Subjectivity on the periphery

For decades, both foreign and second-language teachers have made use of a communicative pedagogical approach, with the aim of giving their pupils, students or course participants linguistic competences that enable them to carry out language acts in a way appropriate to various language-use situations (Lund 1996).

Research in recent years, however, has led to an understanding of the fact that language learning is not solely a matter of acquiring communicative competences but that the learning process is also a social practice by means of which learners, in an interaction with each other – or with those who speak the target language – negotiate linguistic meaning, social position and identity (Norton 2000). The question, therefore, is what subjective learning processes learners pass through in connection with work on tasks of communicative problem solving in the communicative learning forum (Pedersen 2009): How can communicative teaching include the learners' personal experiences of being language learners?

This has been a key issue in a language-pedagogical development project I am taking part in along with a group of teachers who teach adults Danish as a second language at a language centre, and in this article I will present some experiences from the project and point to certain perspectives which these have for a language-pedagogical development that has the *empowerment* of the learners on its agenda.

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A communicative lesson

In a teaching sequence with a team of course participants at levels 2.2 and 2.3, instruction was given in the subject 'Neighbours'. In one of the lessons I observed the teaching together with one of the participants, who was also taking part in some of the teaching activities. The empirical material that was produced during the observation consisted of video recordings using a fixed camera that took in most of the team at one go, sound recordings of some of the groups during group work, and observational notes.

The lesson starts with the teacher handing out small cards to the participants with descriptions of various 'neighbour situations', e.g. 'You want to invite your neighbour over for coffee – what do you say?' 'Your neighbour plays music very loud – what do you say?' The course participants (CP) then act out a dialogue based on the situations described in which they take it in turns to be 'the neighbour'.

One of the groups busies itself with the first neighbour situation:

CP1: (Reads out the card) 'Your neighbour comes over
   with a cake. What do you say?'
CP2: My neighbour, what?
CP1: 'Your neighbour comes over with a cake. What do you say?'
CP2: Oh, I say. Yes, he invites me into …
CP1: Yes, he comes over to you.
CP2: Yes, I come say … What do I say? No, I don't know
   because my neighbour has …
CP1: (teasing) xxx? (laughter)
CP2: Because my neighbour has invited twice last time.
   They won't come.
CP1: It's an example … they come over to you with a cake.
CP2: [No, no, no, I say that I'll come, yes
CP1: No, your neighbour comes over to you with a cake.
   What do you say?
CP2: [Ooh, yes. I say: 'Would you like … to come inside
   with me, we talk, we drink coffee, we eat cakes.' Yes.
CP1: That's right.
CP2: Okay.

Initially, CP2 has not understood the question and has to have it repeated. But there are still problems, which seem to consist in her not completely having understood the nature of the situation. Apparently, she thinks that the neighbour is inviting her in, and here she doesn't know what to reply because she has experienced

that neighbour invitations don't lead to anything. CP1 draws her attention to the fact that this is 'an example', i.e. a neighbour situation that has been designed for teaching and not a personally experienced situation. CP1 realises that CP2 still thinks it has to do with an invitation from the neighbour to pay a visit at her house, and makes it clear yet again that the situation is that the neighbour comes over with a cake. CP2 finally understands, and she answers in a way that suits the situation: 'Would you like ... to come inside with me, we talk, we drink coffee, we eat cakes.'

In many ways, we are dealing with a 'classic' communicative sequence: The course participants are given a communicative task to solve: Construct a dialogue to fit a particular neighbour situation. The process of solving this task leads to communication at two different levels: Communication *about* the task and communication *in* the neighbour situation, and at both levels the task is solved via negotiating processes. In communication about the task CP1 and CP2 negotiate about the immediate linguistic understanding: 'My neighbour, what?' Furthermore, they negotiate about the actual nature of the neighbour situation: 'No, your neighbour comes over to you with a cake. What do you say?'

But there is also a negotiation that seeks to clarify the status of the communicative task as a pedagogical one in relation to neighbour situations in 'reality'. To be able to carry out dialogues in neighbour situations is actually a communicative competence the participants need to have in their everyday lives, which is also the reason why the teachers have taken up the subject 'Neighbours'. In the plan the teachers have drawn up for the lesson – to be used for the discussion between the participants in the development project – they write: 'The topic of neighbours arise from the fact that on several occasions we have seen participants who would like to get into contact with their neighbours, but often find this difficult, and have sometimes felt themselves misunderstood. Some of the participants have also talked about a language barrier in connection with minor disagreements with neighbours.' In the task-solving process of the participants, however, they negotiate their way to understanding that the result is not to be based on their own immediate everyday experiences, but is to be kept within the framework established for the pedagogical communicative task. Such a negotiation takes place when CP2 starts to talk of her experiences of inviting neighbours: 'Because my neighbour has invited twice last time. They won't come.', and CP1 then draws her attention to the fact that this is only 'an example'. This is further confirmed when CP1, after

CP2 has said 'Would you like … to come inside with me, we talk, we drink coffee, we eat cakes', evaluates the answer by saying 'That's right'. The communicative task has been correctly solved.

