Three major strategies of adaptive instruction for Linguistic Minority Students

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Abstract

Based on Vygotsky's idea of the Zone of Proximal Development, three major approaches of adaptive instruction are discussed, with a focus on their potential for success in relation to Linguistic Minority Students within the Norwegian mandatory school and with early literacy teaching as the illustrative case. The discussion ends with the conclusion that bilingual instruction is probably the best adaptive type of instruction. This is true not only for those Linguistic Minority Students who are not able to close the gap by means of mainstreaming, but also for those who are successful.

Introduction

For more than 30 years studies have unanimously shown that linguistic minority students (LMi students) are underachievers in school (Aasen, Engen, & Nes, 2003), albeit with large in-group variation (Silje Noack Fekjær, 2006; Nordahl, under publisering; Øzerk, 2003). For some LMi-students, instruction seems to function satisfactorily as it is while many more seem to be in need of a more adaptive approach (Engen, 2009). Several alternatives have been suggested over the years. The National Curriculum of 1987 (NC-87) introduced curricula for Norwegian as a Second Language (NSL), First Language Instruction and bilingual subject instruction, while later national curricula – the NC-97 and the NC-06 – have focused more on mainstreaming, in combination with a special educational approach for unsuccessful individuals. In practice, this approach was probably also the dominating one in a majority of schools in the period following the NC-87 (Engen, 1994, 2007; Haug & Bachmann, 2007; Pihl, 2005, 2007; Øzerk, 2007).

In this article, three different approaches of adaptive instruction for LMi students will be discussed: a compensatory strategy, a NSL-

strategy and a bilingual strategy, with early literacy teaching as the illustrative case and with a focus on their potential for success / failure. As the Norwegian principle adaptive instruction has changed focus and emphasis with different political regimes (Bachmann & Haug, 2006), I will first contextualize the principle within a conceptual framework, Vygotsky's idea of the Zone of Proximal Development.

Adaptive instruction and The Zone of Proximal Development

When Vygotsky introduced the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), he illustrated his main idea by means of two eight-year-olds who had identical scores in an individual intelligence test (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). When they were allowed to cooperate with an adult, one of the children solved problems at the twelve-year-old level while the other child's scores were typical for a nine-year-old. Thus, the students had the same *actual* level of development, indicated by their individual problem-solving capacity, but widely different *potential* problem-solving capacities, indicated by their cooperative functioning. The interval between the two levels of functioning – signaling different potential for both immediate learning and long-term progression – Vygotsky labeled The Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 209ff).

Further, Vygotsky argued that if students manage in the classroom without any kind of help whatsoever, instruction is either at or below the lower threshold of the child's ZPD. As this will not promote development, the instructional offer in such a case is not demanding enough. However, when the child is unable to profit from any kind of cooperation with the teacher, instruction is oriented above the upper threshold of child's ZPD, and will be too difficult to promote development. Instruction is effective – i.e., adaptive – only when it helps the individual transform the potential level of performance revealed in cooperation to his or her actual level of performance (Vygotsky, 1987). Adaptive instruction must be analyzed according to three internally related factors:

1. The teacher is responsible for selecting and arranging a learning material that can constitute a substantial foundation for cooperation, e.g. a suitable reading material. A competent selection and arrangement of the learning material will raise the levels of functioning and expand the student's ZPD. Thus, the teacher must be academically competent.

2. Teachers are just as dependent, however, upon being able to relate the learning materiel to the student's web of everyday or spontaneous concepts in a meaningful way, i.e., to their preconceptions. In the opposite case, the ZPD will have a very narrow range.

When these two conditions are met, a foundation for two internally related movements is present. Academic concepts will raise spontaneous concepts to a more abstract level by expanding and reorganizing them according to an external, decontextualized system of meaning. Spontaneous concepts – through their experiential meaning – will give a core of personal meaning to the academic learning material.

3. These effects are both realized in *cooperation*, which therefore becomes the core principle of any approach of adaptive instruction. Students are totally dependent upon cooperation – to be able to move from their actual to their potential level of functioning. Teachers are dependent upon cooperation, both in order to be able to assess the students' potential for learning, and in order to help them realize their potential.

