Curriculum development: Content, context and language learning in Estonia

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Abstract
Globalization processes and new political and social environments (membership of the EU, ICT use) have created new contexts for learning as well as problems; they have greatly changed the meaning of literacy and shifted the functional load of languages for regional and international communication which is directly reflected in the content of language syllabi in National Curricula for general comprehensive schools (NC).
The aim of the study is to specify the opportunities of using the educational heritage and present research for more adequate design of language syllabi for general comprehensive schools. The study is based on works by Allardt (1979), Popkewitz (1987), Goodson (1991), Pinar (2013) et al as well as earlier research on development of foreign language syllabi in Estonia (Poldvere 2003 and Tomingas 2009).
As curriculum documents are constantly defined, redefined and negotiated at different levels, opinions of teachers as spokesmen of subject communities and school practice is of particular significance.
The methods used are documentary analysis (NC, syllabi, educational acts n=98), teachers’ questionnaires (n=50) and semi-structured interviews (n=15).
Preliminary results showed what factors could be considered for selection of educational content for learning languages and for new supportive learning environments.
Estonia is an interesting example of educational policy making by paying attention to integration of immigrants and learning Estonian as state language. There are less desired developments regarding learning Estonian as mother tongue which is crucial for sustainability of small languages enriching the world cultural heritage and preserving ethnic identities.
Informed decision making for rational and suitable language policies for a particular society requires regular research on demand for languages competencies in the region. We also need analyses of earlier curriculum documents and comparative educational research on using specific principles for selection of the content and organizing integrated learning within the language cycle of subjects in the NC.

Keywords: context for educational policy making, curriculum development for general comprehensive schools, content of learning languages, learning environments, language teachers.

Introduction
The design of curriculum and selection of content for general education are critical issues for educational systems all over the world. National curricula (NC) as the documents that determine the content of general education are of
particular significance as they have to meet the personal expectations of individuals as well as the educational demands of society at large. Globalization processes and new political and social environments (membership in international organizations, such as the EU or OECD, etc.) with widespread use of ICT (Pinar, 2013) have created new contexts for learning. They have greatly changed the meaning of literacy and the value of specific knowledge for everyday life. Although the idea of becoming knowledge-based societies has captivated all countries, determining which knowledge is most useful to a millennial citizen (Muller, 2000, p. 41) is still heavily debated. The political question “Whose knowledge is worth learning?” is seldom asked. A suitable balance between the traditional and innovative in education has to be a cardinal principle of educational policy making, if we want to reduce uncertainty when designing and planning future education.

However, the educational needs of individuals to communicate locally, regionally and globally have influenced the position of language subjects in all NC. The functional load of languages is constantly changing according to political and social developments, which create demands for particular language skills that will enable labour market mobility, studies abroad, economic and cultural contacts, etc.

The research problem for this study was triggered by public dissatisfaction with the low quality of schooling and achievements as they pertain to students’ language skills, especially in their mother tongue, as expressed in various media by universities, employers and parents. The question to be answered was: Why have young people born in independent Estonia acquired reasonably good English skills, but not acquired the expected proficiency in their mother tongue?

Although the decline in the traditional local tri-lingualism in Estonian, Russian and German can be traced to the aftermath of World War II, and especially to regained independence in the 1990s, the future of ethnic, cultural and political identities is nevertheless worrisome.

The aim of the study was to identify the factors influencing language learning by analyzing official historical documents, including all language syllabi according to the Estonian NCs, as well as earlier research on language demand. These materials could provide insights into the socio-political and pedagogical context that might be useful for designing future language syllabi for general comprehensive schools in Estonia and elsewhere.

The methods used were documentary analysis (of the Estonian NC 1917–2011, education acts, language policy and educational strategy documents), semi-structured surveys of teachers (n=50) and interviews (n=15). The documentary analysis was carried out as a historiographical study according to Edelmann et al. (2012) and the Hempel model of deductive-nomological explanation presented by Koller (Koller, 2012, pp. 177–186). The explanandum — the event or content of analyzed documents — can be explained by the explanans — the factors providing the context for the issues studied. Such an approach reveals the influence of various historical factors on changes in curriculum design and selected content.

As curriculum documents are constantly defined, redefined and negotiated at a number of levels, the opinions of teachers, implementing the NC, were of particular importance as they provided insights into their perception of the NC
and its syllabi as guidelines for organizing learning and establishing supportive learning environments, and how they make use of extra-curricular activities and the wider “hidden curriculum” outside of school.

