

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“About Me and My Languages”: Prospective Language Teachers Reflect on Their Plurilingualism

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(Received 1st August 2013; final version received 12 February 2014)

This paper deals with university students who are studying to become language teachers. My data consist of autobiographical narratives written by Finnish speaking student teachers who study Swedish at the University of Helsinki. The focus is on what they tell about their studies that lead to a teaching profession, how they describe the role of different languages in their lives and how they see their language skills in relation to working as language teachers. In their narratives, these student teachers reflect a lot on their future work as teachers, thereby (re)constructing their professional identities. They are plurilingual, dealing with several languages in their everyday lives, but sometimes wondering if they are “good enough” to teach those languages. They are also involved in and reflecting on their affinity to different cultural realities. Something that can be seen as positive and encouraging in these narratives, is that the student teachers seem to be both able and willing to reflect on their choice of career, their plurilingualism and their multiple identities. This can be regarded as an indication of their ability to solve the problems they may encounter when they start working as language teachers.

Keywords: plurilingualism, student teachers, autobiographical narratives

Artikkelini käsittelee yliopisto-opiskelijoita, jotka aikovat valmistua kieltenopettajiksi. Aineistoni koostuu Helsingin yliopistossa ruotsia pää- tai sivuaineenaan opiskelevien suomenkielisten opiskelijoiden omaelämäkerrallisista kirjoitelmista. Keskityn artikkelissani siihen, mitä he kertovat opettajan ammattiin johtavista yliopisto-opinnoistaan, miten he kuvaavat eri kielten merkitystä elämässään ja miten he näkevät oman kielitaitonsa opettajana toimimisen näkökulmasta. Opettajiksi opiskelevat pohtivat kirjoitelmissaan paljon tulevaa työtään ja (re)konstruoivat samalla ammatillista identiteettiään. He käyttävät useita kieliä monissa eri tilanteissa jokapäiväisessä elämässään, mutta miettivät välillä,

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ovatko varmasti “tarpeeksi hyviä” opettamaan noita kieliä. He ovat tekemisissä monenlaisten kulttuuristen todellisuuksien kanssa ja pohtivat omaa suhdettaan niihin. Positiivista ja rohkaisevaa kertomuksissa on se, että opiskelijat näyttävät sekä osaavan että haluavan pohtia ammatinvalintaansa ja suhdettaan eri kieliin, samoin kuin moninaisia identiteettejään. Tätä voi pitää merkinä heidän valmiudestaan ratkaista ne ongelmatilanteet, joita opettajuuden alkuvaiheessa saattaa tulla vastaan.

Introduction

This paper deals with Finnish-speaking university students who plan to become language teachers. They study Swedish at the University of Helsinki, either as their major or one of their minor subjects. Most of them are young adults, in the middle of a period that Arnett (1998) has called “emerging adulthood”, a transition from adolescence to adulthood. The period is significant as it involves many decisions with long-term consequences, e.g., choosing a line of study.

Something that unites these students is that they are *plurilingual*, dealing with several languages in their everyday lives. They are fluent in some of the languages, whereas the learning process of some other languages has just started. They can also be called *pluricultural*, as they are involved in and reflecting on their affinity to diverse cultural realities.

In this paper, the focus is especially on the following three aspects: firstly, what student teachers narrate about their studies that lead to a teaching profession; secondly, how they describe the role of different languages and cultural realities in their lives; and thirdly, what they tell about their own language skills in relation to working as language teachers.