Once CP1 and CP2 have negotiated themselves to an agreement on how the task is to be solved, CP2 answers in a way that demonstrates that she knows how a suitable reply is to be formulated.

During the process, the teacher (T) also contributes to the linguistic negotiation by going round from one pair to the next and helping with clarifying the meaning of words, e.g. the difference between 'spille' (e.g. to play the piano) and 'lege' (e.g. to play a game), and in particular with clarifying what the most appropriate way of formulating oneself pragmatically is in a certain situation:

T: If you go down into the basement and your neighbour is washing clothes, you can say it in a polite way: 'Excuse me, when do you think you have finished? I would like to do my washing after you.' That is a positive statement. Whereas: 'Take your clothes out because it's my turn now. Otherwise I'll call the police' is negative, and only makes the situation worse.

This corresponds exactly to the aim formulated in the lesson plan: 'That the course participants acquire tools/ideas and language acts to get in contact with their neighbours that are appropriate, based on the given situation.'

After having worked through a couple of dialogues, CP1 and CP2 start to become more creative:

CP1: (reads from the card) 'Your neighbour is going on a holiday, and she asks if you will take care of her cat. What do you say?'

CP2: I say: 'I'm sorry, I can't help you because I've got a big dog at home (CP1 laughs). I think I will help you with a big problem afterwards.'

CP1: And if you haven't got a dog, what do you say?

CP2: (laughter) I say: 'I haven't got one dog, I will help you.' xxx I say 'Are you going on holiday? How long won't you be home? I say 'okay.'

CP1: What can your cat eat? How many times a day does it eat?

CP2: Yes. 'What does your cat eat, and what do you do with your cat? Do you go for a walk with your cat? What am I to do?'

We are no longer dealing with the reproduction of a particular template, but with inventing new scenarios on the basis of shifting premises: 'I have a dog and therefore I can't take care of your cat; I've got a cat myself and therefore can't take care of yours', after which CP1 and CP2 together invent things that can be part of a continued dialogue. How long the neighbour is away, what the cat is to have to eat, etc.

Marginalising personal experiences

In this analysis of the teaching session I have considered it as an example of communicative language teaching, and found a whole series of features that belong to such a form of teaching. There is a problem-solving task that has to be resolved through communication, and that gives the participants an opportunity to develop the communicative competences they may need in corresponding situations in their everyday lives. In the process, opportunities arise via negotiating processes and the teachers' input for linguistic attentiveness for the learners to develop not only a fluent but also a correct language. Finally, the creativity that is also evident in the task-solving process can contribute to the learners developing a finely graded language.

But even though the lesson was designed and implemented as one for communicative teaching, it only became so as a result of a negotiating process. So as we saw, CP2 initially had difficulty in getting going on the solving of the task because she did not quite know what she ought to say. What apparently held her back was that she believed she had to use a situation she had personally experienced as her point of departure. Once CP1 has explained to her that it is an 'example', she can start to express herself in a communicatively creative way.

CP's personal everyday experiences with neighbour situations – which have taught her than an invitation can lead to a rejection – were thus marginalised in the communicative task-solving and replaced by creative inventiveness. At a closer look, it turned out that a number of the course participants included their own personal experiences, although this took place outside or on the periphery of the communicative pedagogical agenda.

We can now try returning to the lesson and looking at other situations where the learners include their own experiences when communicating with their neighbours.

The communicative lesson revited

Here are two course participants who have completed their tasks, and while they are waiting for the others to finish, they make use of the intervening time to chat about neighbours, no longer as 'examples', but on the basis of experiences from everyday life:

> CP3: OK, let's chat – who's your neighbour?
>
> CP4: I've, normally I've a neighbour lives close to my house, and a neighbour opposite my house. The neighbour close to my house is an old man, I think 66, 65, 66 years old. I think he's a pensioner now – doesn't work. He doesn't want to talk to him because we don't speak Danish all that good, so he doesn't understand English, but the other neighbour opposite my house...
>
> CP3: Do you do small talk with your neighbour then?
>
> CP4: The other neighbour has xxx, and he also helps me sometimes – I have a large roof (?) xxx I want him to help me a bit with it.
>
> CP3: What do you think, you have a good neighbour.
>
> CP4: I think it's OK, I understand him because we're not Danish, so I don't know what he thinks.
>
> CP3: I have the same system with my neighbour because he comes from Denmark. I come from Brazil (...) Now we don't talk because I don't always have contact. Perhaps I go in the garden, I play with my dog, he's outside, I say Hi. But my husband always talks with him. I have a bit hard to talk everything because xxxx because the pronouncing.

