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Language teaching in Denmark

Grammar, culture, communication and competencies: some current issues and challenges

0. Abstract and introduction

Language teaching in Denmark is in the process of facing a number of fairly serious challenges. Some of them have been on the agenda for a long time, others are more recent in origin; but since the pace of educational reform has increased, they are now on the table together, more or less. They can be broadly summed up in the form of the following five questions:

- The identity question: What precisely is it that makes language teaching uniquely valuable?
- The globalization question: Why learn any other language than English?
- The teacher authority/work ethic issue: Why should students work harder than they want to do, merely because that is a prerequisite for acquiring high-standard language skills?
- The educational administration and policy issue: How can overall aims and purposes be implemented in a way that connects with reality on the ground?
- The didactic issue: If an enhanced level of professionalization is necessary for future language teachers, how can we make that available in a time of shrinking public funding?

These issues are all connected; and the dilemmas must be understood in relation to the first and basic question, that of the identity of languages as school subjects. For a long time, a number of partly competing, partly complementary philosophies have co-existed in parallel with different degrees of influence in different corners of the school system. The traditional identification between language teaching and *grammar* has been on the wane for forty years and has a more or less residual character. With respect to *culture* (another keyword), the ‘national philology’ conception may also increasingly appear to be a thing of the past, but it still has considerable influence, especially at the higher educational levels. Other forms of cultural identity have been eroding this way of understanding language and culture, but none has managed to establish a really secure foothold. Since the sixties, an accent on the *communicative* dimension of language teaching has been very influential and is probably the most generally accepted definition of the goal of language teaching – and at the level of content, this has to some extent gone hand in hand with an emphasis on material reflecting contemporary student-oriented culture. Most recently, an increased emphasis on *competencies*, however, has focused on what students need to be able to do with language, in conjunction both with globalization and with the revolution in information and communication technology.

In the article I discuss the different challenges and try to point out where the serious problems are. Although aspects of the picture I present may appear to be rather bleak, that is not the point I wish to make. These aspects, rather, form the necessary background to a discussion of what needs to be done. The suggestions presented draw on my experience as a co-chairman of a committee on language teaching from first grade to university level in

the Ministry of Education, and I will present some of the suggestions made in the white paper that it produced. Among the suggestions are that four explicitly specified types of competency should be included as overall goals in the school curriculum: Number one is the use of language as a ‘window on the world’, i.e. the essentially receptive skill of using the language taught as a medium through which to gather knowledge and understanding of the culture(s) and society/ies associated with the target language. The other three are communication, aesthetic appreciation and response, and intercultural competence. The report emphasizes that the new goal of ‘competencies’, understood as things the students should be able to do with the language, cannot replace the old goal of more narrowly defined qualifications: if ‘competencies’ are to be anything more than a fancy buzzword, they must stand on the shoulders of good old-fashioned language skills. Once that is made clear, however, the committee believes that a competency approach may enable the school system to reinvigorate also some traditional goals, including those of the cultural dimension. However, a key issue will be the possibility of providing language teachers with opportunities for lifelong development of their professional skills.

1. The identity question: What precisely is it that makes language teaching uniquely valuable?

Denmark is a small country which is strongly dependent on foreign relations, commercially as well as politically and culturally, so the need for foreign languages has never been seriously questioned. Combined with the fact that education generally has had a high priority, it means that by and large the situation is in many ways good when it comes to foreign language teaching and learning in Denmark. Language learning is generally believed to be both a good as well as a useful thing.

Within this broad continuity, however, the role of languages as part of the school curriculum has changed a great deal in the past hundred years. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the classical languages were in a dominant position, with (on the one hand) an emphasis on ancient culture as the foundation of modern European identity and (on the other) an emphasis on grammar as the backbone of language acquisition. From the point of view of modern languages, this stands as the bad old days of language teaching, and in a way it is strange that there is any reason to mention this practice, since it is more than a hundred years since it was first denounced in Denmark, and it plays only a very marginal role nowadays. But precisely because it has survived as a bogeyman, it is necessary to remain aware of it in order to understand some of the present-day issues. Part of the reason is that there has been an unclear relation between on the one hand a writing-based and grammar-oriented teaching practice, and on the other hand a strong emphasis on cultural content – even if this is not logically necessary: an emphasis on culture and identity is fully compatible with a teaching style that emphasizes spoken communication and understanding. But historically there has been a certain affinity between grammar and culture, also because there has been a relationship between the prestige scales associated with grammatical correctness and high culture.

