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## **Do Danes need linguistic and cultural competence in other languages than English?**

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### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1. Foreign language teaching in the Danish *folkeskole***

In Denmark foreign languages are introduced in public primary schools when children are about 9 years old. The first language is English and it is compulsory for all children. The next foreign language children meet in the *Folkeskole* is usually German (around 85% choose to learn German) or French, in grade 6 or 7 at the age of 13. It is not compulsory for schools to offer French; so it is up to the school authorities to choose to offer French or not. Some schools offer French and German on equal terms for the children to choose between. Other schools offer only German at grade 6 (13 years old children). Or the schools can choose to offer French in grade 8. In private schools ( *Frie Grundskoler*), which are subsidized by the state and attended by approximately 14% of all children, it is quite common to start with English in grade 1 (children who are 6 years old). Some of these schools also introduce and teach German or French to the children from their first grade. These

children will then in grade 2 or 3 be introduced to French, German or other languages, according to their first choice.

So the picture given shows that all children learn English, many German but French to a much smaller extent. Some children will study English from 6 or 7 years old and some from the age of 9 or 10. Most of these children will also study German from the age of 13 to 15 ( 3 years) and a much smaller group of children will study French from the age of 13 (or 14) to 15 ( 2 or 3 years). In sum, English is the first and most important foreign language in Denmark.

Teachers in the *folkeskole* are educated at a university college: a College of Education. Here they study for 4 years and choose to specialize in 2 or 3 subjects, e.g. Danish as mother tongue and English as a foreign language or German or French. After 4 years of study they become Bachelors of Education (B.Ed.).

Local schools and local teachers are alone responsible for the choice of materials and methods they employ in their instruction.

## **1.2. The *Folkeskole* Act**

The present *Folkeskole* Act was passed in 1993 but several major and minor changes have taken place since. The latest edition came into force in 2006. The Aims of the *Folkeskole* are presented in two paragraphs which focus on the pupils' acquisition of knowledge and skills which prepare them for further education, lifelong learning, familiarisation with Danish culture and history, understanding of other cultures and man's interaction with nature, and an all-round personal development of the individual pupil. The *Folkeskole* shall prepare the pupils for participation, joint responsibility, rights and duties in a society based on freedom and democracy.

It is expected that the *Folkeskole* will emphasise that teaching and learning focus on acquiring both knowledge and skills, individual development and taking

part in a democratic society. The aim of the *Folkeskole* is to promote and further the development of both intellectual and personal skills and competences. There is a focus on teaching and learning Danish culture and history and understanding of other cultures.

Provision of the *Folkeskole* is a municipal matter. It is the responsibility of the municipal council to provide all children with free education and the municipal council lays down the targets and the framework for school activities in the order to realise the demands of the *Folkeskole* Act.

### **1.3. The Aims of the folkeskole**

*1. (1) The Folkeskole is, in cooperation with the parents, to provide students with the knowledge and skills that will prepare them for further education and training and instil in them the desire to learn more; familiarise them with Danish culture and history; give them an understanding of other countries and cultures; contribute to their understanding of the interrelationship between human beings and the environment; and promote the well-rounded development of the individual student.*

*(2) The Folkeskole is to endeavour to develop the working methods and create a framework that provides opportunities for experience, in-depth study and allows for initiative so that students develop awareness and imagination and a confidence in their own possibilities and backgrounds such that they are able to commit themselves and are willing to take action.*

*The Folkeskole is to prepare the students to be able to participate, demonstrate mutual responsibility and understand their rights and duties in a free and democratic society. The daily activities of the school must, therefore, be conducted in a spirit of intellectual freedom, equality and democracy.*

*2. (1) The Folkeskole is the responsibility of the municipalities, cf, however, article 20, paragraph 3. The municipal board is responsible for ensuring every child in the*

*municipality a free education in the Folkeskole. The municipal board is responsible for setting the targets and framework for the activities of the school within the provisions of this Act, cf article 40 and article 40a.*

*(2) Each school is responsible for ensuring the quality of the education in accordance with the aims of the Folkeskole, within the framework of the Act, cf article 1, and also bears the responsibility for determining the planning and organisation of the programme of education.*

*(3) Students and parents are to work together with the school in order to live up to the aims of the Folkeskole". ([www.uvm.dk](http://www.uvm.dk) – English)*

#### **1.4. Subjects, Curriculum and Common objectives**

The Minister of Education determines the regulations and objectives for specific grade levels (grade level objectives) for the specific subjects/topics. The end and form level objectives establish a national objective for the direction and goals of the teaching, ensuring that students acquire the knowledge and skills in the subject at, respectively, the end of their programme of education and at the conclusion of specific form levels.

Common objectives cover the two most important sets of academic texts regarding the school's subjects and topics.