Language Education, Plurilingualism and Pluriculturalism

In this paper, *plurilingualism* and *pluriculturalism* are seen as individual concepts (see e.g., Moore, 2006; Byram, 2009; Furlong, 2009), whereas multilingualism and multiculturalism are regarded as societal or institutional concepts. As all languages and (national as well as other) cultures are intrinsically diverse in themselves, diversity can be seen as a fundamental and inherent dimension of all these concepts, as well as of language education.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by the Council of Europe (2001, p. 4), plurilingualism entails expanding “an individual person’s experience of language in its cultural contexts” for communicative purposes; thus, plurilingualism is a contextual phenomenon (Moore, 2006). In their paper dealing with internationalization, plurilingualism and the university, Zegers and Wilkinson (2005) define plurilingualism as “the effective use of several languages by individual members of the institution (staff, students)”; it also “covers the ease of switching according to social and educational contexts”. According to the CEFR, plurilingualism must “be seen in the context of pluriculturalism” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 6); and as Byram (2009, p. 6) states, “Pluriculturalism involves identifying with

at least some of the values, beliefs and/or practices of two or more cultures, as well as acquiring the competences which are necessary for actively participating in those cultures”.

In 2007, the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe published a booklet on a project called Language Educator Awareness (LEA), whose main aim was to give language teacher educators some tools “to introduce plurilingualism and pluriculturalism into their classroom practice” (Bernaus et al., 2007, p. 7). The discussion on plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in this section of my paper is to a great extent based on that report, as well as on the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) and work on interculturalism by Byram (2008, 2009; Byram et al., 2001).

According to the CEFR (see also Bernaus et al., 2007, p. 7), the main focus of language education is

no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place. This implies, of course, that the languages offered in educational institutions should be diversified and students given the opportunity to develop a plurilingual competence. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 5)

Instead of aiming at native-like skills of a certain language, a language learner can focus on developing his/her communicative language competence, seen in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 136) as a combination of “plurilingual and pluricultural competence”. Languages are regarded as a means of communication in a way that is open to *otherness* – the other being “another language, another culture, other people or new areas of knowledge” (p. 12). I see this focus as important as it entails, e.g., the following: firstly, that it is valuable to have skills in several languages in order to enhance mutual understanding; secondly, that languages, cultures and identities are interconnected, and thirdly, that the aim of language education is not primarily about learning some language “perfectly” (or attaining native-like skills) but being able to communicate with others.

Besides, achieving native-like skills is anything but easy. Research has shown that it is uncommon for late learners of a language to attain native-like skills (see e.g., Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2006), in spite of serious study, stays abroad and a high motivation. However, it is also useful to remember that the term *native speaker* is complex and unclear (Rampton, 1995; Kalliokoski, 2009; Fraurud & Boyd, 2011), and that “there is no perfect ‘model’ to imitate, no equivalent of the notion of a perfect ‘native speaker’” (Byram et al., 2001, p. 7). In addition, having a certain language as one’s first language does not necessarily make anyone a good teacher of that language. And as stated in the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 169), knowledge of a language is always more or less “partial, however much of a ‘mother tongue’ or ‘native language’ it seems to be. It is always incomplete, never as developed or perfect in an ordinary individual as it would be for the utopian, ‘ideal native speaker’”.

Diversity is inbuilt also in the multifaceted construction of *identity* (Bernaus et al., 2007, p. 14), in that the same person can have a complex relationship with several

languages and be involved in several groups and communities at the same time. An individual can consider him/herself to be a member of many linguistic and cultural groupings, which entails that pluriculturalism is a natural part of his/her identity: “Pluriculturality refers to the capacity to identify with and participate in multiple cultures” (Byram, 2009, p. 6). As Trujillo Sáez (n.d.) points out, the “multiple-identity perspective is the basis of pluriculturalism”, or from a different viewpoint: the concept of pluriculturalism refers to “the development of a rich conception of identity” (see also Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). Both identities and cultures are “intersubjective co-constructions” (Dervin, 2010).

Van Lier (2004, p. 115) describes the self as “an ongoing project of establishing one’s place in the world” and points out that identities keep changing all the time (van Lier, 2004, p. 125; see also van Lier, 2007, pp. 57–58). When people construct narratives about their experiences and their interaction with others, they simultaneously reconstruct their identities, which entails that identities are unstable and multifaceted (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Identities do not have to be *either-or*, they can be *both-and* or even *in-between*. Furlong (2009, p. 356) describes creativity as something that flourishes “in liminal places where unexpected connections are made between people and ideas, as domain boundaries are transgressed and/or redefined”. These in-between places can also be seen as spaces where new identities can develop (see Kramsch, 1993, on the concept of *the third place*; Huhtala & Lehti-Eklund, 2010). Besides, it is important to keep in mind that all cultural contexts – just like individuals – are pluralistic and complex in themselves (Byram, 2009; Trujillo Sáez, n.d.).

