, children should be supervised.

insight into child safety regulations in an US-American context and because I was interested in how that compared to Finland in the students' opinions. Discussing this presentation with the students showed that there were indeed different notions of what is acceptable or reasonable when talking about child safety regulations. While some students agreed with Tulley and claimed that a similar sense of overprotecting children is spreading in Finland, others found that Tulley adopted a too humorous approach for this serious topic. In the end, the question of whether children are 'overprotected' was answered in different ways by students. Watching presentations given by English native speakers can be useful in many ways: not only do the students watch an authentic presentation given by a native speaker; they also engage in field-related discussions and can analyse the presentation skills of the presenter. Since the students are very likely not personally close to the presenter shown in a video, they are usually at ease criticising either the presented contents or the speaker's presentation style. There is usually time to integrate one or two presentation videos of about 20 minutes length each in a course.⁹⁸ However, there is a tremendous amount of material available online and the students can also watch other presentations outside the classroom and thus get various ideas of how they could give a presentation in English.

Beyond, I usually let students give short group presentations, so that everybody gets used to speaking in front of the group, which is a preparatory step towards the more work-intensive input of an individual presentation at the end of a course. By taking part in these preparatory exercises, students usually realise the value of rehearsing. While I have occasionally noticed reticency and neglect by some students towards fluency activities that go beyond small pair discussions, most students seemed to gain confidence in talking in front of an audience towards the end of a course. Discussions in pairs or small groups are a good start, especially for timid students; however, speaking of communication exercises, I believe that a University course must motivate and encourage students to become confident speakers. The saying "practice makes perfect" certainly applies also to language and presentation skills. Talking in front of the class helps students to become increasingly confident as they express their ideas to an interested audience of peers.⁹⁹ Furthermore, a presentation assignment is a perfect task that combines various useful purposes in a language

⁹⁸ I usually choose one presentation from the above-mentioned TED Talks-site, since this forum offers a good choice of fantastic speeches and presentations. See <http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks>.

⁹⁹ Cf. Cullinan 1993: 3.

course: the students learn more about a field-related topic of their interest; they improve their language skills decisively; and teachers can more effectively develop strategies to help students develop their speaking and rhetorical skills.

8.4 Creating an invitational environment

Admittedly, it can be difficult to generate genuine discussions among students, where different perspectives are presented openly with the intention of arriving at a conclusion. Needless to say, a basic requirement for open discussions in the classroom is an invitational environment, in which students feel that they can honestly express themselves, without being criticised for their ideas.

Barell (2007) provides suggestions for generating genuine discussions, among which some seem to be very useful. In an invitational environment students are encouraged to respond to each other's comments and not just to the teacher's. Barell suggests that when a student asks a question, the teacher should respond by asking other students for an answer. This attempt usually helps to get the whole class involved in a discussion; and in metaphorical terms, also helps to move away from the model of the coach throwing the ball out to each player and receiving it back from them. According to Barell, the intellectual ball should be thrown among the players since, like during a real game, the students should be the players in the classroom.¹⁰⁰

Barell's advice is certainly useful to great extent; however, he naturally adopts an US-American perspective and quite likely his target group are anglophone teachers and students. In other settings, outside the Anglo-American cultural area, I would like to suggest that some of Barell's advice needs to be reconsidered as it might not necessarily trigger interaction among students but rather inhibit them. In order to create 'genuine discussions', Barell recommends among other things to use follow-up responses, e.g. asking one student what they think of another student's comment.¹⁰¹ While he claims that the contents of his work, particularly regarding inquiry, thinking processes, and questions, are applicable across all cultures and ages,¹⁰² I would like to be more careful with respect to culture.

