Enacting Multilingualism

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Enacting Multilingualism

From research to teaching practice in the English classroom

CAPPELEN DAMM AKADEMISK

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ISBN e-bok: 978-82-02-62833-8

ISBN trykt bok: 978-82-02-59562-3

1. utgave, 1. opplag 2018

Materialet i denne publikasjonen er omfattet av åndsverklovens bestemmelser. Uten særskilt avtale med Cappelen Damm AS er enhver eksemplarfremstilling og tilgjengeliggjøring bare tillatt i den utstrekning det er hjemlet i lov eller tillatt gjennom avtale med Kopinor, interesseorgan for rettighetshavere til åndsverk.

Illustrasjoner: s. 79 Roy Søbstad/Bøk, s. 125 Roy Søbstad,
s. 156, Tegning av Sigrid Braadland Sørensen
Foto: Anna Krulatz
Omslagsdesign:Kristin Berg Johnsen
Sats: Bøk Oslo AS
Trykk og innbinding: Ait Bjerch As, 2018

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Acknowledgements

This book is an outcome of our shared interest in multilingualism, as well as of many years of collaboration with teachers who work daily to improve their students' opportunities to grow into confident, capable multilinguals. We are grateful for the inspiration these teachers have given us. To give back to the community, a part of the profits from the sales of this book will be donated to initiatives administered by the coordinators of *Flere språk til flere Trondheim* that support multilingualism.

Cappelen Damm has been supportive and enthusiastic about our work. Special thanks go to Maria R. Braadland for her ongoing guidance and support, as well as to Yulia Rodina, our reviewer, for generous and perceptive feedback. Any remaining errors are our own.

Finally, we also want to express our thanks to our families, without whose steadfast support we would never have been able to devote all the time that was needed to create this volume.

Introduction

Enacting multilingualism. From research to teaching practice in the English classroom has been designed as a practical guide for English teachers who work with linguistically and culturally diverse students, mostly in Scandinavian contexts. Our goal has been to present the material in a way that is accessible for teachers and teacher trainees who are reading about multilingualism for the first time. This book contains a comprehensible and comprehensive overview of theoretical concepts related to the study of multilingualism, mostly with a focus on how to enact pedagogies that support multilingual development in the English language classroom.

Multilingualism is a complex phenomenon that comes in many forms. In some European contexts, a distinction is made between **plurilingualism** and **multilingualism**. Plurilingualism refers to knowledge of multiple languages by an individual, whereas multilingualism is defined as a societal phenomenon when languages coexist within a community. In this book, however, we use the term multilingualism to cover both phenomena, and we focus in particular on multilingual students learning English in a classroom setting in Scandinavia. There are some very specific reasons why we think this book is needed.

In recent years, immigration to Scandinavia has risen steeply. The increase in numbers of refugees as the result of conflicts in other parts of the world has importantly changed the demographics in Scandinavian societies, including the schools. Another important reason for the higher numbers of immigrants is the European Single Market, of which all the Scandinavian countries are members. This agreement ensures the free movement of workers between member states, and especially at times of

economic crises elsewhere in Europe, immigrants from a number of countries have sought work in Scandinavia, often arriving with their families.

With increased immigration comes increased language diversity. Refugees as well as work immigrants speak a number of languages which are still relatively new to Scandinavia, and, naturally, they arrive with little or no knowledge of Scandinavian languages. Since many immigrants come as families, the number of minority language and multilingual students in our schools is also increasing. This includes both students who are born in Scandinavia and who have grown up with their home language in addition to the majority language such as Danish or Swedish, and children who are themselves quite recent immigrants and whose competence in Norwegian, Swedish, or Danish may therefore be rather low.

