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Language as Subject

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Language as Subject

This text provides an overview of language as subject. It emphasises the importance of viewing language as subject not in isolation but in relation to the wider language(s) of schooling and language(s) of education perspectives. It also recognises that many aspects of language as subject including its aims, content and teaching approaches are contested. This text does not seek to recommend one simple way of resolving the questions raised but aims to increase awareness of those issues and provide readers with a means of reflecting critically on their own practice and curricula. In order to achieve that end, each of the related modules of the platform concludes with a series of 'questions for consideration' to promote self-reflection.

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1. Introduction

Language as subject is the designation used to refer to the teaching of a national/official language (and associated literature), e.g. the teaching of French in France, Greek in Greece, etc. Language as subject has become increasingly multi-faceted in recent years. This has affected aims and content, with the advent of new media, new technologies and new demands on young people, but the way in which the subject has traditionally been conceived also needs to change. The traditional conception of language as subject has been to view it in isolation, as the sole area of the curriculum concerned with developing essential language skills, and its aims have sometimes been conceived in narrow ways, with a focus on functional skills divorced from wider educational goals and contexts. In countries with more than one national language, the conception of language as subject has never been simple but in contexts viewed predominantly as monolingual, language as subject has often been seen in isolation from the learning of other languages and without recognition of the needs of other language learners.

This narrow conception of language as subject is no longer tenable. Language as subject is one dimension of the language(s) of schooling which also includes language in other subjects. The languages of education perspective is even wider and includes the importance of regional, minority and migrant languages. It also needs to be recognised that many aspects of language as subject are contested, ranging from issues related to values and aims (e.g. whether the main focus should be on functional skills or personal growth), teaching approaches (e.g. whether the teaching of early reading should focus on phonic skills or reading for meaning) and linguistic assumptions (e.g. the degree to which explicit knowledge about language (e.g. grammar) is necessary for using language). The answer to many of these questions is in some ways straightforward: in almost all cases where dichotomous, polar positions are identified there is a compelling case for balancing competing perspectives. However that insight alone does not provide perspectives on the kind of balance which is appropriate and it is in that area that sensible exploration and dialogue is needed.

Key terms which are central to the teaching of language as subject such as ‘discourse genre’ and ‘task’ raise important questions which are addressed in other locations in the platform. For example, is it appropriate to structure the curriculum around particular genres which the pupils should be able to recognise and which should guide their own creation of oral and written texts? Or are there dangers in assuming that genres represent a fixed category leading to mechanistic teaching? Traditionally the language as subject curriculum has been conceived as focusing primarily on written forms of language but increasingly in the modern world visual images have a key role to play in the way different texts are experienced, and it is important that they are not ignored. The setting of tasks is a common practice in the classroom often taken for granted, but are there tasks which make unwarranted assumptions about particular pupils’ cultural knowledge and understanding, thus unwittingly disadvantaging them?

This introduction to language as subject has therefore been written on the assumption that simple polemic and unquestioned assertions are not always helpful and that an exploration of complexity is unavoidable. That does not mean that the text has been written from a neutral standpoint; there is a clear commitment to particular values and approaches to language as subject but there is also recognition of the complexity of the issues.

2. Shifting aims for language as subject over time and borders

Early comparative surveys of language as subject in European countries showed that its aims differed across borders, in some cases in fundamental ways. Studies of curricular developments of aims for language as subject within one country over time gave a similar picture.

In the 1980s in many western European countries, the focus on 'communication' became a conceptual competitor to a narrow focus on language including its forms and the curriculum took a turn to embrace more functional uses of language. The curricular goals were now, from a teaching perspective, more manifold and ambitious. There was a focal shift from language to student. Since the 1990s the discursive abilities of the students have been a key focus and many curricula have since then shown strong constructivist approaches with teaching being seen as secondary to learning. The notion of language as a learning instrument became more predominant with greater stress on meta-cognitive aspects. In some context this development widened the notion of what knowledge about language entails from a narrow focus on grammar to include broader areas of language awareness.

Generally most curricula in European countries have three levels of curricular intentions: the overall aims for education, the general goals for each discipline or school subject and the specific targets or competencies that are spelled out for the sub-fields of a discipline. In curricular reform there is a need, which is sometimes ignored, to relate and balance these levels of intentions or ambitions explicitly. The set of coordinated ambitions tends to be arranged 'vertically' in national curricula: the governmental level describes the general aims; national experts and designers decide about school subject goals; finally it is expected that teachers will teach and students will learn according to the given aims and goals. However, historically language as subject as a professional field has not been sufficiently concerned about finding out, through research and explicit evaluation, in which ways or to what degree the general aims of the school subject really have contributed to education of the individual in general. Disciplinary goals can easily exclude or fail to address national ambitions inscribed in overall aims.