The cultural side of foreign language teaching has been associated the the pattern of thinking known as the ‘national philologies’. In this model, the main argument for learning a language is to obtain access to the cultural riches to which the language provides the key. This has again traditionally been associated with a set of canonical authors and texts, including names like Shakespeare, Goethe and Molière. This canon has changed, and in the school contexts

the list of names has been extended to include aspects of popular culture, including popular singers and other personalities who could enhance and profile the attractions of the treasures of foreign culture that language learning would make accessible to younger generations.

As an aspect of perceived and potent cultural reality it has been clear for a while that the 'national philology' way of thinking is on the wane. One reason for this is the lessened prestige of high culture generally in the modern era and among broad sections of school children and students. When we teachers want to be open towards the winds of change we affirm that it is good thing that the snob element of culture has diminished – people who manifest an interest in high culture nowadays are likely to have a genuine interest in it rather than wanting to appear 'cultured'. But clearly it is easier to teach students if they have an advance respect for those aspects of high culture that they do not yet fully understand, as opposed to a situation when they increasingly demand that subjects have to compete for their attention based on what they are spontaneously interested in at the moment.

I shall return to the issue of school culture. But apart from the diminishing role of traditional high culture, the national philologies are also facing a threat from a different quarter. The association between nation and identity, and with it the association between cultural and linguistic identity, is being very quickly relativized because of the impact of increasing international contact, both on the cultural and the personal level. Young people are increasingly oriented towards a youth culture that is less evidently part of their national identity, and they increasingly go to work and live outside their own country. On the ideological level more than on the existential level, a currently influential way of thinking is bound up with multiculturalism, and this has to some extent left a manifest identification with the nation to groups that are not obvious targets of identification to large groups of young people. The nation has increasingly become a salient but contested concept in the public arena of cultural identification processes, rather than their obvious background. Where the nation used to be the major level of identification, there are now levels both above and below it that compete for identification, and on both levels the assumed link between language and culture is under attrition: Some cultural forces obviously operate across language barriers – others differ within the borders of a single overarching language community. We are all part-time internationalists, and part-time members of sub-cultures nowadays – and both levels are enrichments in relation to a situation where only a single prescribed national canon was available.

Even so, it is also slowly becoming clear how much of the cultural landscape has been bound up with this unity, even for those who have not thought of it in those terms. Specifically with respect to language teaching, this way of thinking has a strong link with for instance the integrative motives for language learning (especially of course in contexts where the language community is not physically present in the environment): If potential language learners admire and identify with the whole nation, it is easier to put the required effort into learning. If there is no identifiable "language-and-culture unit" that you can want to belong to, it therefore undermines one of the major motivational forces of language learning in school. Especially at the higher levels, some version of the view whereby the most impressive cultural achievements, as part of an overall view of the speech community/nation/heritage, is a central element in a language as a learning target, is difficult to replace as one of the mainstays in achieving high standards of language understanding. It is therefore not surprising that language teachers are generally oriented towards a self-conception as carriers of a cultural transmission process.

In its more contemporary versions, however, this view has had to co-exist with the view of languages, as the object of language teaching in schools, as primarily *instruments of communication*. Communication is often counterposed with 'grammar', as the main element in the transition from old-fashioned to modern methods. In that perspective communication is a good candidate for being the real, universally approved aim of language teaching. Thanks to my predecessor as professor of English in Copenhagen, the great Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, Danish language teaching became communication-oriented at a fairly early point in time, and in Danish primary school this has given very good results. Around 80% of Danish citizens feel they have a good working command of English as a medium of communication (cf. Preisler 1999). The classical problem of knowing all about what one should NOT do when speaking, while being very reluctant to actually speak, is not a problem for language teaching in Denmark generally, and the good results are perhaps especially manifest in relation to English, because of the privileged status of that language in the cultural environment.

