

Developing literacy in Estonian as L1: bridges and gaps

Merilin Aruvee^{a1}, Helin Puksand^b

^a School of Humanities, Tallinn University

^b Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, University of Tartu

Summary

Introduction

As text work is part of literacy as common core competence, Fisher and Ivey (2005) emphasise the notion that every (subject) teacher is also a language teacher. The terms *disciplinary literacy* and *content area literacy* describe this in detail. The former means working with concepts and meanings in learning content, the latter focuses on the nature of texts, vocabulary, textual features and composition, reading skills and strategies (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). In order to build and support content learning, both areas need attention. This is similar to the dual focus in the context of CLIL (Mehisto et al., 2010) where content and language are equally and simultaneously developed.

Technological development has changed the setting of literacy. The deictic nature of new literacies (Leu et al., 2004) is a challenge for schools and teacher training programmes. The term *new literacies* signifies a set of aspects such as multimodal meaning-making, collaboration, being connected and experimenting with texts etc. (Burnett & Merchant, 2015; Lankshear & Knobel, 2018). Educationalists suggest blending the new skills into our everyday actions (Lankshear & Knobel, 2018). There is no need to demonise new literacies – every text is part of meaning-making and is therefore strongly connected with creativity (Knobel, 2017).

The multimodal nature of texts mostly affects literacy teaching in L1 classrooms. Grammar teaching should be more integrated with text work (Myhill, 2018), because grammar is a tool for meaning-making (Halliday, 2005) and always goes hand in hand with (multimodal) reading and writing activities. This view is captured in the term *metalinguistic awareness* (Carter, 2003; Rättyä, 2013), meaning investigating the texts' linguistic features: grammatical and lexical choices. This is impossible without grammatical metalanguage, which is the responsibility of L1s to teach.

¹ School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Narva mnt 25, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia; merilin.aruvee@tlu.ee

Research aims, questions and method

The research problem is to explain how Estonian L1 teachers use texts and build connections with systematic language teaching in order to find ways to teach literacy as a collaboratively shared responsibility.

The aim is to make suggestions for the development possibilities of L1 didactics and Estonian L1 as a school subject and make literacy as the common core. Our first research question focuses on the integration with other subjects; the second question tackles asking how new literacy skills appear in teacher's actions; the last research question investigates how the text-centred approach is practised by interviewees.

An ethnomethodological study (Garfinkel, 1984) was conducted from September 2017 to June 2018 and was divided into 3 stages. This research uses the principle of triangulation (Flick, 2017): theory, data and methods combined to make up the 3 perspectives. In the first stage, one Estonian language teacher (Teele, name changed) was asked to keep a diary describing her text-use in 12 lessons of Estonian L1 and Literature. After that she was interviewed for further comments.

In stage 3, we carried out a focus group interview (3 persons) and an expert group interview (4 persons) with Estonian L1 teachers. To trigger discussions, we used Teele's diary to provide examples of literacy practises.

We analysed the results qualitatively, using programme QDA Miner Lite (Lewis & Maas, 2007). Firstly, content analysis and guided content analysis was utilised to connect literacy practise examples with Ivanič's literacy discourses (skills, process, creativity, social practice, genre, and socio-political discourse) to see, how new literacies and the text-centred approach appear in teacher's experiences. This was followed by a discourse analysis (Gee, 2003).

Results and discussion

The responsibility for teaching literacy seems to become more important among both L1 language teachers and their colleagues. Integration between subjects is mainly achieved by content (same topic across subjects), but joint text work is also carried out. Literacy discourses (Ivanič, 2004) clearly outlined skills, social practise, process and sociopolitical discourse. Skills and process combine with each other: the L1 teacher is asked to support writing assignments and to help grade spelling and grammar. In the second case, an important topic or a problem is developed from the perspective of various subjects. In this collaboration the Estonian L1 teacher supports activities with oral discussions and text analysis. The study of L1 teachers alone isn't sufficient to describe

how literacy as a common core responsibility has to be shared and whether other subject teachers are ready to provide the co-responsibility (Soodla et al., 2013). This directs us to continue with the research.

There are examples where disciplinary literacy is supported by the L1 teacher – this might indicate the need for CLIL (Mehisto et al., 2010) in Estonian-speaking schools. However, the importance of text and language work will increase in the future when Estonian schools engage more multilingual pupils. We suggest expanding CLILs' dual focus to *triple focus of literacy education*. The three foci include content area literacy, disciplinary literacy and metalinguistic awareness. Joint text work could begin with new learning material, followed by text input, reading-writing activities in line with subject-specific terminology. The final layer is metalinguistic concepts that the L1 teacher points out, which, according to the study, is a strong side of L1, although not necessarily text-based. This is a perfect compromise where the content area literacy is strengthened along with reading skills and language as a meaning-making tool becomes more visible.

Compared to social practice and skills discourse, genre discourse is rather modest. We see, that the genre approach (Dean, 2008; Knapp & Watkins, 2010), could bridge the gap between texts and its metalinguistic layer.

This requires attention in general and subject didactics. Reading strategies, creative writing, and other textual activities could be used as examples in teacher training courses (McArthur, 2012) in order to create the understanding that all teachers are literacy teachers (Fisher & Ivey, 2005) and that the responsibility for teaching literacy is legally shared (PRÕK, 2011, § 4).

Visual texts are the strongest bridge to new literacies. Short video clips are used for activating students, movies and TV-shows are analysed, discussed and used in process-centred writing assignments. Fictional stories are often compared with their visual remakes, but the visual grammar or metalanguage receives little attention. Visual meaning-making becomes more dominant in today's society, so these skills need more explicit attention. Today's subject teachers cannot do that alone, therefore, new literacy skills need to be blended into the school practice as a whole.

We suggest the following actions to support literacy education and metalinguistic awareness.

- Teacher training programmes should engage more literacy skills, reading strategies and new literacies' practices.
- New literacies need more attention in schools; one solution could be a course that integrates new literacies with different school subjects.
- CLIL as an approach to literacy education could be applied in Estonian schools by focusing on three aspects: content area literacy, disciplinary

literacy and metalinguistic awareness. This approach needs arrangements by schools, teachers alone cannot guarantee organisation and collaboration among each other.

- Text-centred approach needs many examples and methodical materials, also courses for in-service teachers, especially for teacher trainer practice supervisors.

However when we develop literacy education we should be mindful that Estonian as L1 should not be promoted through other subjects, but should be present in every subject and everywhere as a meaning-making resource and the main goal of Estonian schools.

Keywords: new literacy, text-centred language teaching, metalinguistic awareness, CLIL