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**CONCEPTUAL TOOLS FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATORS**

**WHEN DEVELOPING FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION**

**Abstract**

This article represents the Finnish approach to the future of foreign language teaching, studying and learning. It highlights the general overview of the key instruments or conceptual tools for foreign language teachers and educators to be used and profit from when developing foreign language education (FLE) and envisioning its future.

The key futuristic instruments, such as vision, strategy, scenario and mission are described and analyzed in order to better understand, visualize and formulate the future in regard to education in the field of foreign languages.

*Keywords: foreign language education, foreign language teachers and educators, vision, strategy, scenario, mission, conception of learning.*

Today, foreign language teachers not only in Finland but all over the world face, more than ever, the challenge of visualizing future language teaching, studying and learning. In educational parlance, revision, division and supervision may have been used more often than vision. In teacher education at least, we often face the challenge and demand of having all teachers act as visionaries, able to actively visualize future language teaching, studying and learning, while, at the same time, encouraging future teachers to follow suit.

To understand better the development processes in foreign language education and have a better comprehension in visualizing futuristic perspectives, some theorists have suggested certain key instruments used when foreseeing and envisioning the future, such as vision, strategy, scenario and mission. This is very much the heart of the matter in this article and also the main rationale for exploring this relatively uncharted territory and to lead teachers’ thinking towards a better understanding of the futuristic perspectives.

Before we start talking about the above mentioned aspects, we feel the need to outline the notion of the future in regard to education however without going into detail or discussing the future from the deepest sense as seen by many futurologists. Thus, the future is not to be foreseen, and yet, on the other hand, it is feasible to see and anticipate different kinds of futures. Even if we cannot predict the future precisely, it is generally accepted among futures researchers that we can affect the future and future developments through our own decisions, our actions, and our ways of behaving.

Let’s examine the different views towards the future:

1. One classification is based on three different attitudes.

* There are people who are driven to the future, as they believe, by “greater forces”, such as legislators and political decision-makers who are thought to be in the critical position to design the future.
* There are people who adapt to the future, who take the future as something inevitable but understand that future needs have the potential to be looked into in advance, and these people can be flexible enough when facing these needs.
* There are people who make the future. These individuals are convinced that their own future is − at least partly and to some extent − up to them themselves to create, to shape, to design. This kind of attitude calls for predictive behavior, which is often also called strategic thinking.

1. Another classification speaks of reactive and proactive attitudes towards the future.

* The reactive behavior is grounded on the questions like: How can we adapt to the future? How can we achieve our aims in the predicted world?
* A proactive attitude encourages us to ask: How do we influence the characteristics of all possible worlds? How will we achieve our aims in these possible worlds? And this latter attitude does not see the future as monolithic; rather, the future becomes a spectrum of different options and opportunities that are open to all of us.

In the light of the stated above clarifications we are to speak of the main instruments or conceptual tools to work with used when looking into the future in regard to foreign language education, such as vision, strategy, scenario and mission.

The first instrument that helps educators to cope with the future is vision. According to one English-language dictionary, a vision implies the “power of seeing or imagining, looking ahead, grasping the truth that underlies facts”.

This meaning is very close to how many Finnish scientists see the vision: looking forward, foreseeing and anticipating. Some theorists have suggested an even broader interpretation. Liebermann, for instance, when referring to general school developmental work, points out such aspects as leadership, professionalism, reform, teaching incentives, social realities, and teachers as colleagues. On the other hand, visions can also be interpreted through various and sometimes even contradictory concepts of teaching: engineering and apprenticeship as well as a developmental, nurturing or social reform according to Parr. The visions would then greatly depend on the approach adopted.

Visions are closely related to futuristic thinking, to the idea of doing something in order to affect the future. In this sense, creating visions, or visualizing the future, is needed at all levels, including those of the institution, its principal and the teachers themselves. This does not exclude student teachers, by any means.