Concerning a persons's communication skills, certainly a lot depends on context, culture and also on the temperament of individual students. If we take Barell's advice

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Barell 2007: 23.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² See Barell 2007: X (Introduction).

and imagine a teacher asking, e.g. *Hanna, do you agree with Mika's comment?*¹⁰³; in Finland, this could in my opinion be interpreted as creating a rather competitive setting, where the two mentioned students might seem like rivals, with only one giving a good or correct answer. Therefore, while certain advice to create an invitational environment might be considered useful in one culture, it might have counterproductive, conflictive effects in another. This is not to say that I avoid any sincere discussion, where students might have opposing opinions. Of course, with regard to appropriate register the students are free to comment each other's ideas, but I do not want to create any competitive atmosphere among the students.

Concerning external aspects of instructional methods, I plan my lessons usually so that I start with a small warm-up exercise, which might take up to twenty minutes. After that, I give a short lecture on a particular topic, which is followed by an exercise the students work on in small groups. Naturally, this task is related to the current topic of the prior lecture and requires thinking and discussing about relevant contents. Ideally, each group presents their outcomes afterwards and the findings are discussed in the lesson. Again, it seems to be very important not to ask general questions to the whole class, but to let students first think individually about a certain issue, then let them discuss about it in groups, and only then in the whole class.

It turned out that having a regular framework when planning sessions was of great advantage, since the students seemingly prefer being taught on the basis of a stable, reliable plan.

Besides external aspects, internal aspects of teaching are likely a lot more challenging since they cover the mental activity and the phases of the learning process a teacher hopes to achieve.¹⁰⁴ Learning is surely more effective if the students are actively involved in the process. In order to make progress in their foreign language learning, all situations in which real communication occurs should be taken advantage of. For students who are studying English in a non-English-speaking environment, it is very crucial to experience real communicative situations in which they learn to express their own thoughts and views, and in which they are taken seriously. Creating an invitational environment in this regard should enhance the learning process and be beneficial for the students.

¹⁰³ Barell uses comparable questions, where students are asked to comment on each other's statements. See Barell 2007: 23.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Engeström 1994:90.

8.5 Discussing about discussions – reflective journals

With respect to language learning, it might be fruitful trying to use metalinguistic approaches by discussing about discussions in the classroom and thus, the learning process in general. As described above, discourse cultures might vary to great extent, even between neighbouring European countries. Becoming acquainted with respective discourse practices will be of great help in order to make ourselves aware of potential misunderstandings, what goals we want to reach and how our ideas could possibly be exchanged. Of course, this can also include discussing problem situations directly with students. In the classroom, students might for example post their ideas, which could be useful guidelines for further discussions in the future. A conscious discussion about discourse likely increases awareness among students of what is essential in peer interaction, implying politeness strategies and other social skills; which will be of great importance also outside the academic realm and thus, generally in life. Therefore, I believe that it could be beneficial to keep reflective journals, in which teachers and students write in answers to questions such as “*How well are we actually doing in our discussions?*”, or “*How can we possibly improve on our performance?*”¹⁰⁵ This idea of reflective journals could also be introduced in electronic form; for example in form of a pedagogical Wiki, where students can contribute their ideas online in a very flexible way regarding time and place.¹⁰⁶

By engaging in field-specific observe-, think-, question- and debate-exercises weekly, by making quality responses, inducing peer discussions and interaction, as well as by using reflective journals, teachers can create an invitational environment.¹⁰⁷ Ideally, students feel comfortable contributing, contradicting, e.g. something the teacher or an academic article says, as well as taking the risk of asking a ‘weird’ question. While focusing on problem-based learning strategies, Barell suggests that good listening and having respect for each other’s ideas can be considered to be a solid foundation to establish communities of inquiry.¹⁰⁸

While it might not always be easy to form equivalent communities of inquiry, this could at least be regarded as an ideal goal, since working with likewise interested students would without much doubt result in great learning outcomes for everybody involved.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Barell 2007: 23.

¹⁰⁶ In order to create a wiki for pedagogical purposes, please see <http://pbwiki.com/education.wiki>.