Language as subject is a key element for plurilingual and intercultural education and this means it has to be value-driven, to be part of a global language education project, to be part of a formative conception of education, to enlarge its perspectives on language and discourse, and to establish progression in aims and contents in harmony with other subjects in the curriculum. By relating language as subject and language in other subjects, the aims for language as subject might be significantly changed.

Seeing language as subject in relation to all school subjects is historically not a new idea. What is needed however is that language as subject as a discipline has to be re-conceptualised to be able to contribute to the more general perspective which emphasises the role of language in other subjects. From being simply one school subject, with merely a disciplinary content, there is a need to emphasise language as subject as a tool for teaching and learning. Language as subject in this perspective should be more able to make clear, explain, convince, and teach learners and teachers in other school subjects how language as subject knowledge is crucial in those subjects. Some national curricula have already given language as subject such an aim.

3. Challenges of developing aims for language as subject

Curriculum developers and teachers have to find ways of integrating different aims in the curriculum and in the classroom. Most national curricula try to balance the preferred aims in an integrated holistic vision to foster *Bildung*, a process of developing and bringing out the full potential of a human being, based on each student's resources, but stimulated and structured by education. Policy makers and curriculum designers, as well as teachers have to orchestrate a process in which mental, cultural and practical capacities as much as the personal and social competences are being developed continuously and widened in both a specific and a holistic way. This rich notion of *Bildung* is essential to the conception of language as subject. The learner's development in the field of language is a key to this aim, although no formal institution can ever guarantee this achievement because it is always linked to the individual's potential between autonomy and heteronomy; offering opportunities for education in this broad sense is central to language as subject. Aiming at *Bildung* balances the more functional aims of the subject that are also focused upon and provides a frame that surpasses the limits of an instrumental perception of language as subject.

Subject knowledge

Aims for building specific subject knowledge can for example include the following complexities:

- a) knowledge of language, text, literature and culture (multimedia included) including synchronic and diachronic perspectives,
- b) pointing out methodological routes from knowing what to knowing how including knowing why, and
- c) searching a common core of knowledge for all the students and an additional differentiated knowledge for different groups of students.

The knowledge required is complex. It includes two domains (language and literature) that can be brought together under the umbrella of text and communication; different types of knowledge (reproductive, but also strategies for combining and exploring knowledge); diverse approaches (synchronic, dealing with contemporary language and texts, and also diachronic, as learners acquire an overview of the development of language and literature). A horizontal coherence needs to be combined with the knowledge provided in other subjects, and a vertical progression of the knowledge introduced at different levels in language as subject, also taking account of diversity in target populations (students with different capacities and backgrounds, with different needs or interests).

Subject skills

Aims for developing skills in language as subject concern a balance between receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) and oral and written communication. All skills are equally important and they are interconnected. When the students read a text, they often also speak or write about what they read, or listen to their peers' opinions about the text. In this way, their own understanding about the text is enriched. Nevertheless, there can be different contexts of learning and different perspectives on the importance of certain skills. For example, in education systems which have vocational as well as academic schools the priority given in practice to oral or written communication may differ.

The aims for skills overlap with the aims for knowledge if knowledge is conceived in a broad sense that includes acquiring and using knowledge for different purposes or reflecting upon

the way knowledge may be acquired or used. ‘Learning to do’ in language as subject has many common aspects with ‘learning to do’ in foreign languages or in mother tongue (if other than language as subject) and aims at learners mastering communicative skills throughout their lives: to communicate (listen, interact, speak, read, write) in a variety of contexts; to participate in communicative interactions; to accommodate to different social contexts and the language varieties inherent in them or cultural contexts with the demand for intercultural dialogue.

Broader aims

The broad aims for language as subject reflect the tensions between identity and alterity – personal values and interest and respect for others’ values; national culture and interest for other cultures – on the one hand, and personal growth and cultural values on the other: discovering one’s own identity/identities in contact with different cultural values. The aims in this category are very important as they place skills and knowledge in a new perspective, that of building the learner’s own identity/identities in relation with others and with a specific cultural background. They are also found in the aims of other subjects, but they certainly have specific implications for language as subject too. Examples include: to develop critical thinking; to explore one’s own thinking and values; to express personal opinions; to gain flexibility in thinking and argumentation; to develop an aesthetic sense and sensitivity to cultural expression; to show respect for and interest in others’ values and to have a positive communicative attitude in the spirit of pluralism; to work on common projects on the basis of communicative interactions; to develop an understanding of one’s own emotions and those of others. Thus, the aims of language as subject concern the personal development of learners in a broad sense since language as subject contributes not only to the acquisition of communicative competences, but in the spirit of the eight key-competences for lifelong learning of the EU, it also contributes to learning-to-learn, interpersonal and civic competences and cultural awareness.