As an alternative to using the native speaker as a model for language learners, Byram (2008, pp. 57–73) has introduced the concept of “*the intercultural speaker*”, a person who has knowledge of cultural similarities and differences, and who is therefore able to act as a mediator between cultures, i.e., to act interculturally. In foreign language education, it is important to give learners “experience of otherness, or other cultural beliefs, values and behaviours” (Byram 2008, p. 29) in order to acquire intercultural (communicative) competence. However, as Sercu (2010, p. 31) states, “the assessment of intercultural competence in foreign language education is anything but straightforward”.

Data and Method

My data consist of 70 autobiographical narratives written by students of Swedish at the University of Helsinki during the years 2008–2013. All these students have Finnish as their mother tongue and Swedish as either their major or one of their minor subjects, and they are planning to become language teachers. Even if Swedish is one of the two national languages in Finland – spoken by circa 5.4 % of the population (Statistics Finland, 2012), mainly in the coastal areas of the country – for most Finns it is in fact a foreign language, as they have very little contact with the language in their everyday lives.

The narratives (1–5 pages long) were written by the students as a part of their ordinary second language (L2) education of Swedish. In their texts, students were asked to reflect on their language studies, their language skills and their expectations concerning their future. The aim of the writing task was to let the students practice their

L2 in a meaningful way, and to give them a chance of reflecting on themselves as language learners, language users and future language professionals, i.e., “to involve learners as active participants in their identity construction process through L2 learning” (Cognigni, 2012, p. 97), to engage them in active identity work. It would also be possible to see these narratives as “language awareness work”, a way of stimulating “reflection on the question of the relationship between languages and identities” (Byram, 2012, p. 8).

These narratives can be regarded as contextual co-constructions: the students wrote their narratives in a university context, and they knew the narratives would be read by me, one of their subject teachers. It is typical of all narratives that the narrators choose to tell certain things and omit others; they also tell about their lives in different ways to different people and in different contexts. In my analysis, I am not interested in finding any “ultimate truths” – whatever those might be. Instead, I am interested in the ways these student teachers describe their experiences, thoughts and expectations. All the students have given their permission to use the narratives for research purposes. The text fragments that are used in this paper are translated from Swedish to English by me. As no more than 3 of these 70 texts were written by men, I have decided – in order to preserve the anonymity and integrity of all writers – to present the quotations from the texts without any reference to the writers; the pronoun she/her is used of all writers.

I analyze the data using a qualitative narrative method that Polkinghorne (1995, pp. 12–15) calls analysis of narratives (see also Kalaja, Menezes, & Barcelos [eds.], 2008); this kind of analysis draws, e.g., on categorization and linguistic analysis, and “moves from stories to common elements” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12). My analysis is mostly descriptive, concentrating on “common elements” that arise from the narratives as an answer to my research questions. The topics that come up are examined in their narrative context, in order to avoid isolated and simplistic interpretations. As Pavlenko (2007, p. 167) states, analyzing content is only the first step; also form and context should be considered.

Findings

University Students Studying to Become Language Teachers

Students often describe their professional transition as a demanding process. The choice of career is obviously significant for young students’ identity formation (see Plunkett, 2001), and the process can be tough. In their narratives, students tell about their search for an ideal profession or “a dream job”, about insecurity, doubts, and fluctuating thoughts.