¹⁰⁷ See Barell 2007: 24.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

9 Conclusion

The interaction between teachers and students is not only a complex form of institutional dialogue, but also includes the more complex forms of sociocultural discourse practices.¹⁰⁹ As described above, the practices of teaching and discourse might vary in different cultures.

Situations, in which we are expected to say something but remain silent can cause anxiety. Among many, it is a teacher's task to guide, moderate and manage discourse. While teachers undoubtedly do have great responsibility as they have to direct communication in the classroom, a certain lack of discussion and motivation might as well be a sign of weak group dynamics among students.¹¹⁰ Creating an environment where students are comfortable speaking, without undue anxiety and fear, is what I see as the driving force of success in language teaching. Frequently, a teacher's role is comparable to that of a juggler.¹¹¹ Often, teachers will have to make spontaneous decisions in specific situations, with regard to interested but also unmotivated and maybe difficult students; and very likely, we have to juggle with diverse interests of differently skilled and motivated students. Admittedly, at the very beginning of my teaching career I have been hasty by asking the whole class questions, rephrasing and even answering them myself. I have realized that rushing students is a great mistake and believe that foreign teachers have to get used to a different turn-taking in classrooms in Finland. Keeping in mind that there is more tolerance of silence in the Finnish culture than, for example in English speaking cultures¹¹² will help a lot; even if teachers might initially feel awkward to allow students considerably more time to respond. Beyond, it is necessary to offer a wide array of communication channels; for example in the form of pair and group work, debates and panel discussions. In this way, students have, regardless of their language skills, a chance to prepare for, take part in, and contribute to the learning process.

The communicative challenges I have described are certainly very subjective; and maybe some readers feel that they disagree with some observations I have made.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. van Dijk 1997: 5.

¹¹⁰ In the aforementioned survey I have made in spring 2008, one student responded that it was difficult to talk because of some other students in the group. Please see also Appendix, Fig. 2, respectively the comments to question 11 of the questionnaire.

¹¹¹ See Lempiäinen 2006: 83.

¹¹² Cf. Mauranen A. 1994; and McArthur-Mortell et al. 2001: 34.

However, I considered it important to reflect on the aforesaid challenges I have faced, since they were of major concern to me as a teacher.

Without doubt, I have also made lots of fruitful and rewarding experience as both, a teacher education student and as a teacher. Teaching is a subject matter area with very different characteristics and it can be difficult to agree on a very important aspect, the nature of good teaching practice.¹¹³ Reflecting on discourse practices in the Finnish classroom and comparing my cultural background with the cultural reality I presently live in, was indeed a very necessary process for me personally. Generally, it will likely take time for teachers to find their spot in the pedagogical field; and I feel that writing this report also meant to proceed in the quest for useful strategies to enhance conversation in my language courses. In spite of the subjective nature of the findings in my report, I hope that I could contribute to a vivid and constructive discussion about intercultural features of classroom discourse in an increasingly international academia in Finland.

¹¹³ Cf. Richardson 1997: 11.