1. How does context influence curriculum development?

The term context is generally understood as the situation within which something happens, and which can help to explain it (CALD, 2008, p. 302), or as circumstances in which something is to be considered (OALD, 1992, p. 254). The political situation with its constant fluctuations influences all social developments, in particular education. According to Yates and Grumet (2011, pp. 239–240):

“...school curriculum does not take place on some idealized plane, but is constantly informed by and reacting to events. The world that emerges from curriculum is always in conversation with the world outside schooling... And so the world that is named and fixed for the young, is first named and fixed by their parents and grandparents... Arranged and ordered by government directives, and by education bureaucrats, curriculum may appear clear and consistent; nevertheless within its documents, syllabi and practices flourish the contradictions and tensions of our history, our institutions and our politics... Curriculum visions and practices, economic, social and cultural vulnerabilities generate demands that often thwart each other, or mute one in order to address another”.

Accordingly, it also has to be recognized that the design of curricula is inseparably bound to the culture and period of history considering the knowledge and skills available at that time. (Laanemets 2003, pp. 285–286). The same idea was expressed by Popkewitz (1988) who recommended to understand a curriculum as a political text reflecting social structures, as an institutional text, and as a biographical/autobiographical text in the context of its time (p. 379). When we are talking about causes and effects reflected in curricula at different times, we should try to identify the contextual factors that have proven to be and probably will remain influential in the future. The context is never neutral.

2. What did we learn?

2.1 Historical developments and laws related to languages and language learning

All legal acts serve to set the behavioural rules for the society, and represent the legislated values. The first Law on Language was adopted in 1934. Article 1 specified Estonian as the state language and the language of official communication to be used in all spheres of life and throughout the country. Article 5 guaranteed members of ethnic minorities (German, Russian and Swedish) the right to use the ir languages in school and for official communication. During the Soviet period (1940–1941 and 1945–1991) Russian was the lingua franca, which limited the spheres in which Estonian was used. However, education in the Estonian language was provided at all levels. In 1961, after the Sputnik shock, a special decree was enacted for improving learning of foreign languages, even a network of language-specialized schools was developed in Estonia, which was in many ways regarded as the “Soviet West” and suited to educational experimentation. In 1978 the decree Regarding further improvements
in teaching and learning Russian was a program aimed at developing Russian-Estonian bilingualism, and Estonian began to lose ground.

A new approach was initiated in 1988 under perestroika, and in 1989 The Language Law of ESSR was enacted, in which Estonian was declared the official language (Article 1) and Russian was unseated as the pan-Union language of communication. The status of Estonian was entrenched in the new Constitution of Republic of Estonia (1992, Article 6) and its use in education and official communication was stipulated. The 1995 Law on Language set the language norms and specified the use of other languages within the country. The aim of the most recent (2011) Law on Language is to “develop, preserve and protect the Estonian language” (Article 1). And since 2004, when Estonia joined the EU, Estonian is one of the Union’s official languages.

According to the Education Act of the Republic of Estonia (1992, Article 4) everyone must be provided with an opportunity to obtain education in Estonian at all levels. The most recent Law on General Comprehensive Schools (2013) mandates Estonian as the language of instruction in basic schools and gymnasia. However, other languages can be used with the permission of the Government. In schools with instruction in Russian 60% of the curriculum must be taught in Estonian (Article 21).

2.2 Strategic documents and research related to language learning

Since the 1990s a new approach to formulating language policy has emerged, which is characterized by westernization, the development of wide international contacts, globalization, the use of ICT, and the need to support the linguistic integration of non-Estonians. All aspects of education, not only language learning, had to be altered when the Soviet system collapsed.

A new type of document appeared — strategic plans which often served as drafts for intended legislation and sometimes offered scenarios for action plans. The Estonian language and ethnic culture 1999–2003 (1999) discussed how the language and culture of an ethnic group of one million could survive under the pressure of mass culture, the hegemony of English and a high proportion of immigrants (see Allardt 1979). The program The Estonian language and ethnic memory 2004–2008 (2004) was directed towards the development of technological support and an electronic language corps (p. 2). The next iteration of the program The Estonian language and cultural memory 2009–2013 (2009) deals with how non-Estonians should use the language (p. 1.3).

Unfortunately, neither The Estonian language strategy for 2004–2010 (2004) nor The development plan for the Estonian language 2011-2017 (2011) focus on the activities and problems related to Estonians learning their mother tongue. The dual purpose of Estonian language policy is clear: de jure, the status of Estonian has been guaranteed by relevant and numerous legal acts; de facto, more attention and resources are dedicated to ethnic minorities' learning Estonian as the state language.