The role of the documents on this platform, including the related modules on the different aspects of language as subject, is not to provide a definitive way of resolving these tensions but to raise awareness of the different dimensions and to help users reflect on the balance within their own curricula and practice.

4. Language and literature

Language can be embodied in a curriculum as ‘system of language’, implying a descriptive academic approach, or as ‘language in use’, associated with a communicative perspective. Both approaches are used to different degrees in many curricula. Some knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is a necessary basis for developing linguistic competences. Reflection on language evolution or on the linguistic varieties of a language is also based on information to be analyzed and compared. To strengthen learners’ linguistic competences, it is important to build on their knowledge of different languages or variety of languages and to provide a diversity of contexts in which languages are used.

The domain of text/literature involves both cultural patrimony (representative texts in the history of a genre, works included in a literary canon) and more recent developments of texts (contemporary literature, nonfiction and multimodal texts). The approaches may be text-oriented (with a focus on the value of the text), process-oriented (focusing on developing reading strategies including analysis of texts) or learner-oriented (challenging personal reactions of the readers). Such approaches may emphasize a specific didactic focus or may be

combined in order to open learners' minds to multiple perspectives. Specific tensions arise however when trying to define the literary canon and its role in the language as subject curriculum. It is helpful to distinguish between the official canon (prescribed by the national or local curricular documents) and the *de facto* canon (emerging from actual practice). On the one hand, the arguments against the traditional canon, conceived as authoritarian, static, elite and sometimes ahistorical, are strong: it is insensitive to the diverse nature of contemporary societies and ignores the challenge of engaging the interest of young people. On the other hand, there are also arguments for not abandoning completely the notion of a canon, but for approaching it in a more dynamic way to prevent the *de facto* canon from being left to chance, to protect the interests of pupils for whom choice of reading content should not be arbitrary, to ensure some element of curriculum entitlement for all pupils, and to allow consideration of the balance of the prescribed curriculum between national and multicultural texts, classic and modern (see the study on *The Literary Canon: implications for the teaching of language as subject*).

5. Teaching approaches in language as subject: genres and tasks

The main difficulty in this field is to find an appropriate balance between competences, values and attitudes, on the one hand, and contents, on the other, bearing in mind that the process of teaching and learning is to be a formative one. Teachers have to deal with students' linguistic knowledge to develop their linguistic competences, to develop and use their text knowledge for strengthening reading competences and to stimulate interest in cultural knowledge in order to develop students' participation in culture. They may use analytic and holistic approaches, text-oriented, process-oriented or learner-oriented strategies, formative and summative assessment.

Pressure on the decisions about teaching comes from the way assessment is conceived at a national and/or regional level, as it may clash with the strategies of teaching and learning. Teaching and learning for life or for examinations (teaching to the test) is still a dichotomy in many countries. That is the reason why there is a need for standards of assessment that are consonant with the aims in the curriculum and also relevant for the real-life contexts learners could meet. Implicitness and explicitness of tasks are both legitimate, but they can motivate the students in different ways in order to perform the tasks. The formative strategies of teaching, learning and assessment have to be coherent and lead to developing autonomous individuals that may use their knowledge and competences in the most beneficial ways for themselves and for the communities in which they live.

In practical terms different broad approaches to planning of the language as subject curriculum tend to be used, based, for example, on themes, specific texts or language skills. The concept of 'genre' has also emerged as a key consideration when thinking about approaches to language as subject. At one level the term 'genre' seems straightforward, referring to 'types' or 'kinds' of text or utterances; its appeal therefore as an organising principle for the curriculum is evident. Literature used to be conceived in terms of the three traditional 'genres' poetry, prose, drama which were sub-divided further (tragedy, comedy etc.). The teaching of writing is often conceived in terms of different genres (reports, letters, poems) or as writing for different purposes (to inform, persuade, entertain). However the way genres are conceptualised should not be static. Genre categories overlap and to assume that genres can be taught narrowly and explicitly as discrete entities in a linear fashion may lead to oversimplification. The coherence and specificity of genres may vary, for example within the media there is a difference between simply reporting the news and commenting on the news. Within an approach that stresses the communicative function of language the notion of 'discourse genre' is enlightening: this moves beyond mere text types and takes into account

various situations of oral and written language use where structural patterns arise. Because subjects can be conceived in terms of acquisition of ‘genre competence’, the concept is central to forging links between language as subject and [language in other subjects](#).