However, at this point it should be added that there is an important difference between a broad, cultural commitment to the communicative ideal of language teaching and a focused professional competence in actually doing communicative language teaching. Where the former has been something of a mass movement, high-level professional didactic competence has been a much more restricted phenomenon in the Danish educational landscape. The broad cultural version of the communicative 'turn' was in tune with influential strands in Danish tradition, with ties to the towering figure of Grundtvig as the prophet of Danish educational thinking. The living, spoken word, the key element in the 'school for life' as Grundtvig called it, as opposed to the 'school for death' marked by rote learning and dead languages. But this way of thinking about education has not fostered an emphasis on professional teaching skills, to some extent quite the opposite – since the key element was the emphasis on a caring environment and teaching on the child's premises, letting the child develop in accordance with her own interests and dispositions. In this approach, communication was to some extent identified with 'existential' communication of the kind that the child would spontaneously engage in, and only secondarily a skill defined in terms of what the targets of teaching were.

Therefore one needs to be aware that there are two rather different things being talked of as communication-oriented language teaching. By far the most common one is the broad cultural version, which is not driven by any well-defined didactic conception, but whose main feature is that the success of language teaching is measured for most teachers by the extent to which they can actually get the students to communicate actively in that language during teaching. This aim has of course had consequences for the nature of the content that language textbooks and teaching strategies draw upon. Rather than traditional high culture, a communicative aim favours the type of content that goes with naturalistic settings and everyday activities and concerns. Whatever the merits of this broad strategy, it is necessary to be aware that compared with the content associated with the high culture canons of the national philologies, it has resulted in a considerable loss of prestige for the language subjects (as also noted by Professor Raasch, speaking at this conference).

This loss of prestige has made itself felt both among students and in the educational system generally. Where there used to be a sense that those who were culturally and linguistically up to reading the classics in the European languages, had achieved a 'cultural capital' (with Bourdieu's term) that was equivalent with that of science and mathematics,

language classes to some extent became associated with endless sequences of small talk, where the role of the content was reduced to being more or less successful input to that activity. In the seventies, when the cultural climate was strongly oriented towards social deprivation and suffering, the teaching of German went through a phase that was metonymically named after a book, namely “Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo”, the memoirs of a young drug addict, which stands for a phase of cultural content that many German teachers remember with a shudder.

One of the consequences was that a sense of progress virtually disappeared from many language classrooms. Taking a language class tended to give a sense of ‘more of the same’. Reading the learning targets in official documents, it was often difficult to see any difference from seventh year in primary school and university levels: It was more or less a matter of being able to communicate adequately and fluently in the target language. Professional didactic competence in communicative language teaching should of course not be blamed for this development – and is of course something teachers ideally should have no matter what the cultural dimension of language subjects might be. The problem was in the sense of what the core content of language teaching was.

This rather unclear situation has generated a dilemma for language teachers that has to do with the cultural issue. On the one hand, there is suspicion based on the core aim of communication against the aptness of inherited cultural content as a vehicle for class discussion, and an orientation towards content that is inherently attractive to the students. This includes contemporary culture, including media, computer games etc. This has gone with an assumption that communication is an attractive goal because it is seen as *easier* than learning grammar, without a counterbalancing emphasis on how complex issues you need to be able to talk about, making language subjects either nice and harmless, which is sometimes the case for English, or if they were not nice and harmless, then a legitimate object of stubborn resistance, which is sometimes the case for German. On the other hand, there is a feeling that language classes should have something to offer that goes beyond the everyday issues that students know in advance. With communication understood as everyday oral communication, and the tourist situation as the most immediately obvious naturalistic arena, one may ask how essential the role is that the foreign language can claim. This sceptical attitude towards the broad communicative current in language teaching, however, has not generated a clear alternative positive focus. This question, again, is especially critical for foreign languages other than English. This unresolved identity situation was an important part of the background for the committee that I mentioned above.