In this paper, I concentrate on narratives by students who have made up their mind about language teaching as a profession. Although they feel confident about wanting to teach, there are many things connected to the choice of study line that cause worry and stress (a more detailed discussion on the worries experienced by student teachers in Huhtala, submitted). The students tell about concerns that may not be as overwhelming as having to choose a career, but this does not mean that they would be trivial for these students. For example, choosing the “right” minors can be a tough decision. As one student teacher writes: *“The most frightening thing now is having to*

choose my minors." (1) Student teachers sometimes worry about the language combinations they have chosen, and how these combinations could help them in – or prevent them from – finding a proper job in the future. Could a certain combination be better than others, or alternatively, could a certain combination become a hindrance for getting a job? Are there combinations that are completely wrong? These are questions that language students reflect on in their texts. *"The question is how one can choose something over something else? What is worth doing for the rest of one's life? ... I will become a teacher of Swedish, but which languages should I choose as my minors?"* (2) The present situation at the labour market seems to affect the students as well. Worries about getting an employment after graduation comes up in several narratives: *"I want to become a teacher, but will I get a job? – I don't want to be unemployed."* (3)

Teaching seems to be a very special kind of career: many students regard it more or less as a vocation or a calling: *"Teaching is said to be a vocation, and I think that's what it is for me, too."* (4) According to Estola and Syrjälä (2002, p. 90), vocation has to do with wanting to serve and help others as well as with getting personal satisfaction from the work. In my data, there are several narratives where students write about teaching as a way of doing something valuable for society, and even as a way of changing lives. There are probably not so many other professions (perhaps with the exception of the medical branch) where students tell openly about their wish to change lives. *"Teaching is meaningful and something I'd love to do. ... As a teacher it's possible to change people's lives."*; (5) *"It is really rewarding to see when pupils learn, and I regard teaching as an important job. In that way one can do something for society and for young people."* (6)

As teaching is often seen as a way of life rather than a mere job, students also reflect on the (im)possibility of combining teaching and their present hobbies and other private engagements. One student is worried about not having any private life left after becoming a teacher: she is afraid of having to be a role model 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Besides, these student teachers reflect a lot on the great responsibility that teachers have for their pupils and for society at large. They see this responsibility as rewarding, but also as frightening. At least partly, this may be due to the recent discussion in Finnish media about children becoming more restless, parents becoming more demanding, and teachers feeling more helpless in class management. Students are also aware of the fact that new teachers feel burdened by their work load, and that the first year in teaching is experienced by many as far too hard (Blomberg, 2008). According to several students, *"teachers' responsibility is greater than ever."* (7)

Student teachers often comment on their pedagogical studies, and tell they have become aware of the requirements of the job during their studies at the university. They realise that their work as teachers gives them authority and *"a lot of power over the pupils"* (8), and they want to be worthy of the trust that is vested in them. In their narratives, they try to figure out ways of dealing with bad behaviour and managing restless classrooms. It seems to be important for them to treat every single pupil with respect and kindness, also the ones who behave badly or do not do their homework: *"Will I be able to respect all my pupils so that I won't have a negative attitude towards pupils that can't behave?"* (9).

Different Languages and Cultural Realities in Student Teachers' Lives

The student teachers in my study see their involvement in several languages as a positive and self-evident thing: "*It is always valuable to know a foreign language, any language.*" (10) This is of course natural as they plan to become language teachers. Many of the narratives show clearly that the writers see themselves primarily as teachers; their future work as language professionals seems to come second. However, this does not mean that they would regard languages or language skills as unimportant. On the contrary, language students have often been interested in languages from very early on, and they emphasize the central role of languages in their lives. As one student teacher writes, "*Languages have always been a part of my life.*" (11)

Language students are used to reading different kinds of texts in more than one language; they have also become accustomed to hearing and using various languages during their university education both with staff and with students from different backgrounds (see also Zegers & Wilkinson, 2005). Students tell about their stays abroad, working, studying, visiting friends and relatives, or just travelling around, or about their plans to move abroad after finishing their studies: "*I have plans to live and work abroad at least for a while.*"(12)

My impression is that, in their everyday lives, these students consider languages as a self-evident and natural way of communicating and interacting with other people, and as a means of enhancing mutual understanding. This can be seen also in the following two text fragments. "*I like communicating with people from different countries in their own language.*" (13); "*In today's globalized world it's useful to know several languages and in that way get to know different people and cultures.*" (14)

As Byram (2009) points out, the concept *culture* can be defined in many different ways; in popular discourse, culture can be seen as something fixed and stable, which also makes it possible to talk about distinct national cultures, like the Finnish or the French culture. However, from the point of view of cultural discourse, culture can be regarded "*both as something established, belonging to a particular national, ethnic, religious or other 'community', and as a dynamic process relying on personal choice*" (Byram 2009, p. 5).