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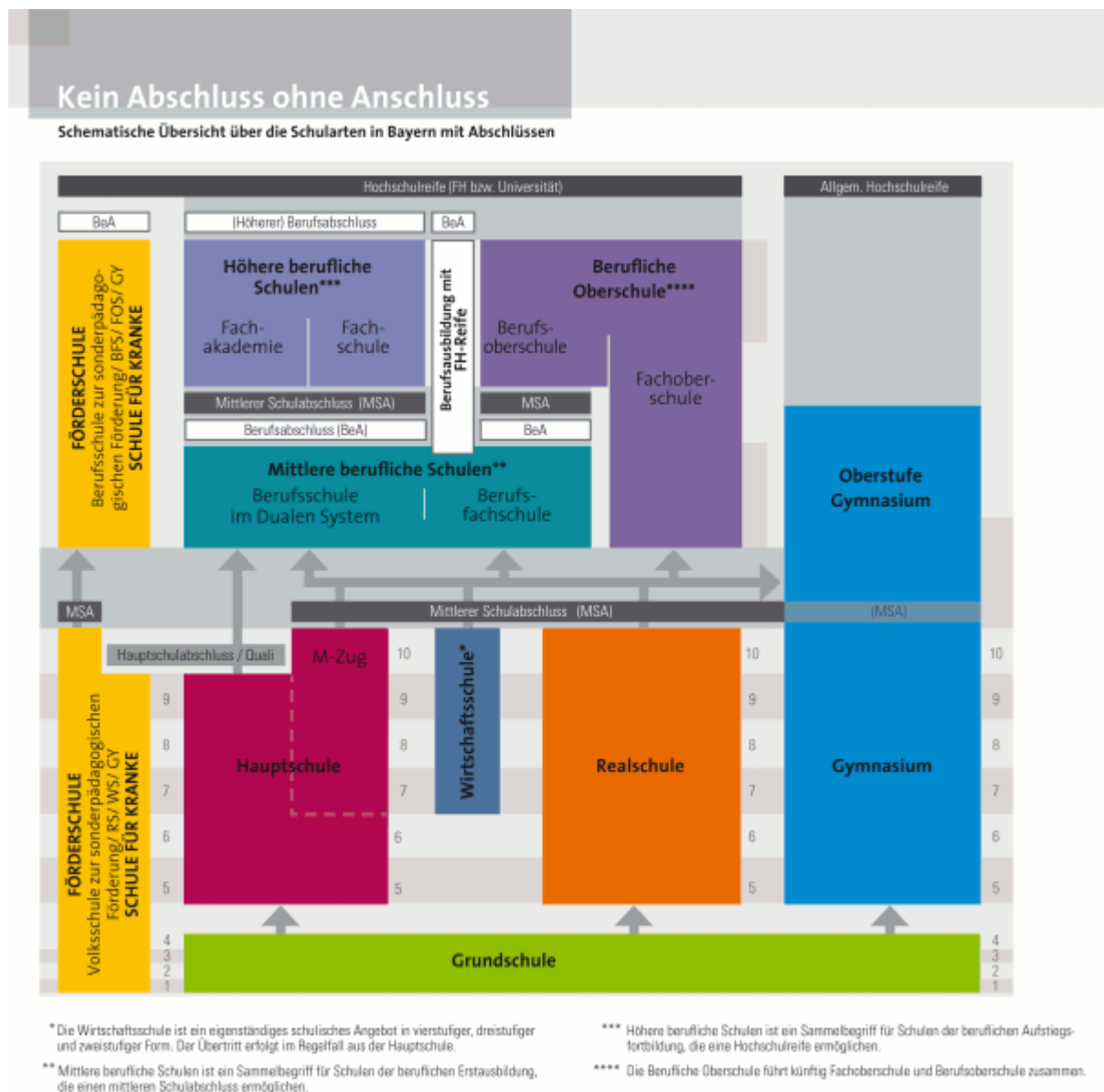
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11 Appendix

11.1 Fig. 1 The Bavarian education system



Source: Bavarian ministry of education,

<http://www.stmuk.bayern.de/km/schule/schularten/> (16.4.08).

Vocabulary concerning primary and secondary schools

‘Grundschule’ = Primary/Elementary school

‘Hauptschule’ = Secondary school

‘Realschule’ = Secondary modern school

‘Gymnasium’ = Grammar school

} Main tripartite secondary education (without special or private schools)

11.2 Fig. 2 A questionnaire on motivation

Precisely 81,25 per cent of students took part in the following survey. The distribution of students' agreement to the respective answers is given in per cent. The students' comments are cited in bold italics.

The following is a short questionnaire about students' motivation and interest in their studies, and specifically regarding language learning.