2. The globalization question

This situation is thus problematic. In the old days, when I was a child, the identification between language and nation also meant that all languages were essentially equal. In the last twenty years, as everyone knows, this situation has changed drastically, and English has become the primary medium of international communication. The situation in which you had to learn German to speak with the Germans, Russian to speak with the Russians, etc., has been replaced by a situation in which the way it presents itself to many people is that you have to learn English to speak with the world.

As widely recognized, and also as reflected in the language policy of the European Union, the view that English is all you need is a simplistic picture – a ‘stereotype’ of the kind that is familiar from the literature about the everyday awareness of linguistic variation as op-

posed to the realities of actual variation. What is clear is that English is carving out new domains for itself as part of internationalization processes involving commerce, education, politics, among others. This does not mean, however, that national languages in general are on the way out. Although languages are dying out at an alarming rate, no one suggests that this is likely to be the immediate fate of the national languages within the European Union, for instance. The question that needs to be addressed, then, is what the status and role of national languages are going to be in the future for which we need to prepare the coming generation of students.

In order to discuss foreign language teaching, you therefore need to develop a new understanding of the role of the mother tongues in the new world of International English. An increased level of sociolinguistic awareness is therefore required in order to discuss language issues: the question of which language to choose in which situation, which could be successfully suppressed in the age of monolithic national languages, now becomes inescapable in the linguistic everyday life of an increasing number of citizens.

The first arena to consider is the domestic one, which raises the question of domain loss. For instance, it may be asked, will all higher education be in English in the foreseeable future? This question falls outside my purview in this article, but the premise on which my argument is based is that we should base our understanding of bilingualism on the national level on experience with bilingualism at the individual level (cf. Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas). Depending on circumstances, having to operate with two languages can either enhance or improve the individual's linguistic coping skills. In one case, which has been described as 'semi-lingualism', the individual is fully proficient in neither of the two languages – in the other, he is in both of them (and command of one leads to increased awareness of the possibilities of the other language). National policies should reflect an awareness of the risk of the 'neither-nor' situation and take active measures to avoid it. The first prerequisite for doing that is to avoid a battle between the two languages, either by seeing English as the enemy or by seeing the national language as a folkloristic relic – and instead make sure that steps are taken to ensure a situation where the society has two vigorous and fully functional languages living side by side.

Such a policy should also be taken as the foundation of foreign language teaching. In nations with the kind of bilingualism that is characterized by English being used in a number of situations that call for international transparency, there will be a range of contexts, also beyond hearth and home, where the national language is being used for core areas of communication. The type of communication for which international English is appropriate is thus likely to remain a fairly narrow strand in the whole web of communication in a country. A belief in the sufficiency of English as sole foreign language would entail focusing on this type of communication to the exclusion of all others. That would be a continuation of the narrow (instrumental) view of communication as a goal of language, comprising (in addition to tourism and the newest computer games) a strictly professional domain: learning to handle the basic mechanics of relations with the rest of the world, just as everybody else round the world does.

Instead, we should understand the linguistic complexity of Europe as approaching a type of linguistic complexity that is familiar from the third world – one in which a number of different languages are within the purview of one's interests for a variety of different purposes. This calls for a set of policies to cope with the necessary upgrading of language

skills. Globalization does not simplify the language situation, on the contrary: just as in the identity issue, we need to become aware that there are languages at different levels, instead of only one at the national level.

As part of that new complexity, globalization raises challenges of understanding and enrichment that make it increasingly important to invest in the ability to understand what others think and feel when they are at home. But it is not obvious to all that there is a step beyond the obvious need for English. This raises the issue of the cultural content of understanding in a way that goes beyond a simplified view of communication as the only goal of language teaching.

3. The teacher authority/work ethic issue: Why should students work harder than they want to do, merely because that is a prerequisite for acquiring high-standard language skills?

This emphasis needs to be addressed in an educational climate where the question of what is good for the students can no longer be addressed without taking into consideration the opinion of the students themselves. This is of course a moral as well as a practical imperative, and a great advance for humanity. Nevertheless, as all teachers will recognize, it also complicates the life of teachers and educational politicians considerably.