After this, CP3 says more about how one talks to neighbours in Brazil.

This dialogue is not a neighbour situation, but a dialogue about how the course participants experience being second-language speakers in relation to their neighbours, and here other dimensions turn up. They position themselves as second-language speakers with insufficient language skills: 'we don't speak Danish all that good', 'a bit difficult to talk about everything because xxxx because the pronouncing', and they feel this is important for how they are perceived by their neighbour: 'he doesn't want to talk to him because we don't speak Danish all that good'. Apart from that, they position themselves as being non-Danes: 'we're not Danish' – or rather they perhaps feel themselves positioned as non-Danes

by their neighbours, and then assume an identity of non-Danes. So the participants do not only regard themselves as second-language learners or users but also as persons who are linguistically inferior and, nationally speaking, outsiders, and they experience that this has an effect on their possibilities for using the language and becoming part of a local community.

Here on the periphery of the communicative lesson it is then not simply a question of having the right communicative competences but also of being able to use the language to be recognised as a legitimate language user (Norton 2000), as ethnically different, as an equal member of social communities. Such process of identity are in turn linked to the cultural background experience the course participants come with, e.g. experiences – and experienced situations – with neighbours in their country of origin.

Everyday experiences and learning culture

The teachers who had planned the lesson state that in an earlier lesson they had asked the course participants to interview each other about their neighbours and make notes of the interviews. On the basis of these notes, the teachers made up small texts such as this one:

> Mahmoud's unfriendly neighbour.
> Mahmoud has a very unfriendly neighbour. It is an old lady who lives with her dog. The dog is also bad-tempered. It barks the whole time when people pass. Mahmoud moved into his flat recently and baked a cake for his neighbour, but she was not pleased about this. She said no thank you and quickly shut the door again. Mahmoud thinks it's because she doesn't like foreigners.

It is interesting that the participants – as is reflected in this text – already talked to each other about their personal experiences regarding neighbour situations in the interview task: their own attempts to get into contact with Danes and their experience of feeling rejected as a foreigner; but when the texts were included in the teaching, they were used as communicative listening exercises in which one participant reads aloud and the other one listens, the aim being to see if what is said is understood. Personal experiences thus slid into the background, the focus shifting to communicative competences.

Both in the process from the interviews to listening exercises and in the lesson sequence I have described, the course participants and pupils thus act in a way that leads to reproduction of communicative teaching where one works on linguistic and pragmatic competence in relation to examples of neighbour situations. This reproduction takes place, among other things, by converting narratives about personal experiences, by negotiating identities, self-understandings and access to social communities and turning them into communicative activities whereby experiences of being a second-language user and learner are marginalised. In the teaching, the course participants are thus part of a particular institutionalised *culture of learning* (Pedersen 2013). This learning culture gives them access to participating in certain ways by making use of their cultural resources in the form of communicative activities which the learning culture places at their disposal; but the learning culture also marginalises certain ways of acting, forms of learning and personal experiences.

Pedagogical perspectives

Institutionalised learning culture thus contains certain limitations for the possibilities the participants have to – as van Lier puts it – 'think for themselves' and 'speak for themselves', and this opens up for critical language studies, which he elucidates as follows:

> The students should develop their own ways of thinking, based on their own developing positions, going in their own chosen direction. At the same time they should do so with full participation in the sociocultural groups of which they are members. They should furthermore learn to speak in ways that connect their words to their thoughts, and that connect both to their self, their identities, and their social affiliates. This means, they should develop their own – socially situated – authoritative voice in the target language.
> (van Lier 2004: 189)

For language pedagogics this means changes being made to the learning culture, so that communicative teaching is part of the pedagogical organisation that takes as its starting point the conflicting experiences of the course participants resulting from being second-language users and learners, that gives them the opportunity to reflect on and analyse these experiences – and to problematise and challenge the way they are positioned in social contexts. The partic-

ipants must have situation-adapted communicative competence, but also be able to speak the new language with their own voice.

In connection with the development project, such a pedagogical development was potentially opened up by, for example, experimenting with communicative problem-solving tasks that had as their point of departure the participants' personal and collective thoughts about whether they should do a module test or not, and by working with aesthetic learning processes in relation to literary texts.

Literature

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