Fundamentals of early literacy teaching

Competent reading – reading for learning – is most fundamentally characterized by text comprehension. For reading to function as a truly reconstructive process, the reader must be able to focus all his/her attention on the meaning of the text, meaning that competent readers are dependent upon fluent or automatized decoding. When students are learning to read, up to the stage where reading has become fluent, then they should be allowed to focus all their attention on the acquisition of *technical* skills, i.e., they should be allowed to experience *spontaneous comprehension*, taking *comprehension* for given. Spontaneous comprehension occurs only if knowledge that is – and especially knowledge that is not – encoded by the written word is familiar to the reader. In such a case, the language and content of the text will correspond to the readers' actual level of functioning. Reading will then open a rich ‹world› behind the words – a world that is varied enough to mobilize the necessary motivational and cognitive processes to support the acquisition of decoding skills, and integrate decoding with comprehension. (cf. Elsness, 2003; Fillmore, 1986; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Ricoeur, 1973; Uppstad & Solheim, 2005; Vygotsky, 1987). In such a case, the students' ZPD will be wide.

When comprehension does not occur spontaneously, time and attention for interpretation in cooperation with the teacher is needed. This will interrupt and delay the primary task of technical training, in the best case stealing valuable time from quantitative training, thereby slowing down progression. In the worst case, lack of spontaneous comprehension means that the learner will lose focus on the *meaning* of the text to such a degree that decoding is isolated from comprehension, reducing it to a more or less mechanical skill. Under such circumstances, the student will neither be able to develop fluent reading nor to accumulate new knowledge of the language and the culture. Obviously, the text is above and outside of the ZPD, which at the same time is seriously narrowed.

For as long as promoting decoding skills is the central focus of early literacy teaching, both as far as breaking the code and developing automatized, fluent reading are concerned, adaptive instruction means to secure as high a correspondence between the reading material and the child's preconceptions as possible, linguistically as well as culturally (Baker, 2006; Engen, 2003).

The main cause for underachievement

Native majority language school beginners have an average vocabulary of 8 000-10 000 words (Viberg, 1996). LMi-students are often two to three years behind age level (Sand & Skoug, 2002; Skoug & Sand, 2003; Øzerk, 2003), probably because most LMi-students are socialized with the minority language as the preferred and most frequently-used communication medium. Even if they apparently speak the majority language fluently, the preschool majority language experiences of LMi-students are often restricted to certain domains (J. Cummins, 2000; Engen, 2003; Skrtic, 1995). As long as vocabulary seems to be the most important single factor for the prediction of literacy skills (Bogaards & Laufer-Dvorkin, 2004; Laufer & Goldstein, 2004), a gap of two to three years in language competence (which the majority of LMi-students bring with them to school) may well be the main cause of their underachievement when the majority language is the medium for early literacy teaching. Only when their two languages are counted together, will LMi- students' language competence correspond to their age level (Romaine, 1995).

A mainstreaming compensatory strategy

Still, schools – out of tradition – often choose a mainstreaming approach, in some cases supplemented with special educational approaches, meaning that reading instruction is administered exclusively in the majority language. As schools in this way pay little attention to the home cultural aspect of the students' bilingual preconceptions, the approach is compensatory in nature. On the one hand the students' actual level of functioning is lowered by the same extent as they are behind their age level. For students who are two or three years behind, age-level texts are totally out of reach for spontaneous comprehension. On the other hand, they may still be moved inside the zone, provided teachers are able to help LMi-students comprehend unknown majority language vocabulary – at a level that makes decoding instruction meaningful. Since important aspects of the students' preschool experiential material is made irrelevant for classroom conversation, their potential level of functioning is lowered. The range of the zone is narrowed, slowing down progression. Accordingly, it has been observed that a mainstreaming approach inevitably makes classroom conversation «childish» (Gitz-Johansen, 2006; Skoug & Sand, 2003; Øzerk, 2003).

Within a mainstreaming approach, linguistic majority students (LMa-students) are allowed to use all their ability/efforts initially on breaking the reading code and later on developing fluent skills. LMi-students, however, have to spend valuable time and energy in cooperation with the teacher in order to move the text inside the zone, i.e., establish a sufficient platform of comprehension for developing (meaningful) decoding skills. When this approach is successful and students acquire fluent skills, it inevitably occurs at a considerably slower pace than the expected age-level progression unless students have been working considerably harder than the average mainstream student (cf. Bakken, 2003). The success of well implemented programs such as «Listiga räven» in Rinkeby, Stockholm (Axelsson, Lennartson, & Sellgren, 2002) can probably be explained by hard, long term student-teacher effort.