All in all, a vision is defined as a view geared towards the future, an abstraction of some sort, which can then be made more concrete with goals, aims and objectives. A vision is something projected relatively far into the future, while goals and aims are more concrete, often measurable and chronological, so that they can be achieved by the end of a specified period of time. A vision always contains the idea of a better and more desired or desirable future. The vision accepted by an organization should form the basis for everyday action, because the conceptions related to the future promote a state of self-directedness.

In the context of our study the notion of the second instrument – strategy – will not be explained at full length; rather, a number of different facets are only to be presented, with a view to adding something to a rather established discussion.

So strategies consist of those paths that are geared towards creating and enabling visions. The vision defines the limits within which the strategies are being implemented. In a learning organization, the strategy is changed if something unexpected is faced. If an organization has a vision but no strategy, then, as Malaska eloquently states, the sky collapses when something completely unexpected occurs.

Strategies are often divided into competition strategies and visionary strategies. The first category of strategies aims in increasing the commercial competitivity, and are usually expected to come true within five years, often even much sooner. A visionary strategy, on the other hand, aims at coming true in the future as it will appear 10 or 15 years from today. Naturally, visionary strategies are more difficult to create, even if they are exactly what we would need now and are what we think of in this article when speaking of strategies and strategic thinking and planning.

Strategies usually consist of decision-making rules and practices, which help people to run the organization and to guide its behavior in the future. The rules and practices regarding the management of different organizations can be divided into four categories:

1. Rules that are used to assess the present and future capacity to perform. Goals, aims and objectives are some of the instruments used to “measure” these kinds of rules.

2. Rules that determine the relationship between the organization and its external environment.

3. Rules that determine the internal relationships of the organization and the different quality support mechanisms of the working order.

4. Rules that govern the daily working policy of the organization.

Sometimes the different strategies needed to develop and assess an organization are gathered into a “strategic cross” as Meristö, Määttä, Helakorpi stated. So called “strategic cross” contains four different kinds of knowledge linked to organization:

* knowledge related to aims: shared reflections concerning the future and the aims which an organization, such as a school, needs when developing into a networked or team school;
* situational knowledge: analysis of the status quo and the action environment;
* methodical knowledge: an organizational analysis and a survey of what the staff know, with a view to deciding about the methods that are needed in developmental work;
* strategic knowledge: a concrete plan of development or an implementation plan to be carried out jointly between different individuals and units of the organization.

In strategic thinking and planning, the typical mistake is not taking all four of these types of knowledge into consideration, but contenting oneself with one or two out of the four. In that way, not enough adequate information is gathered to work on.

One more instrument that helps educators to cope with the future is a scenario. Generally speaking, scenarios are optional or alternate images of the world or worlds of the future; possible worlds. They are powerful instruments that can be used to shape and visualize change, as well as all the ingredients and chains embedded in it.

Scenarios are often used to assess all of the weak signals that the future sends to this day. One could summarize the meaning of scenarios by saying that they are the future’s manuscripts based on the knowledge we have at present. One of the best-known scenarios is what is known as the PESTE scenario. PESTE stands for political, economic, social, technological and ecological.

The last instrument to be mentioned when considering futuristic planning on an organizational level is mission. Mission is usually preceded by a vision. Mission, briefly, means all the tasks that are required when advancing towards a vision.

Mission links a vision situated somewhere in the future with the present state of affairs, which is also the level of know-how as we experience it. In order to see mission implemented in the future become concretized as vision, we need an adequate level of know-how and a certain number of resources, as well as a certain level of purposiveness for all of this to come true. Briefly, for mission to manifest itself as vision, quite a few criteria or prerequisites must become tangible. Yet, both mission and vision are essential to be explicated, because otherwise we will not know the paths we are heading towards or the targets we should be aiming at. Vision is the futuristic state of the art, while mission is the way to proceed onwards from the present state of affairs.

To sum up, nowadays foreign experience in the sphere of education and pedagogy attracts great attention all around the world. We, the educators on a world scale, are very eager to study and analyze the best and the most successful models of educational systems and to implement relevant and appropriate elements into our own systems.

As a conclusion, we can admit that

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