Besides, the connection between languages and cultures is very complex and multifaceted (Risager, 2006; see also Byram, 2012). However, there are students in my study who seem to look at that connection mainly as a straightforward and even unidirectional phenomenon, and appear to use the word *culture* as a synonym to (a more or less stable) national culture. Some of them tell they want to delve deeper into different cultures with the help of languages, whereas some others see cultural knowledge as a way of becoming more familiar with the language they are studying and planning to teach: "*I'm really proud of being able to speak languages and in that way get to know different cultures.*" (15); "*I hope to learn more about the culture in these countries. Knowing the language well requires knowing something about the culture, as well.*" (16)

For most students, language and (national) culture seem to be essential parts of the same package: if you take one of them, you also take the other. There are students who tell about their love for a certain culture, a passion that has led them to start studying the language. For example, one student teacher tells she is in love with

Japanese culture, and that is why she has started studying the language. However, there are also a couple of students who tell they have been studying a certain language for years, and that they speak the language well, but do not feel close to the cultural reality in a country where the language is spoken. They like the language, but do not seem to be aware of the diversity of (also) national cultures. In my data, there is a narrative by a student teacher who tells she has been studying French for a long time and speaks the language fluently, but does not have any connection with France or French culture. This is an interesting comment for several reasons. Firstly, her narrative indicates that she seems to separate language and culture from each other, as only “the language itself” interests her. Secondly, she seems to think that there is only one cultural reality in France, and she combines French only with France and Frenchmen. Thirdly, she apparently sees the national culture in a certain country as a monolithic and unchanging entity, and thereby ignores the inherent diversity of any culture, nation or individual.

If we accept the view expressed by Byram et al. (2001, pp. 8–9), that teaching is not only about developing knowledge, but entails also developing the attitudes and skills of the pupils, teachers’ awareness of their own attitudes and values can be seen as central. As Byram et al. (2001, p. 29) point out, developing the attitudes does not mean the same as developing certain kinds of attitudes towards other people or other cultures; instead it is about “creating curiosity and a sense of openness”.

Some students write that they during their studies have become interested in etymology, history, or ancient languages that have already died out. They have become fascinated by the differences – and often also by the similarities – between languages, which has led to a greater linguistic and cultural awareness, and naturally affected their identities as language professionals and (future) language teachers (see also Trujillo Sáez, n.d.).

Studying a foreign language can make learners more interested also in their own mother tongue, which the following quotation is an example of: “*Skills in foreign languages make you look at your own language in a different way.*” (17) This awareness is of course a valuable asset for student teachers in their future work, where they aim at developing the plurilingualism as well as the pluriculturalism of their pupils.

Most language students take university courses in at least two or three languages at the same time. Students of Scandinavian languages study not only Swedish, but take compulsory courses also in Norwegian, Danish and Icelandic. Some students are sceptical and criticize this, usually at the very beginning of their studies. Later on, when they have spent more time travelling or as exchange students in the Scandinavian countries, they appreciate the courses they have taken at the university. “*Earlier I didn’t understand why we have to study Norwegian, Danish and Icelandic if we have Swedish as our major. ... Then I got the idea of moving to Sweden and studying there for a while.*” (18)

There are students who tell they are studying as many as seven languages at the same time: “*At the moment I study Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Icelandic, English, Spanish and Finnish.*” (19) Studying many languages at the same time is seen as a source of pleasure and happiness, but also as a time-consuming and demanding endeavour.