Within a mainstreaming approach without such expectations, intensive teacher-student interpretative cooperation, will deprive a majority of LMi-students of the necessary amount of quantitative technical training. On the one hand, their attention will be drawn so far away from meaningful decoding that skills may attain a mechanical character (cf. Bergman, 1994) undermining the conditions for developing fluent skills. On the other hand, LMi-students will be deprived of

much of the space normally set aside for expanding academic or formal vocabulary to age-level expectations. Accordingly, their acquisition of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge is affected negatively at a stage where a considerable expansion of formal sociocultural knowledge is supposed to take place (Viberg 1996).

Even when technical decoding skills are established, lack of sociocultural and linguistic knowledge expansion to support fluency will be become a serious obstacle whenever students are exposed to mainstream texts. As these also become gradually more advanced, LMi-students spend more time struggling to break the code. As a consequence, many LMi-students risk losing the long-term motivation needed for bringing their reading competence up to the age level.

Within a mainstreaming approach where students are not met with expectations of hard work, it is especially two categories of students who have the greatest chance of success. First, is that portion of LMi-students who are more talented than the mainstreaming strategy inherently expects. Second, is that proportion of LMi-students who are prepared to work harder than the mainstream LMa-student (cf. Engen, 2006, 2009; Schecter & Cummins, 2003; Skolverket, 2008; Øzerk, 2003), i.e., students with a home background that appreciates the instrumental value of education, with parents who are in a position to support their (still not self-motivated) children academically as well as motivationally (Bonesrønning & Tovmo, 2008; Engen, 2006; S. N Fekjær & Birkelund, 2007; Gravaas, 2008; Vygotsky, 1987). Without such favourable parental support, LMi-students probably have to be considerably more talented than the mainstream LMa-student. In such a case, they may need to have their aims and hopes continually and sufficiently reinforced by experiencing that they are steadily closing the gap in order to keep up the long-term effort needed (Engen, 1975).

Thus, only a minority of LMi-students succeed. while the majority will be less – and probably not sufficiently prepared – when they meet the expectations of reading for the sake of learning at the middle stage (cf. Engen, 2006, 2009).

A compensatory special educational approach
When the approach of moving the age level text within the zone by means of cooperation is insufficient, some schools may choose so-called Easy Readers, i.e., simplified mainstream texts. The approach is founded in a special educational tradition, but as schools continue to ignore

the home cultural aspect of the students' bilingual preconceptions, its compensatory nature is emphasized.

The main advantage of Easy Readers is that their frequency of unknown vocabulary is lower. Spontaneous comprehension will occur more easily while the need for explicit interpretational cooperation is reduced, making it easier for students to break the reading code – at least as a technical enterprise. Whether the approach is effective when it comes to establishing fluent decoding skills and expanding cultural and linguistic knowledge, is, however, doubtful. Simplified text material may in fact decrease cultural comprehension in the long run:

> ... one cannot claim that [Turkish pupils] feel alienated by the open message, which they like the Danish pupils learn to acquire, […]. What they feel alienated by is the silent language, which conditions the 'spirit' of the classroom, and which the Danish pupils have internalized* during their primary socialization in the family (Mortensen, 1989, pp. 162-163). […] For this reason: '...immigrants […] struggle hard to grasp the «basic narrative», which is an organic condition of life in the host country. They see only the *«simple story»...*' (Hougaard in Mortensen, 1989, p. 156).

Spontaneous comprehension of any text is always heavily dependent on the reader sharing a common context with the text (Vygotsky, 1987). Accordingly, the depth or richness of the comprehension will vary according to the students' familiarity with ‹the basic narrative›. Within early literacy mainstream teaching, texts are constructed precisely to make the basic narrative correspond to the linguistic and sociocultural «habitus» of – LMa – students. Since Easy Readers are constructed to communicate with students who are behind age level and more or less unfamiliar with the basic narrative (Hvenekilde, 1983), such students *do not* share a common underlying cultural and linguistic context with the text. They will inevitably lack the cultural preconceptions that age-level, spontaneous comprehension presupposes. Thus, they will be in need of short term interpretive help in order to comprehend the open message. Further, comprehension will inevitably be superficial and poor, no matter how well vocabulary is explained in each special case. Even if technical decoding may become a meaningful enterprise based on the open message, the basic narrative will be moved further out of reach. The more texts are simplified linguistically in order to promote the conditions for techni-

cal decoding, the more their comprehension at the same time will depend upon the students' familiarity with the given context. Ultimately, the more they will delay the development of advanced vocabulary.

The use of Easy Readers, moves the students' actual level of functioning to a threshold far below age level as well as below their actual total linguistic capacity. At the same time, the range of the ZPD will also be narrowed, as many of the students' informal preschool linguistic experiences are made educationally irrelevant. While students probably will need to spend less time in cooperation with the teacher interpreting unknown vocabulary, and succeed in breaking the code, their acquisition of age-level linguistic and sociocultural knowledge will probably be even more negatively affected than in a mainstream approach. This will have even more serious consequences whenever they are exposed to age-level expectations.