The most recent research on the demand for functional language skills was undertaken in 1988 (Laanemets, 1988), and the only analyses of the development of foreign language syllabi were made in 2003 and 2009 (Poldvere, 2003; Tomingas, 2009). The syllabi for Estonian and the role of Estonian in
personality development, identity building and as the vehicle for a common culture has not been studied.

2.3 Curricula of various periods, language syllabi and the hidden curriculum

The curricula of 1917–2010 clearly reflect the political changes, demonstrated by the lists of languages learned, the time allotted for learning, and the content. Until 1940 Estonian was taught as the mother tongue, and German, Russian, Greek, Latin, French and English were studied as foreign languages. The time allotted was adequate for acquiring the specified content. Learning a language primarily meant training in speaking, reading, and using basic grammar. At gymnasium classical literature in the language being studied was mostly read in the original (Poldvere, 2003; Tomingas, 2009).

The period 1940–1941, when Estonia was occupied by the Soviets, was too brief for major change. The German period followed (1941–1944) during which more emphasis was placed on learning German and German literature. A longer Soviet period followed (1945–1991) during which Estonian remained the language of instruction, but Russian was the language of official communication, and English, German and French were studied as foreign languages. Curricula ceased to exist — the content of learning was specified in new subject programs, which were periodically updated as the political climate changed.

The period since independence was regained (1991–2013) can be described as a time of incessant innovation and educational reform. The NC of 1996, 2002 and 2010 have all reflected humanism, democratic values and freedom of choice. Schools only have to follow the mandatory lesson plan specified for compulsory subjects. Due to political priorities the time for learning Estonian in grades 1–12 has decreased by 490 lessons during the years 1984–2010, while the time for learning English has increased considerably. The changes in content are astonishing — there is no mention of language structure (grammar) or literature in the syllabi for foreign languages, and according to the Estonian language syllabi, language structure is mainly learned at the compulsory school level. At the upper secondary level, the diachronic approach to learning literature has been replaced by a “reader-centered approach” (NC 2010, Appendix 1, 1.3.1.), which is supposed to provide opportunities for individual choice, but also removes the basis for studying the cultural values that underpin ethnic and national identity. The aims expressed in the syllabi are unattainable due to excessive and non-integrated content.

The opportunity to blend the language syllabi in the NC with elements of the “hidden curriculum” also deserves attention in the context of the Estonian educational experience, as there are factors which can contribute to enrichment of learning and develop cultural as well as linguistic awareness. For this reason, visiting museums, attending theatre performances, meeting writers, participating in public speaking and literary competitions, festivals, conferences, etc. should be considered when designing NC (Kalamees-Ruubel & Laanemets, 2012, pp. 216–226), if learning at school is to have meaning for young people.
2.4 Teachers’ opinions of language syllabi in NC

The research project on teachers’ opinions (2010–2011) focused on their comprehension of the syllabi in the NCs. They evaluated how well the general goals of education corresponded to the aims stated in the syllabi and how the selected content of studies reflected the reality of the language situation and students’ interests. Teachers also described how prepared they were to implement the new NC and how useful they considered the support provided by the state.

The answers indicated that teachers felt uncertain about the NC. The responsibility and competence to develop integrated curricula at the school level is a matter of controversy. As 66% of respondents were delivering up to 30 lessons per week, they often considered school curriculum development additional unpaid work. 45% of respondents reported having to write formal documents that had to be handed in.

Teachers were quite critical of the selected content (38%), the inadequate number of lessons allotted to reaching the learning targets (90%), dropping learning language structures at the upper secondary level (70%), and rejecting the diachronic approach to learning literature (75%). They also worried about missing opportunities to integrate language subjects with other arts (55%). 95% of respondents having previous experience of extra-curricular activities recommended wider blending of formal and informal learning. 40% were critical of the content of in-service training provided.

Despite the small sample of respondents, there seem to be clear indications that something is wrong. Considering introduction of new curricula, we might agree with Widdowson (1990): “Individual teachers may be highly effective in making their own way by an intuitive sense of direction” (p. 1), but NC reform cannot be undertaken by shifting all the responsibility onto teachers, who lack the time, energy and competence to perform tasks beyond their powers.

Conclusion

Identifying the context in which learning is organized and takes place is essential to the design of NC and language syllabi. The factors and elements that comprise the context must be regularly researched. The heritage of the past, influences such as globalization, ICT, political aspirations, and the social and cultural values of a society reflected in the learning content, the opportunities of the hidden curriculum, and the professionalism of teachers are the important factors, which, if competently analyzed, could contribute to informed decisions about education and reduce uncertainty about future developments.

References


