

Special issue on
**Learning, teaching and assessment of second
foreign languages in school contexts**

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Editorial

The current special issue of *Apples – Journal of Applied Language Studies* features a subset of the papers presented at the symposium *Learning, teaching and assessment of second foreign languages in school contexts* held at Lund University, Sweden, in December 2016. The symposium was organised by the *TAL-project* (Granfeldt et al., 2016), a research project funded by the *Swedish Research Council* and focusing on the learning, teaching and assessment of second foreign languages (SFLs) in Swedish schools¹.

The symposium aimed at bringing together researchers working in different European countries to review the current situation for SFLs, i.e. languages like French, German and Spanish that are in most cases introduced after English in schools. In Europe, stakeholders widely support the “mother tongue plus two” language policy (European Commission, 1995), according to which all Europeans should be able to communicate in at least two foreign languages. A key element in the work of implementing this European language policy in educational settings continues to be the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching and assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001). Since its publication more than 15 years ago, the CEFR has become increasingly influential and integrated, in particular at the policy level (Figueras, 2012), although to a varying extent across European countries (see Erickson & Pakula, 2017 for discussion from a Nordic perspective). However, at a more practical level, in the development of teaching and learning materials and in classroom practices, Figueras (2012) finds that we are still far from a situation where the core ideas of the CEFR, like the

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action-oriented approach, are fully implemented. As a sign of its considerable influence, nearly all papers in the present volume refer to the CEFR in some way (see below for details)².

Despite long-standing political and societal ambitions and the development of high-level policy documents to support learning, teaching and assessment of foreign languages, such as the CEFR, reports and studies repeatedly suggest that SFLs are facing major challenges in many European educational systems. Commissioned by the European Council in 2007, *The First European Survey on Language Competences* (ESLC) studied both linguistic competences and contextual factors in 16 educational settings (European Commission, 2012). Among many other results, the ESLC report highlights the special status of English in contemporary western societies. Importantly, the ESLC also underlines the necessity of looking not only at pupils' achievements, but to include also the wider context in order to understand the current situation for SFLs in different countries (see e.g., Österberg & Bardel, 2016). In fact, the report from the ESLC also shows a great deal of variability between countries with respect to contextual factors such as policy, starting age and time allotted to teaching of SFLs.

In an attempt to contribute to further illustrations of contextual differences for SFLs in Europe, a **first purpose** of this special issue is to bring together empirical research on SFLs in the school context from different European countries. Some papers focus on contextual issues only whereas others also include learning outcomes. A **second purpose** of the special issue is to highlight learning, teaching and assessment of *oral language proficiency*. There are several reasons for this. Studies on learners' perceptions of the relative importance of different language skills tend to show that speaking is ranked very high (Fernández & Andersen, 2019/this issue). Moreover, oral production and interaction are to some extent under-researched competences. As an illustration, it can be noted that oral language proficiency was not included in the ESLC.

The special issue is divided into two parts, reflecting the two main purposes of the publication. In the first part, there are four papers focusing on SFLs in the school context in different European countries. The first paper by **Bardel, Erickson and Österberg** sets the ground by providing an overview of relevant research and reports on SFLs in the Swedish school context. The focus is on learning, teaching and assessment of SFLs in Sweden with certain comparisons made with other European countries. Such an overview has been lacking and it will be important in developing new research in this area. The paper points at both dilemmas and prospects for SFLs in Sweden. The authors discuss the fact that an SFL is not mandatory in the Swedish educational system and that despite measures introduced by the Government since 1994, the number of pupils studying an SFL does not seem to increase. The second paper by **Granfeldt, Sayehli and Ågren** presents the results of an empirical investigation into some relevant contextual factors for teaching and learning of SFLs in the Swedish school context. A stratified random sampling method was used to identify a large number of schools across the country using both socio-economic and geographical inclusion parameters. The paper reports on results from 147 school leaders who answered a detailed questionnaire about resources for and organisation of SFLs. The results show that there are differences both between languages (French, German and Spanish) and between schools, some of which can be related to socioeconomic characteristics of the schools and others to geographical differences. The third paper by **Fernández and Andersen** offers an analysis of

how oral proficiency is understood and, in particular, how progression is interpreted in the Danish educational system, from primary school to the university level. The study focuses on the three most taught SFLs in Denmark: French, Spanish and German. Comparisons between how progression is interpreted in language syllabi in Denmark and in the CEFR are also made. Through a detailed analysis of curricula documents, the authors find that progression above all seems to be interpreted at the level of tasks in the sense that different education levels encode different oral tasks. The paper by **Mitchell and Myles** concludes the first part of the special issue. Their paper thoroughly describes the policy and practice of foreign language education in England with a particular focus on early language learning. They also present empirical results from a classroom study on French in Year 3 beginner group and report that the children found an oracy-led teaching approach stimulating and enjoyable and that the children made observable progress in French. However, the low number of teaching hours (38 per year) put high demands on teachers to make the most out of the limited time allowance they have at their disposal. The authors finally discuss a potential conflict between, on the one hand, a willingness to maximise learning activities in order for the pupils to reach curriculum goals and, on the other hand, a need to focus on learning strategies in order for pupils to 'learn how to learn'.

In the second part, there are four papers on learning, teaching and assessment of (second) foreign languages. Two of the papers in this section are conceptual papers and two papers present empirical research. The paper by **Pakula** is a conceptual paper and starts by taking stock of what is known about learning oral proficiency in a foreign language in the two main research traditions, the psycholinguistic approach and the socio-cultural approach. The author then goes on to discuss the teaching of oral skills as part of language teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and focuses on what a language teacher needs to know about speaking and on what is important in teaching speaking. The paper ends by a list of recommendations to teachers and suggestions for further research. The following paper by **Nilsson, Harjanne and Rosell Steuer** presents an empirical investigation of how student teachers of SFLs (Spanish, German, French and Italian) in the Swedish context reflect on the importance of oral production and grammar in foreign language teaching during their theoretical courses and after their school practicum. The authors discuss, in relation to previous research, the origins of students' teaching cognition and to what extent it is based on their own experiences as pupils or university students or influenced by readings and seminars during language teacher education. Another topic in the paper is students' cognition about teaching oral proficiency in relation to their cognition about teaching grammar in the foreign language. The last two papers are concerned with the assessment of oral language proficiency. In her conceptual paper, **Figueras** discusses the key role of assessment in learning and teaching in general and in the skill of speaking in particular. The central role of task characteristics is also highlighted together with the importance of taking into consideration the implications and impact of different task characteristics. The author shows how research and social changes have reshaped the way speaking is defined and operationalised, and illustrates how speaking can be assessed validly and reliably. The paper ends with some recommendations for the development of useful and meaningful assessment tasks, which foster use of assessments contributing to learning. The last paper of this volume by **Borger** presents an empirical investigation of interaction features that were salient to

raters as they evaluated performances in a paired speaking test, part of a mandatory Swedish national test of EFL. Two groups of raters, 17 Swedish EFL teacher-raters and 14 external European raters, were included in the study. It is shown that raters incorporated a variety of interaction features in their rating decision, both at micro- and macro-level. Raters perceived the construct of interactional competence as co-constructed by the interlocutors and therefore contextdependent. The author ends with discussing implications for assessment in high-stakes contexts.

We hope that SFL researchers and teachers alike will find the collection of papers in the current special issue informative and interesting.

Endnotes

¹ For more information, see www.tal.lu.se

² The CEFR was recently complemented by a Companion Volume (CV) (Council of Europe, 2018). Building on the CEFR, the CV introduces new descriptors and new scales for certain areas.

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