A few years ago I co-authored a book entitled 'The school on free wheels' (Bugge/Harder 2002). The point was to prise apart a symbiosis of two views which had become welded together in the educational debate: the belief that education should operate in the interest of the students rather than the interest of the 'system' – a point of view that no one wanted to dispute – and the belief that educational goals must always be defined – or at least accepted – by the students themselves, on a day-to-day basis, in order to be legitimate. An unintended consequence of this confusion was that it was widely believed that if the students did not feel motivated to achieve a particular goal, then either the goal must be wrong or the teacher must have done something wrong. This belief was reinforced by the very visible existence of high-profiled cases of the system imposing arbitrary demands on students and on teachers doing things that were objectively wrong. There is every reason to dismantle obsolete requirements and make efforts to improve teaching.

However, because of this confusion the development from the old arbitrary authoritarianism towards a school catering to students' real needs had an unforeseen fellow traveller in the form of the set of expectations created among students who no longer lived in fear of what a harsh world would force upon them. The mindset that filled the void was not in all cases that of eager young learners all set to learn everything they felt they needed to understand the world and improve their chances of interesting, profitable and personally fulfilling employment (as idealists had expected). For students who had no experience of personally fulfilling participation in education, and also for those who had such experience but who felt that there were other activities that were even more attractive, education simply dropped far down in the perceived hierarchy of personal priorities. The world of 70-channel-TV, computer games and the internet is also a world in which the school as a preferable alternative to boredom or hard work at home has all but vanished, and instead it is faced with ever fiercer competition for students' attention and interest. Briefly put, education became a commodity, part of the set of choices facing young consumers. Instead of setting their own educational goals, would-be students increasingly put goals other than educational ones first.

This means that the most important requirement of school subjects, as part of everyday school life, became that they were *sexy*. In the perspective described above, where flagging student interest must be a sign that the subject was irrelevant or the teacher was bad, this created a strong pressure on the teacher to make the subject as sexy as possible – or live with a sense of failure and irrelevance.

This made the situation of languages deemed to be ‘hard’ very perilous, putting them in a position of having the same problems as the natural sciences, which are having recruitment problems all over the western world. The languages that appear to offer an easy path forward will gain – and this has been the perception of English and to some extent Spanish, which is a new language at Gymnasium level in Denmark. German, which used to be taken for granted at higher levels in Denmark, has been the chief victim of this process. The level of command of German has been on the wane in Denmark for the past generation and is likely to continue a downward trend, unless something happens to reverse the developments with respect to prestige and work ethic.

One sad consequence of this development is that German and French texts can no longer be assigned as readings at Danish universities – the students are no longer willing and/or able to read them. When I began to study at the university (doing economics, as it happens), there was a German text that was used because it was the best (as it was patiently explained to raw students who were surprised that German was required). Such students went away slightly ashamed and went home to their parents to retrieve their German-Danish dictionary and got on with it. This no longer happens, also because it would lower productivity (and teaching at Danish universities is financed on a piecework basis). There used to be a specific requirement in philosophy that the philosophical tradition from Kant onwards had to be studied in German, but no longer.

To do something about this situation requires a rethinking of the role of the school and of the teacher, which is difficult because of the ideological mindset whereby hard work is associated with authoritarianism. The process is under way in Denmark, which I think has gone to greater extremes than most countries in accepting non-performance in the name of student-centred education (the problem also has to do with youth culture, where Denmark has the unenviable position of being the country in which young people drink more alcohol than in any of the countries with which we usually compare ourselves). It also has to do with what one can achieve at the political-administrative level, which brings me to the next section.

4. The educational administration and policy issue: How can overall aims and purposes be implemented in a way that connects with reality on the ground?

At the administrative level, there is considerable good will towards language education. The EU policy of one plus two has universal acclaim, and it is also generally accepted that there should be options at secondary level for doing more languages, as has been the tradition. However, if the dangers that I have mentioned are to be effectively combated, good will is not enough. This is true especially for models that offer choices in ways that have not been carefully constructed to ensure choices of equal *quality*. If school subjects need to be popular, and popularity is strongly negatively correlated with perceived difficulty, unintended consequences will follow.