The binding national objectives in the form of the subject aims, central knowledge and skills areas and form level objectives.

Guidelines for curricula and descriptions of the educational development designed for reaching the form level and end objectives. Once the local curricula and descriptions receive the approval from the municipal board, they also become binding – and thereby common – for the individual schools.

In relation to the aims, politicians had required that instructions be given in pedagogy in the different subjects: called “Central knowledge and proficiency areas”. These texts are not entirely the same for English, German and French but they carry similar headlines:

- Communication skills
- Language and usage
- Language learning
- Cultural and social relations.

The content and division into language and cultural dimensions are strongly influenced and inspired by work of the Council of Europe: *A Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; Learning, Teaching and Assessment* (2001). In the 1995 Curriculum there was a strong emphasis on valuing both linguistic and cultural competence in the teaching of foreign languages, and there was an emphasis on terms such as ‘pupils developing international understanding and understanding of own culture’. There have been changes in the Aims and Central Knowledge and Proficiency Areas in 2002, in 2004 and again in 2009 but the basic construction of three linguistic dimensions and one cultural dimension has been maintained. The Aims are no longer similar for the three foreign languages, furthermore the Central Knowledge and Proficiency Areas differ quite a lot in accordance with the fact that English is now compulsory from grade 3 to grade 10.

There is an emphasis on teaching both the linguistic and the cultural dimension in the three foreign languages in the national curriculum in 2009, but there are on the other hand no specific cultural or intercultural objectives set for the teaching. The purpose of learning about the cultural dimension is expressed in terms of ‘using basic cultural knowledge in reading literature, in comparison between own and English/German/French culture and in communicative situations’.

## 2. FLT teaching and learning – focussing on French

The demand for a new perspective on knowledge and language teaching, and the context of change in the *Folkeskole* outlined so far need then to be addressed in empirical ways and in this section I will focus on foreign language teaching in French in the *Folkeskole*.

As a researcher I also deal with the political dimension of different curricula for the *Folkeskole*, both the ‘Act of the *Folkeskole*’ and the ‘Aim of the teaching of French as a subject’ and different political texts handling the issue of implementation of internationalisation in the Danish *Folkeskole*. All the texts at the political level are based on a national paradigm even in their call for work towards an international dimension in teaching processes.

Twenty years ago Danes considered Denmark to be culturally homogeneous, but recent events have revealed to them that they are now living in a diverse society. The homogeneous conception of culture is however still mirrored in the national curricula for FLT. The curricula were changed in 2009 and now the term ‘intercultural understanding’ has been introduced, but it remains rather vaguely described. Moreover, no specific guidelines are given as to how teachers are to plan lessons. This means that teachers in both teacher education and teachers in the *folkeskole* are in the process of finding their own solutions to the demands of the new situation, a situation for which their training has not prepared them.

One of the factors which explains this impression lies in the failure to cite relevant research. In the curricula of 2004 for French there are no references to research in *culture pedagogy*, although in the curricula of 2009 there are a few. This may be due to the fact that the official guidelines for teacher education in French from 2006 have taken in theoretical aspects such as ‘intercultural competence’ and ‘intercultural communication’ but with no specific references to research nor any

indications towards a development in the understanding of culture as diverse and dynamic. *Culture pedagogy* in FLT in Denmark is a relatively new research area.

### **3. Investigating the linguistic and the cultural dimension in French as a foreign language in the Danish folkeskole**

#### **3.1. Findings**

In 1988, French as an FL had changed its position in schools as it was now offered to 13 year old pupils whereas it had earlier only been offered to 16 year old pupils. Most of the pupils had chosen French for emotional reasons: they liked the language and the image of exoticism connected to the language and culture. Often their parents had advised them to choose French. They had otherwise no clear profound rationale or expectations for studying French, and only a few mentioned this subject as what they might study at university.

The teachers found it challenging to teach a younger group of pupils than they had been used to and were very focused on the need for new teaching materials. They found it difficult to represent French as FL in the school and in the local area and felt neglected when applying for new teaching materials. They put much effort into teaching the linguistic dimension but in relation to the cultural dimension they relied heavily on their own personal and subjective understanding of the culture. In other words, they mostly told the pupils about their own travelling experiences in a combination with brochures and magazines, a result not dissimilar to the findings of Byram, Esarte-Sarries and Taylor in English schools (1991).

In all of this, both pupils and teachers referred to French language and culture as homogeneous entities.

I had expected to observe some changes in the way teachers realized the linguistic and the cultural dimensions from 1988 to 1999 as both a new curriculum and new teaching materials had been produced. However, in fact the overall impression was

more or less the same. Teachers and pupils complained over the short period of teaching and learning French as the major reason for the feeling of incompleteness in connection with both the linguistic and the cultural dimension.