Even if students point out that learning a new language from scratch is not easy, they plan to learn additional languages in the future. The pleasure they get from language learning seems to be worth the time and energy that they invest in it. *“I’ve studied Swedish, Finnish, Japanese, Norwegian, Danish, Icelandic, German and English. They have all been interesting and I want to teach some of them.”* (20)

The narratives show that different languages have had a different meaning to these students at different stages of their lives – and that their involvement with languages and cultural communities can vary a lot within a relatively short period of time. One student tells vividly about her “passion” for languages, and how she used to love English the most before she fell in love with Swedish some time ago. Even in the same narrative, their identifications with different linguistic and cultural realities fluctuate, which can be seen as a sign of the flexible character of identity.

Own Language Skills and Starting to Work as a Language Teacher

By far the biggest, most often mentioned, and obviously the most stressful challenge that many of these student teachers experience concerning their language skills, is the idea that they should be faultless, absolutely correct and unerring in the languages they are going to teach. Interestingly, students seem to be worried about their language skills even – or perhaps especially – in their “strong” languages, and wonder if they are “good enough” to teach those languages. Making mistakes in pronunciation feels worrisome and irritating, and not knowing the language perfectly is taken up as a problem that needs to be solved. Some student teachers compare themselves with native speakers and sometimes with their fellow students – and worry about (their future) pupils whose language skills may be better than their own, e.g., due to bilingual parents. As one of the student teachers asks, *“What if the Swedish of some of my pupils is better than mine?”* (21)

Another student teacher writes about her feelings of inadequacy, in spite of the fact that she is motivated to study and eventually to teach Swedish: *“Already in the beginning I got disheartened when I compared my language skills in Swedish with others’. I felt that everyone was so good at speaking Swedish, much better than I was.”* (22) Later in her narrative, this student takes up some useful strategies that have made her feel better about her language skills, as well as helped her to develop those skills: *“I decided to change my attitude and my studying habits: I should start talking Swedish and stop worrying about the mistakes I make.”* (23)

My impression is that the students who worry about their language skills the most, are the ones who have not had a real possibility of using the language outside of the study context. Some of them worry about not being taken seriously if they do not speak the language fluently. *“Other people don’t perhaps see you as a trustworthy person if you are not fluent in a language”* (24), writes one of the students. There is research indicating that such a worry may not be completely unjustified. According to Boyd (2000, 2004), deficient language skills can be seen as a negative thing by other people and generalized to apply to other characteristics of a person. Her studies have shown that people can make an evaluation of a person’s professional competence simply on the basis of that person’s pronunciation (Boyd, 2000, p. 61). Getting comments on one’s

pronunciation or accent can feel like an insult: *“There have been comments concerning my accent, probably jokes, but I’ve felt hurt by them.”* (25)

Some students tell they have tried to solve these kinds of problems by spending some time abroad, either working or studying: *“I decided to study in Sweden for a while.”* (26) However, they are aware of the fact that perfection – whatever that means – is difficult to achieve, also concerning language skills. The only thing that really seems to work is getting enough self-confidence to be able to teach others, as well as realizing that teaching involves many other things as well, not only one’s language skills: *“Reflecting with my friends made me aware of my strengths and gave me self-confidence.”* (27) Many student teachers comment on the importance of accepting themselves as they are. As one of them points out, she works hard to make her language skills better, but concludes: *“I know I don’t have to be perfect.”* (28)

Students are aware of the fact that there are high expectations on (prospective) teachers not only from the students themselves, but also *“from society, parents and the media”*. (29) They know they will meet the explicit requirements for language teachers when they graduate, but keep asking themselves whether they will be able to live up to the implicit requirements they have internalized during their school years and by following discussions in the media. Questions like *“Am I the right kind of person to become a teacher?”* (30); *“Am I too shy?”* (31); or *“Do I know everything that is necessary to know?”* (32) are not uncommon. For these students, teacher education seems to be an important source of support. In their narratives, they refer to their own teachers’ words that good teachers can be of many kinds, and that everyone should be allowed to work as a teacher in his/her own way (see also Byram et al., 2001, pp. 5–6). As one student teacher writes, *“The most important thing is that you trust yourself and your skills, and understand that even if you are a teacher, you don’t have to know everything.”* (33)