This has come out in the new model for ‘gymnasium’ (upper secondary level) education. A new model has just been introduced in which the idea was to force students to choose two languages that they would learn to a higher level than before. Thus it was no longer allowed to drop a language that you had taken for three years in primary school (either German or French), possibly without really being able to use it, in favour of starting with a new language (that you would then have for two years at upper secondary level, still without reaching a very high level).

The idea was that if you dropped the primary school language, you would have to choose a language that offered an intensive course instead. Thus there was no intention to downgrade languages (rather the opposite) – but in fact, cutting out the soft options (in conjunction with other changes, one of which was that there is now no longer a special ‘language line’, because of the low prestige to which it had sunk, cf. above) turns out to have the consequence of reducing language teaching instead of getting the hard options to replace the soft ones. People simply cut down on their language choices instead. The minister is aware of this problem and is interested in finding ways of counteracting it, but we are only in the middle of the first year of the reform, and no one can say with any certainty what the outcome will be.

Another point where official regulations meet reality in unforeseeable ways is the well-intentioned move towards specifying more clearly what targets should be achieved at different levels. New standards of progression have been introduced, in harmony with the thinking expressed in the EU and Council of Europe levels levels. However, these targets are not reached merely by listing them as the official standards, as everybody knows. To make sure there is a link with reality on the ground, the government is introducing a programme of testing – but it has turned out to be more problematic than anticipated to develop testing that would do the job. And again, as everybody knows, testing in itself does not solve the problems. Unless the teachers have the hours as well as the professional skills necessary to bridge any gap they may be revealed between learning targets and student performance, tests are without effect – or may even be harmful because, as has been alleged in the case of the education system in the US, teachers scramble to get the students to beat the tests (in order to avoid trouble) – throwing all other educational goals to the winds.

In politics, this coincides with the ‘spin’ issue: increasingly, the battle focuses on making things *look* good, while resources invested in making them *be* good show no similar dramatic increase. Thus there may be no great interest in registering discrepancies between aims achieved on paper and aims achieved in the classrooms: from headmasters to ministers, protecting the organization against adverse publicity is becoming increasingly important in increasingly market-oriented educational systems. If the competition between appearances and reality (*Schein* vs. *Sein*) continues to increase the premium on the former, it will not benefit subjects that are already in the grip of market forces on the ground.

5. The didactic issue: How can we create an improved professional tool kit for future language teachers?

Many of the issues above involve problems that end up on the language teachers' desk – whatever we (or she) may want or think. Together they have made the language teacher's job very much more demanding than it used to be in the good (bad) old days of the grammar-translation method. Unfortunately teacher education in Denmark has not upgraded the

teachers' didactic equipment to an extent that matches the development in the challenges she faces. From a situation where everything about the language as taught in the classroom was fixed in advance and the teacher had the power, we have reached a situation where everything is fluid and negotiable on market terms – and clearly the teacher needs a much greater range of options in order to stay ahead of the game.

Sometimes increasing demands on professional skills are viewed with suspicion by teachers, because they are couched in management-like terms – as if the very personal job of dealing with the learning process of children and young people could be ‘handled’ by impersonal quasi-technological devices of the kind that come and go with pedagogical fashions. However, the point is obviously not to replace personal understanding with impersonal professionalism. Rather, the idea is that the range of options that the teacher has with respect to measures designed to achieve his or her personal aims should be increased, along with a professional knowledge of what has been tried and what works.

Unfortunately, knowledge of that kind is rather thin on the ground in the educational landscape in Denmark. Didactics has been the poor country cousin on the one hand of academic content disciplines and on the other hand of core pedagogic disciplines which have been more concerned with underlying psychological and institutional issues than with the mundane question of how to make things work in the classroom. At all levels, including those where one would look for people to teach the teachers, didactic knowledge is in short supply. There lies one of the major challenges for the Danish education system.