The fundamental problem with compensatory strategies, is that they lack the capacity for promoting LMi-students' technical reading skills. One main weakness is attached to the fact that these strategies lower and narrow the students' ZPD, so that that the acquisition of fluent skills will at best be considerably delayed. A second weakness is that a necessary – gradual and continuous – acquisition of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge will also be delayed, at the stage of schooling where a considerable expansion of such knowledge is supposed to take place. Not even in the favourable case where LMi-students make the same progress in absolute terms as their majority language peers – an annual progress of one year – will they close the initial gap between the groups – at least not during the period set aside for elementary literacy teaching. Gradually, more advanced – i.e., age level – text material will be less rather than more available (Sand & Skoug, 2002; Skoug & Sand, 2003; Thomas & Collier, 2002), probably also undermining LMi-students' long term motivation for bringing their reading competence up to age level. The success of compensatory strategies, is therefore dependent upon the students managing to maintain strong long-term instrumental motivation to support harder work than the average mainstream students. In early literacy teaching, a decisive factor is probably the experience of continuous success, mediated either by competent parental support or better-than-average individual predispositions. Empirical research indicates that this applies only to a minority.

Adaptive instruction: A NSL-strategy

To overcome the disadvantages of compensatory approaches, it is not sufficient to arrange learning material according to the logic of quantitative differentiation. On the one hand, schools more consciously need to make the students' own cultural and linguistic preconceptions relevant for early literacy instruction. By means of an approach of qualitative differentiation, instruction will raise the students' actual and potential levels of functioning and expand the range of their ZPDs, as in the case of bilingual teaching. On the other hand, schools also need to be more consciously aware of the importance of making students aware of ‹the basic narrative› of majority language texts in order to make students' comprehension and cultural understanding deeper and richer (Kulbrandstad, 1996). Only in this way will gradually more advanced age level texts be available for LMi-students in the long run.

Relating to the students' preconceptions is, of course, what competent majority language teachers always do – also within a mainstreaming approach. However, in the case of LMi-students, more conscious attention must be paid to the inherent relationship between the text and its context. In other words, the challenge for L2-teachers is to help LMi-students develop age- level technical skills at the same time as they are not seriously delayed in the task of getting access to age-level linguistic and sociocultural knowledge – especially knowledge that is not encoded by the written word.

Thus, an effective L2-teaching approach requires a competence which enables teachers to asses and analyze what preconceptions LMi-students actually have in relation to majority language text material (cf. Baker, 2006; J. Cummins, 2000) so that these can be made maximally relevant for text comprehension. While mainstream teachers may take the basic narrative (Bøyesen 1987) and established texts for granted, L2-teachers should be prepared to choose texts more in accordance with LMi-students preconceptions but not just simplified versions of mainstream material. They should also be prepared to *articulate* aspects of the silent «world» that existing texts take for granted (cf. Ricoeur, 1973), precisely in relation to the students' preconceptions. Teachers further need to do this – text by text if neccesary – whenever new blank spots are revealed in the students' preconceptions – for as long as it takes to develop a deep familiarity that allows for rich comprehension. This is one main reason why the acquisition of advanced second language comprehension takes 5 to 7 years while super-

ficial comprehension takes only two years (Coelho, 2008; J. Cummins, 2000; Øzerk, 2003.

When teachers succeed in this double effort, they will raise both thresholds of the students' ZPD so that the potential both for immediate comprehension and better progression increases. While L2 literacy teaching in Norwegian schools in some instances have not functioned in this way (Lødding, 2003), the reason could well be that what has been labeled L2-instruction in reality has been – sometimes even poorly implemented – compensatory strategies. Many schools have delayed the transfer of LMi-students from special educational programs to mainstream classrooms for strategic financial reasons, in this way revealing low ambitions on their behalf (Engen & Kulbrandstad, 2007; Lødding, 2003; Øzerk, 2007). Moreover, the vast majority of teachers have also lacked the presupposed competence and motivation (Bakke, 2006; Rambøll management, 2006). This confirms that the requirements of proficient L2-teaching probably exceed the competence of the average mainstream teacher.