The results in 1999 showed that teachers were well aware of the need to implement and teach both the linguistic and the cultural dimension, but they said they had difficulties both in finding the time to do so and also because they found it very difficult to define culture. Some teachers not only mentioned but also repeated several times during the interviews that they found teaching the cultural dimension difficult and complex. Some said that they were familiar and at ease with the policy demands in the national curriculum for French but others felt very uneasy in having to teach the cultural dimension. Almost all of them found it very difficult to create a balance in the teaching of both dimensions and mentioned the lack of time and the overall bad conditions for teaching French.

The teachers' own studies of French at the national colleges of education had not been focused on their learning of a cultural dimension, but on the linguistic dimension, and they did not refer to the concept of culture in their own teaching. In their spontaneous discourse in interviews, they used a very imprecise and nationally oriented description as also found by Byram & Risager (1999) in their investigations of teachers of all languages in Denmark and England.

Most of the school pupils again said in 1999 that they had chosen French for emotional reasons. They did not have exact goals for the study of French but had chosen it because 'it is such a nice language'. It had a scent of exoticism and they were mostly interested in learning about France and the French and being able to speak French 'without offending people'. They felt that the teaching materials were old-fashioned and out of date and that lessons were sometimes boring. On the other hand they were very loyal to their teachers and said that knowing the difficulties of learning how to speak just a little French, they had to work a lot with grammar and phonetics and written exercises.

Again in 2005, most of the pupils stated that they did not have any concrete ideas of why and for what purpose they had chosen to study French. They often stated that they had chosen French because their parents wanted them to do so, or that they found German too difficult or had heard that it was difficult. Their reasons were mostly expressed in terms of emotional statements and they seldom formulated the choice of French as a means to other ends or as a target in itself. Thus, most of them did not have precise and accurate purposes for their learning but found it interesting to obtain insight into what they called “French language and culture”. When asked about what culture meant to them they mostly referred to fashion, perfumes, Paris as a great city and French sport icons. They seldom referred to films or music, which undoubtedly reflects that French films are rarely shown on Danish television or in Danish cinema and that French music is even less frequently played on Danish radio.

When asked about the workload they often admitted that they did not spend much time on homework for coming lessons. The majority of pupils stated that they found French phonetics very difficult and that they found it difficult to learn and achieve the linguistic goals as presented in the national curriculum.

When asked about the cultural dimension they often answered that it was difficult to identify with French culture as they found it ‘far away’ and therefore quite exotic. They all talked about the linguistic and the cultural dimension in the singular and did not differentiate in their comments between ‘the French’ in Paris, in France or elsewhere in the world. They had been told about the Francophone countries and areas around the world but had no precise picture of French people as individuals.

Their teacher was very open-minded and had welcomed me into her class. We did not discuss her understanding of ‘culture’ or the cultural dimension, but she referred to the curriculum of 2004 and said that she felt very familiar with the text. She invited me into her class as this year they were going to work specifically with

the cultural dimension. The class worked in groups and with different themes such as 'food', 'leisure time', music and films', 'hobbies', 'towns and places in France'.

She did not have any doubts about the possibility and outcomes of working with the cultural dimension, but the teaching materials dated back to 1988-89, i.e. the year of my first questionnaire, and she was very annoyed not to be able to present new and updated materials to her pupils. New teaching materials have in fact been produced but many schools find them too expensive to invest in. For that reason she spent most of her vacations in France and brought back whatever material she could get for free. Again as in previous investigations, both the teacher and the pupils talked about France and 'the French' as homogeneous and stable artefacts.

My empirical investigations have, in short, shown that there has been little or no change in French teaching over the last twenty years. It is still seen as one target language with one homogeneous target culture, and no reference to a transnational perspective into the francophone world or beyond. The question is therefore if and how a new perspective can be introduced.

### **3.2. Conclusions – changing language-culture pedagogy for a changing Denmark...**

Byram and Risager (1999) found that both English and Danish teachers of FLs wanted to address the cultural dimension in their teaching but that they found it difficult to teach and difficult to find the time. My investigation, which addressed both teachers and pupils, gave the same impression but furthermore it showed that teachers and pupils felt lost in finding time and energy for the development of a reasonable result in oral and written French and in giving the pupils more than just superficial insight in Francophone cultures and French as both a mother tongue and FL. My survey also revealed that teachers do not feel adequately trained for the teaching of the cultural dimension. In fact it seemed that 'intercultural competence' and 'intercultural speakers' (Byram, 1997) are very abstract goals in connection

with the teaching and learning French in the *Folkeskole* in Denmark (Gregersen, 2008, 2009).

To me, it is important that pupils discover that they may have just as much or even more in common with a pupil of another cultural and linguistic background – in their own class or somewhere in the world. But, on the other hand we as FL teachers shall not conceal the differences among people because we all learn more about ourselves when reflecting on different approaches to things in life.

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