To this problem is added that there is no funding in sight that would make it possible to offer teachers upgrading courses (were they available in sufficient number) on an in-service basis. There is a growing awareness of the issue, and like everyone else, we are looking to Finland for long-term solutions. A central part of what is needed is to try to emulate Finland in enhancing the prestige status of the teaching profession, and various attempts to upgrade teacher training are under way.

6. The white paper

Three years ago I shared the chairmanship of committee in the ministry of education to try to formulate the ‘core identity’ of the foreign language subjects in Denmark across the curriculum. Other committees were set up for mother tongue teaching, sciences and mathematics, and the committees had a fairly close collaboration because they turned out to share some basic ideas. We were all concerned to provide the fashionable buzzword of ‘competency’ with a solid core of meaning, because we felt that it embodied a good point, although it was also often used in a way that reflected a measure of hot air and hype. We were sceptical, for instance, of the type of thinking that was at one time very popular, where competency was contrasted with academic knowledge, implying that one should go for the former rather than the latter. What we believed was a real step forward was the basic idea that school subjects ought to be judged on the basis of what they enabled students to *do*, rather than on the basis of what they had been *through* at school. At the same time we believed that no education could be set up unless you assumed that there was some relation between what you could do and what had been required of you while you were in school.

The language committee therefore introduced a distinction between a level of *qualifications* built on what in Danish is known as “the four skills”: receptive and productive capacity in the spoken and written medium. In making the level of qualifications more

precise, we made extensive use of the work done in the EU as well as the council of Europe. We also advocated an increased use of testing specifically in the area of vocabulary, not as a way of awarding *marks* to the students, but as a way to be more precise about measuring *progress*. We were very concerned to avoid the situation in which all students learn is how to beat the tests, so we suggested that tests should be spread over the year, avoiding competition among the students for the best testing scores and maximizing the desire of each student to achieve a steady standard of progress, so that the relevant comparison would be with one's own previous score, not with the scores of other students.

We also tried to assert the principle that all teachers should have both the right and the duty to be on a continuous path of in-service training, and no major new development could be implemented without one responsible 'ringleader' at each school being equipped to spread the word on the new elements – including testing: if teachers do not know how to handle the information provided by testing it is not going to make any (positive) difference.

Returning to the level of 'competency', the committee fleshed out the concept of 'competency' as a goal in foreign languages in the following way – which is simultaneously our bid for defining the necessarily complex identity of foreign language subjects in the future we are facing. Among a number of different suggestions we suggested that there were to be four key competencies which between them defined the aims of a foreign language subject. Students should practice the use of languages and texts in the following ways, as (or as vehicles of):

- Windows on the world,
- Communication (with specified target groups and situations),
- Aesthetic discernment and response,
- Intercultural competence.

The reason we put the use of 'language as a window on the world' first has to do with a desire to stress the role of reading, also as a dimension which has achieved new significance as part of the information revolution: Written information is now available in unimaginable quantities from the students' desks, rather than something that you had to buy or borrow books to get. Receptive skills have generally taken second place in the general awareness of language after the ability to express yourself orally; and although we did not want the question the significance of the oral revolution in language teaching, we believe that there was a need to adjust the balance. Being able to communicate fluently in the here-and-now is the most basic and elementary skill in language – but it is also the most difficult skill when it comes to a foreign language, and the one that becomes rusty first unless it is practiced. In contrast, once you have learnt to read a foreign language, the skill basically stays with you forever.

The importance of developing a 'window on the world' competence is particularly central when it comes to the role of foreign languages other than English. There are many good reasons why non-fluent Danish learners are likely to switch into English for purposes of immediate communication when they meet speakers of German or French, for instance. The most important is that if you speak English, you are meeting on equal terms – while if you speak the other person's mother tongue, you are putting yourself at a clear disadvantage. If, heroically, you decide to speak German or French (and I speak from personal experience) – even if you get into your stride (such as it is), there is always the risk that just when you try to make a particularly important point, you may hit a patch of stammering and gibbering ending in a humiliating retreat into English.