Since the kind of competence needed for competent L2-teaching presupposes special training today, it should obviously be part of the mainstream teacher program. This is espacially critical given the number of LMi-students are steadily growing, but also because the approach will be helpful for teachers in their cooperation with LMa-students who are below age level as well. In addition, subject matter teachers would be better prepared – and perhaps more motivated – by an extended L2-approach competence. When subject matter teachers are enabled to take responsibility for the students' linguistic development – in addition to their academic learning – they will discover that the two are more closely interrelated than is usually assumed (cf. Coelho, 2008; Laursen, 2006; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Øzerk, 2003, 2008; Özerk, 2006, 2007).

Adaptive instruction: A bilingual strategy

It is only when their two languages are counted together that LMi-students' language competence correspond to their age level (Romaine, 1995). The obvious hypothesis, then, is that the gap between the schools' and the students' (taken for granted) conceptual worlds and learning styles can most easily be bridged by teachers who are thoroughly familiar with both. In such a case, both level of actual as well as potential functioning will be raised optimally. In addition, bilingual teaching will probably mobilize and realize the students' general and academic

motivation in a more effective way (Banks, 2008b; J. Cummins, 2004; J. Cummins, et al, 2005). There are strong indications that it is often easier for LMi-students to break the reading code as well as developing fluent decoding skills by means of the first language (Baker, 2006; Hyltenstam, 2003; Schecter & Cummins, 2003). Later, acquired fundamental literacy *skills* can be transferred to the second language (Wagner, 1998). Thus, even knowledge that is encoded in the students' first language should be made directly relevant in the classroom (J. Cummins, 1984, 2000; Rambøll management, 2006; Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Even if creative majority language speaking teachers also can utilize LMi-students' first language in the classroom (The Ministry of Education, 2006; Schecter & Cummins, 2003), bilingual teachers are probably best prepared for this challenge, especially – but not exclusively – when they share the students' specific linguistic and cultural background, provided they are professionally qualified as well. Bilingual teachers have the advantage of being able to move between the students' two languages so that whichever language is the strongest in relation to a given assignment can be utilized. Bilingual teachers may further clarify the majority cultural context and promote second language vocabulary competence by means of a conceptual understanding transferred from the first language and thus promote academic comprehension by means of both languages. (cf. Skolverket, 2008)

Conclusion

The discussion shows that bilingual instruction is probably the most *adaptive* type of instruction for those LMi-students who are not able to close the gap by means of mainstreaming, compensatory approaches. Successful LMi students also profit, as they in bilingual programs in many cases outperform their majority linguistic peers academically (J. Cummins, 2000; Fillmore, 1986; Thomas & Collier, 2002). When the bilingual strategy introduced by the Norwegian NC-87 did not function in this way, the main reason was that it was never properly implemented (Engen, 2006). One fundamental condition for success is of course that bilingual teachers have equal educational qualification.

It has been argued, that bilingual instruction requires a certain minimum number of students of common language background at each school or in each community. Therefore, bilingual programs can probably not be administered for all groups of LMi-students. According to Hvenekilde (1994, p. 185), the twenty largest language groups in 1993 made up about 90 % of LMi-students. The five largest language groups

made up as much as 56 % of the LMi-population. As this general situation has not changed fundamentally, according to Øzerk (2007), bilingual programs may be administered for a majority of LMi-students. Further, as the argument in this paper shows, bilingual instruction is not one single exclusive model. There are many ways in which creative teachers can mobilize knowledge that is encoded in the students' first language in classrooms in order to raise their actual level of functioning. Better qualified L2-teachers will improve the situation for LMi-students considerably.

Well-trained (bilingual) teachers will have a challenging and not least time- consuming task if current available learning material is not in any way related to the LMi-students' sociocultural background (cf. Hirvonen, 2004; Skjelbred & Aamotsbakken, 2004). If LMi-students' experiences are reflected in the learning material, however, their actual and potential level of performance will be raised. Further, they will have their identities confirmed and expanded (Banks, 2008a, 2008b; Engen, 2009). They will be empowered to make their own sociocultural experiences an asset in academic work (Baker, 2006) so that also their instrumental motivation will be reinforced.

Independent of strategy, the acquisition of advanced L2-competence will require many years of work. Well-implemented L2-strategies on their own do not seem to have the power to close the gap between LMa and LMi-students and bilingual strategies do not furnish students with elementary L2 technical reading skills any faster than other strategies (cf. Thomas & Collier, 2002). Together both seem to be much more powerful approaches when they come to establishing fundamental literacy skills that are robust enough to meet the requirements of middle-stage academic texts – for a much larger proportion of LMi-students (Collier & Thomas, 2002; J. Cummins, 2000; Engen, 2008).

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