The extent to which multilingual students need extra support, and the benefits and potential drawbacks of their linguistic backgrounds when entering school, obviously depends on their competence in the majority language, among other factors. It is therefore crucial that teachers and policy makers with influence over these children's education have an understanding of what multilingualism is, why it should be supported, and how this can be done. Unfortunately, so far, such issues have not been given a very central role in our mainstream teacher training programs. The tendency has been to introduce topics that deal with multilingual realities only to those who pick certain specializations such as Norwegian/Swedish/Danish as a second language or special education during their training, rather than as a core element included in all subjects in teacher education programs. Thus, multilingualism is largely treated as an exceptional phenomenon relevant to the few, rather than a common aspect of everyday life.

One of the major goals of this book is to highlight the ways in which multilingualism is beneficial to both societies and individuals. These areas are abundant: competence in more than one language has obvious practical benefits for education, travel, and career prospects, it may have positive consequences for cultural sensitivity and cross-cultural understanding, and a number of studies indicate that it may have certain cognitive benefits. Crucially, as we will stress repeatedly throughout this book, there is no necessary link between multilingualism and lower competence in a given language or in overall school achievement. It is perfectly possible and normal to be

fully competent in a number of languages, and knowledge of one language is normally beneficial, not detrimental, to competence in another language. Similarly, learning and using several languages at the same time does not hinder children's ability to learn content in other subjects at school.

Reasons for the monolingual bias described above probably have nothing to do with ill will, but rather a lack of awareness of and knowledge about multilingualism among professionals working in the school system. As already mentioned, teacher training in Scandinavia has traditionally had a monolingual focus, and many teachers feel that they do not know enough about multilingualism to work effectively with students with language backgrounds other than the majority language. While multilingualism is not new to Scandinavia – since there is a continued presence of minority languages – the region is characterized by fairly monolingual traditions and relatively strong monolingual ideologies. This is, for example, reflected in language policies in education, which tend to have a stronger emphasis on helping students achieve competence in the majority language than on (also) helping them maintain their home languages. Such policies promote a negative rather than positive image of multilingualism since they focus on areas where multilinguals may compare unfavorably with other learners.

The monolingual bias in the education system is a democratic problem in that it can lead to the exclusion of those with low competence in the majority language, and the marginalization of the ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of minorities. If schools are unable to provide equal education for all students, opportunities for further education and employment may be limited for young people with minority language backgrounds. In turn, this also leads to social and economic inequality, and makes it difficult to create inclusive societies for everyone living in the region. Furthermore, attitudes in schools that dismiss multilingual competence and marginalize minority languages may lead to groups of students feeling alienated not only in school but also in society at large, with severe consequences for their sense of belonging and citizenship.

An increased understanding of the phenomenon of multilingualism and of the linguistic rights and needs of minority language speakers is therefore necessary throughout the school system. In addition, teachers need practical knowledge of how to teach in multilingual classrooms, and

how to use strategies and activities that benefit all their students. This book aims to provide both theoretical and practical insights into teaching in multilingual classrooms, with a special focus on the English classroom. We consider it important to stress that English teachers as professionals have a special responsibility for advocating multilingualism and the value of both minority and majority languages.

While multilingualism is increasing in Scandinavia due to increased demographic mobility, another factor breaking down our monolingual traditions is the special role of English in the world today. Competence in this language is a necessity in a range of professional and social situations to an extent that has never before been the case with a foreign language. In fact, on a global scale, English is no longer perceived as either a native or a foreign language, and the term *English as a lingua franca* has become central to describe its role as a means of communication between speakers who do not share a mother tongue – even when no native speakers of English are present. In the Scandinavian countries, English enjoys a particularly central role alongside the countries' official languages in areas such as media, academia, and business. Thus, in order to prevent marginalization of minority language students, it is crucial that all students, regardless of background, gain solid competence in English for further education and work prospects. The ubiquity of English also means that many students, regardless of home language, may achieve relatively high competence in English, beyond what has traditionally been the case in foreign languages, and that they can thus be seen as *users* of English in addition to *learners* in a way that is somewhat new to foreign language pedagogy. Thus, all our students may be fruitfully viewed as emergent bi- or multilinguals when we consider their development in English. This, in our opinion, makes a book about multilingualism *with English* particularly relevant in today's Scandinavian context.