The situation is very different when it comes to using language as a pathway to understanding what goes on in other speech communities. The rise of a special type of international communication for which English is the appropriate medium does not mean that you get access to all the interesting things that go on in other countries via the medium of English. We need to have a way of understanding other people also when they are at home – and here the need to understand the languages of other countries is not very much affected by the rise of international English.

The same is true *a fortiori* for the third dimension, that of learning to approach texts from other languages (from rock music via traditional songs and stories to the crown jewels of the national canons). Also here, the competency dimension provides a new perspective. The traditional view of culture was at risk of being perceived as an essentially passive possession which belonged to the teacher and not to the students. In contrast, the capacity for aesthetic response, viewed as a type of skill that the school aims to foster in students, relocates the issue as belonging in the space between the student's background and interests and everything the foreign language has to offer. The message to students is: we do not want you to see foreign language texts only as instruments. Part of your ability to deal competently with them is to use the whole extent of your sensibilities to learn to appreciate the special flavours, nuances and perspectives that are associated with foreign languages, especially in texts written for aesthetic appeal.

Intercultural competence also involves a rethinking of what is going on in a foreign language classroom. The traditional assumption was that the classroom was a little pocket of (e.g.) 'Frenchness' – but in fact a more realistic assessment is to see it as a place where two cultures and languages meet and understanding has to take place in the troubled territory of uncertainties and uncharted ground. Instead of seeing this only as a defect, from which you can be saved only when you reach the haven of near-nativeness, there is a point in saying that this type of situation is something you have to live with in the modern world. Chances are that there will be an increasing number of situations in an increasingly multi-ethnic Europe where you have to navigate without being able to rely on your own cultural bearings, and where you have to sharpen your ability to reinterpret, pick up hints, ask for clarifications and expand your understanding as you go.

Tolerance is often mentioned as one of cardinal virtues of intercultural understanding, but I would like to suggest a slightly different focus. For one thing, there may be things in foreign cultures that you find intolerable, and rightly so (as there may be things about people in your own culture that you cannot stand). What matters in the context of intercultural communication is the willingness to enter into a process of gradually developing and redefining cultural assumptions. As things change, we need to be able to negotiate with each other what premises are to be regarded as the shared basis of understanding – so that (on the one hand) you do not expect everybody else to have the same cultural presuppositions as yourself, and (on the other) you do not feel that you have to swallow other people's assumptions wholesale. The negotiation of meaning is also part of conversations in one's own language – but the process becomes much more demanding when it is conducted in an unfamiliar language and with frames of reference that are new. Foreign languages, therefore, are excellent instruments of cultivating this essential competence.

Tolerance does not become irrelevant, but should be seen as a necessary starting point rather than the central goal. There is something rather unsatisfactory about a relationship built *solely* on tolerance (which is brought out if you consider that tolerance is also some-

thing that you can develop towards toxic substances). The goal is to use mutual tolerance as a basic 'traffic regulation' that makes it possible for individual members of the different subcultures to look for possibilities of establishing relations that are rewarding rather than merely bearable.

Communication, of course remains the centrepiece of foreign language activities. All the three other types of competence involve communication as one aspect, and the ability to make successful communicative contact with someone is the quintessential locus of language use. All the skills and experience that have been developed in the communicative language tradition should remain central to professional foreign language teaching – and one way of ensuring that will be to reform the practice of language so that there is a clearer difference between the broad communication-oriented mindset (which is not sufficient in itself as a basis for language teaching) on the one hand – and high-level professional skill in communicative language teaching on the other.

7. Final remark

I hope to have given an impression of the challenges that language subjects need to face if they are to find a satisfactory position in the educational landscape of the future. I hope also to have made it clear that the committee of which I was a member believe language subjects have a very important mission, which means that it is essential not just for language teachers, but for the whole society that these challenges are indeed faced. Many of the problems that the languages face are shared with other subjects (including in many respects, the science subjects). The things that need to be done are the stuff of which educational reforms are made, and some of the recommendations of the committee are in the process of being implemented. So many things are in fact happening that whatever one's perspective, the next few years will be very interesting to follow – also from the point of view of language teaching.

8. References

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