The concept of ‘task’ which is also a key to determining approaches to teaching and learning can also easily be taken for granted because of its apparent simplicity. The importance of tasks in the learning process is sometimes underestimated. Task in a teaching context is generally seen as an activity designed to help learners achieve a particular purpose. Like language itself, tasks are not always transparent as they may require interpretations that are not made explicit; for example determining what not to do is as important as recognising what is required. There may be unpredictable challenges related to tasks which are only understood retrospectively after completion; specific tasks may carry genre expectations which are not always explicit. The degree of tacit understanding required of the learner is increased when a task is set with minimal contextualisation. These considerations suggest the need for a high degree of reflexivity when setting tasks, in particular with regard to the importance of de-centring and seeing the task from a learner perspective.

6. Learner diversity in language as subject

Language as subject may be the mother tongue of some learners or it may be a second or foreign language for others - be they migrants or indigenous minorities. Policy makers have to decide how the curriculum will address all these diverse situations. It is a political decision whether to have the same or a different language as subject curriculum for different students. Three possible options, which may coexist in an educational system, can be identified: (a) make no basic changes to the curriculum; (b) operate a remedial approach (with a stress on the rules and discourses of the language as a subject, in its formal, communicational and reflective aspects); (c) move towards more inclusive curricula and methods (aimed at securing greater transversality and breaking down barriers, as part of a more comprehensive and economical approach to the development of young people’s linguistic and cultural level of competence and knowledge).

The languages of education perspective emphasizes the possible positive effects of the third option, but does not exclude any other option considered by the policy makers in different countries. The most important aspect of any approach is to be aware of the diversity of learners and to find ways for reaching a set of aims that are homogeneous. Policy in the language as subject context on this issue cannot be determined in isolation from a wider consideration of diversity. [See the text on [Multicultural Societies, Pluricultural People and the Project of Intercultural Education](#)].

7. The domains of language as subject

Language as subject is usually described in terms of the different domains of writing, reading, speaking and listening, and knowledge about language. In practice these elements are often integrated, as when a text for reading is used as the basis for oral discussion which then becomes a stimulus for a writing task. When describing the language as subject curriculum, the different elements are usually addressed separately; each one raises a variety of issues. For example, the ability to write in a variety of different contexts and for different purposes does not come automatically just from being acquainted with texts through reading. There is a need for systematic approaches to the teaching of writing both at the initial stages of schooling and in later years. Language development in the early years particularly pre-school with an emphasis on emerging reading and writing is important in providing an adequate foundation

for the future. Teaching programs need to ensure progression and a broadening of scope throughout the years of school (see text on *Writing*).

There has been an increasing awareness of the broad contexts of reading within life (in school and beyond) and it has become an aim of formal schooling to cover a wide range of texts. Thus, the domain of reading needs to cover an introduction to the use and understanding of various forms of texts, including expository and literary texts, the media and a wide range of genres. Reading can be described as a cognitive constructive process; it is not enough to describe making meaning when reading a text simply as text reception but it is the result of a complex text-reader-interaction. Good readers benefit from meta-cognition that allows them to monitor their understanding. [See the text on *Reading*].

Speaking, interacting and listening competences traditionally had little specific attention in the language as subject curriculum, although the importance of oral activity is now more widely acknowledged. All students need to develop their oral language. Being able to speak and understand a language on a basic level, or in a way that indicates fluency, does not mean that the student has sufficient competence to master oral genres in a broad sense. The variety of mother tongue backgrounds in many language as subject classrooms calls for more systematic approaches to enhance proficiency of speech for various purposes and understanding of oral language.

Knowledge about language is often less explicitly distinguished in the language as subject curriculum than speaking and listening, reading and writing, particularly where a language-in-use-approach is more dominant than a focus on language as a system. Aspects of language awareness and reflection are often integrated into working with texts. However, in planning the language as subject curriculum there needs to be consideration of what aspects of knowledge about language and reflection on language need to be included.

8. The changing role of the language as subject teacher

The teacher has a vital role to play in the language as subject classroom. However the role has undergone changes in recent years, from a narrow emphasis on instruction to a greater recognition for the need for supervision or conferencing (providing one-to-one support). Another indicator of the change derives from recognition of the broader variety of competences required for the teaching of language as subject. Change in subject content, greater diversity within student groups, and an increased interest in the learning processes of the pupil are some of the elements that determine the changes in classroom practice. Considerations of diversities within a learner group, including how pupils learn and progress in different ways, has led to new approaches inspired by ideas from learner autonomy, process writing, self assessment, meta-cognition and various ways of understanding learning strategies. At the same time, demands on teachers' subject knowledge have increased. The language as subject teacher needs to know as much about language and literature as before but the domain of language as subject has grown, and encompasses areas such as multi-modal texts and new communication modes in modern society.