This book is organized as follows. In Part I, we discuss a number of theoretical concepts and issues that are crucial for understanding multilingualism and for working with multilingual students in a way that benefits their continued multilingual development. This includes different types of language competence, the relationship between starting age and language acquisition, the effect of multilingualism on the individual, and

the relationship between the languages of a multilingual. In Part II, we build on this theoretical knowledge to discuss its practical applications to teaching English, with specific examples of activities that can be used in the multilingual classroom. As we have mentioned above, our focus is on the Scandinavian context, but since all three authors live and work in Norway, many of our examples refer to this context as the one we are most familiar with. However, both the theoretical background and the practical examples are designed to be relevant regardless of the specific curriculum being used or the differences that may exist between school systems in the Scandinavian countries. We hope that this book will help English teachers working with multilingual students better understand the unique qualities and needs of these learners. Our goal is to prompt the teachers to reflect on their pedagogical practices and to help them become advocates for equality and equity of education for all students in their schools and communities.

PART I

KEY CONCEPTS IN MULTILINGALISM AND MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION

CHAPTER 1

Multilingualism in Scandinavia

In this chapter, we explore the following topics:

- Language diversity in Scandinavia, with a focus on Norway
- Norwegian language policy
- The status and role of English in Scandinavia

Key Terms

Autochthonous – Native of an area, not living there as the result of migration or colonization. The term is used synonymously with *indigenous*.

Dialect – A regional variety of a language, with a local vocabulary, grammar and accent.

Domain loss – A situation when a local language is no longer used in specific professional domains because a more widespread language takes over due to its more developed terminology in these fields.

Endangered language – A language that is at risk of becoming extinct. Degrees of endangerment range from vulnerable (when the language is not spoken by children outside the home), definitely endangered (not spoken by children), severely endangered (only the oldest generation speak it), and critically endangered (only a few of the oldest generation use it and in limited domains).

Indigenous – Originating where it is found, deriving from Latin, and meaning "native." The term is used synonymously with *autochthonous*.

Language policy – Decisions made by governments and other stakeholders about how languages are used, protected, promoted and maintained.

Lingua franca – A contact language (system) which serves as a common means of communication by speakers of different first languages.

Minority languages – Languages spoken by minority groups living in territories dominated by a majority language; they include national minority languages (see below) as well as minority languages spoken by immigrants.

National minority languages – Languages used by historical groups of people who occupy territories in a state, and who are a minority in that state.

Revitalization – The process of restoring a threatened language by means of various methods, for instance through teaching, developing learning materials, grammars and dictionaries and the distribution of information in a more general sense.

Reflection

1. How would you describe the linguistic diversity in your country to a foreigner who is interested in languages?
2. Why do you think Scandinavians in general are considered very good at speaking and understanding English?
3. To what extent do you think of English as a serious competitor to the Scandinavian languages in the domains of media, professional life, and education?

1.1 Language diversity in Scandinavia, with a focus on Norway

In this chapter, we will discuss language diversity in Scandinavia using Norway as a specific example. Historically speaking, Norway, Denmark and Sweden have been multilingual communities for centuries. Immigration to these countries has always been, and still is, motivated by economic, political, social and other factors. Even though we often have the impression that multilingualism started developing when immigration to Scandinavia really got under way around the middle of the 20th century, with a fairly large number of people arriving from Pakistan, Turkey and other countries to find opportunities for work, the picture is very different once we consider the historical diversity of groups of people already living in various regions of the three neighboring countries.

In the next few paragraphs, we explore some of the factors that must be borne in mind if we wish to get a realistic overview of the multilingual diversity of Scandinavia. It will become clear that the three countries have a lot in common not only in regard to demographic characteristics and language policies but also the role and status of English in society and in education. We will start by taking a closer look at the groups of people inhabiting the three countries, their legal status and their languages.

The Sami population has a special status as a minority people. Geographically, it is spread across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, and the Sami are recognized as an **indigenous** or **autochthonous** people. This