1. What are your major studies?

- Early Childhood Education → **65%**
- Teacher Education → **27%**
- Special Education → **8%**

2. What was your motivation for the choice of your studies?

- Personal interest → **92%**
- I was inspired by parents, friends, relatives, other role models → **8%**
- In a counseling interview it turned out that this would be my choice → **0%**
- Honestly, I don't remember → **0%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

(No comments)

3. How would you describe your motivation / interest concerning your major studies?

- I am highly motivated / interested and always have been → **38%**
- I am not motivated / interested and never was → **0%**
- I was very motivated / interested at the beginning, but I am not anymore → **12%**
- I was not very motivated / interested at the beginning, but I am now → **12%**
- My motivation / interest changes → **38%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

“Depends on the topic of discussion and my personal possibilities to affect on it. I don't like to be forced to think – it makes me passive.”

4. How would you describe your motivation / interest concerning this language course?

- I am highly motivated / interested and always have been → **8%**
- I am not motivated / interested and never was → **8%**
- I was very motivated / interested at the beginning, but I am not anymore → **12%**
- I was not very motivated / interested at the beginning, but I am now → **8%**
- My motivation / interest changes → **64%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

“This course has caused me a lot of stress because of presentations and conversations.”; “The atmosphere is very tensed.”;

“I know I need language skills, but I have currently too many studies/too much work.”; Usually, my motivation is good.”; “I feel myself busy, too much work! (But this course is good!)”

5. Do you consider yourself good at learning foreign languages?

- Yes → **23%**
- Rather average → **62%**
- No → **15%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

“I had to drop out from German studies. I just didn’t learn fast enough.”

6. Did you receive good grades in languages at school?

- Yes → **62%**
- Rather average → **23%**
- No → **15%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

(No comments)

7. Are you interested in other language courses, either in English or other languages?

- Yes, for example... → **73%** (***Dutch, French, Finnish Sign Language, German, Italian, Latin, Russian, Spanish***)
- No → **27%**

8. Have you attended other language courses, either at the language centre or at a different institute?

- Yes, for example... → **58%** (*French, German, Russian, Spanish, Swedish - i.e. compulsory Swedish courses*)
- No → **38%**
(No answer: **4%**)

9. Would you have chosen this language course if it had not been compulsory?

- Yes → **35%**
- No → **50%**
(“Maybe” → 15%)

10. Which skills do you think are particularly important in your studies?

- Reading skills → **19%**
- Writing skills → **12%**
- Oral skills → **31%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

“All of them” → 23%

“Reading & Oral” → 15%

11. Which skills should be developed more intensively in your opinion?

- Reading skills → **8%**
- Writing skills → **8%**
- Oral skills → **65%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

“All of them” → 8%

“Reading & Oral” → 3%

“Writing & Oral” → 8%

“Because of some people in the class it’s really hard to speak up.”

“Oral skills should be practised, but not in large groups.”

12. Do you like discussions about study-related topics?

- Yes → **85%**
- No, discussions about study-related topics are usually boring. It would be better if we discussed about other topics as well, such as...
→ **12%**
“Both” → 3%

Please name a topic of your interest.

“Hobbies, gardening, sports.”

“Yes, but there should be conversation more in small groups.”

13. Do you like giving presentations?

- As a matter of fact, I like giving presentations → **3%**
- It can be difficult, but I don't mind giving a presentation → **47%**
- No → **50%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

“I get extremely nervous.”; “No!”

14. How useful are presentation skills in your opinion, e.g. in your studies / your future career?

- Very useful → **27%**
- Useful to some extent → **62%**
- Not useful at all → **11%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

“Teacher must keep presentation in every lesson, but it's different situation to speak to children.”;

“Working in Kindergarten is more group-discussing than presentations.”;

“I can talk without giving a presentation.”

15. What do you think about academic reading skills? Were the techniques covered in this course useful?

- Very useful → **8%**
- Useful to some extent → **92%**
- Not useful at all → **0%**

Please feel free to add further comments.

“Because we had to read academic articles, I found academic reading more easier than earlier.”;

“You learn as you read. Techniques may help a bit but the real work is elsewhere. Thus, people should be encouraged to read.”

Tank you very much for filling in this questionnaire!