During the last couple of years, the status of Swedish as a compulsory school subject in Finnish schools has been the focus of an intense debate in the media that teachers – and students – of the language naturally follow with a great interest. There are narratives where the writers ask themselves if teaching only Swedish might be risky. They also wonder whether teaching another language alongside Swedish – especially English, a high status *lingua franca*, both academically (Mauranen, & Ranta, 2008) and otherwise, or e.g., Spanish, a language that has risen in popularity in Finland lately – would be better for their professional credibility. As one student teacher narrates, even some of her friends – who see teaching as a perfect choice of career for her – have been sceptical as to her choice of a major. Teaching Swedish to unmotivated pupils is seen as a potential problem, due to the negative attitudes of some pupils or their parents towards Swedish. As a solution, these future teachers suggest creativity in teaching, and a lot of humour. *“I can use my creativity and personality which is motivating.”* (34); *“I won’t take myself too seriously – humour is needed!”* (35) These students thereby acknowledge the resources and the potential they have in themselves, and have decided to cope with the problems they may run into when they start working as teachers.

Discussion

It is possible to notice an interesting paradox in the way many of these student teachers look at their many languages and their own language skills. On the one hand, they see their plurilingualism as perfectly “normal”, positive and appreciated. They study various languages at different levels, and seem to be enthusiastic not only about brushing up their strong languages, but also about learning new languages, including Estonian, Arabic and Mandarin Chinese. They take up positive, joyful experiences of using different languages in their free time activities, during their travels abroad and in contacts with their friends from various countries. The students seem to have accepted (at least partially) the contemporary idea that languages are primarily a means of communication, a way of connecting with other people and other cultural groups (Bernaus et al., 2007, p. 10).

On the other hand, when these students start telling about working as language teachers, their attitude towards their own language skills (especially concerning Swedish) gets more self-conscious, critical and uncomfortable. It looks as if many of them would still carry the burden of ideals like “native-like skills” and “perfection”. Students compare themselves with native speakers and, in that comparison, see their language skills as deficient. Most of them have started learning Swedish at school in their early teens, and are worried about their language skills not being good enough. This is of course natural: they want to master the languages they are going to teach, with the intention of being good linguistic models to their pupils.

Some student teachers seem to have overcome their own fear and realized that it is important for their pupils, as well, to see that people can communicate with each other also when their language skills are not perfect – and equally important for pupils to see that it is not shameful or face-threatening to make mistakes.

One of the aims of language teacher education is naturally to develop the linguistic skills of prospective language teachers in various ways, but an occasional inaccuracy or an error in standard pronunciation does not make a language teacher incompetent. As Byram et al. (2001, pp. 12–13) point out,

a non-native speaker inferiority complex is only the result of misunderstanding and prejudice. What is more important than native speaker knowledge is an ability to analyse and specific training in systemic cultural analysis is an important aid in becoming a foreign language teacher, regardless of the teacher’s mother-tongue. This is not to deny the importance of linguistic competence and it may be important to follow the authority of the native speaker in linguistic competence, but intercultural competence is a quite different matter.

In many ways, the thoughts and doubts expressed by these student teachers are common to young university students in general. Unsurprisingly, they write a lot about common developmental tasks connected to emerging adulthood, like moving away from their childhood home or managing their economy. They tell about problems in choosing minors that can help them find a job, and about difficulties in combining studies, work and leisure. Some of the things they take up, however, are more typical of prospective

teachers, like dealing not only with their own expectations, but those of pupils, parents, other teachers, the media and society at large. They reflect on their teaching with regard to their different languages, their language skills, even their personality traits and teaching as a vocation. All in all, they appear to be both able and willing to reflect on their choice of career, their plurilingualism and their multiple identities. This can be seen as an indication of their capacity to solve the potential problems they may encounter when they start working as language teachers.

This article is a revised version of a paper presented on August 30th 2013 at the conference Intercultural vs. Multicultural Education: The End of Rivalries? (University of Helsinki, Department of Teacher Education).

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