

# Genre pedagogy and equality in the teaching of newly arrived young foreigners

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The students of Class 9.b have just entered the classroom. The teacher says they are going to start a new topic: Image Analysis (or Pictorial Analysis). The teacher emphasises that this is a topic they may draw at the oral final examination in Danish. On the copy sheet handed out to the students the heading is 'image analysis with genre-pedagogical characteristics'.

What the students have in common is that they have more or less recently arrived in Denmark, i.e. they have recently been granted a residence permit. The young people, who come from Afghanistan, Armenia, Bangladesh, Russia, Somalia, Syria and Uganda, are 15-26 years old, and their life situations and interests vary quite a lot. They have attended school for anything between six and twelve years, and in Denmark they have attended a reception class in a municipality or at an asylum centre, at a language centre or have been sent directly to this school. They know between two and five languages (included Danish), and many of them are used to being taught in a language other than their native language.

The school the young people of 9.b are attending specialises in preparing and leading young new arrivals for the final examination of the Danish Folkeskole (compulsory public - primary and lower secondary - school) in Danish, English, Mathematics, Biology, Geography and Physics/Chemistry in the course of three years. At the same



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time, those over 18 are prepared at regular intervals for the modular tests that are linked to Danish Education 2 for adult foreigners. Those in this 9.b are about half-way through the three-year course and are expected to take the final examinations during the next school year.

In this article I analyse a language-based teaching sequence in the subject Danish in order to discuss what possibilities newly arrived young people have to be placed on an equal footing in the education system with young people living here. I look partly at how the teacher has organised the actual teaching sequence for the young people in 9.b and partly at the overall context of which the teaching is a part.

The expression ‘language-based teaching’ I use about subject teaching in which language- and second-language didactic methods are consciously included, as in, for example, Australian genre pedagogy (Gibbons 2014; Rose & Martin 2012).

I take as my starting point theories that focus on the relation between language, teaching and power. Content, methods, aims and language in teaching are not neutral entities, but create various participation conditions for participants in the classroom. Teachers and researchers with ambitions concerning equality in society are extremely interested in what type of teaching can wrestle with social inequalities inside and outside the classroom. This applies among other things to Australian genre pedagogy and critical literacy (Janks 2008). The strength of genre pedagogy, according to Janks (2008: 188) lies in the possibility that the school’s relatively concealed language requirements, which favour certain students, are made visible to all students, and that genre pedagogy helps them to master the language requirements. Equality is then gained when all the students, irrespective of their previous qualifications, get the opportunity of mastering the school’s predominant genres. With a critical literacy approach, one further seeks to understand the historical, political and social processes that have led to the predominance of particular genres – such as natural science, for example – and to understand how one can challenge such a predominance (Janks 2008: 188). Here equality also becomes a question of what opportunities various social groups have of influencing the school’s content, methods, aims and language.

In the following, I will give an example of a portion of the structural context in which 9.b’s teaching is embedded and subsequently return to the students and teacher in 9.b who together are busy training themselves to be ‘image analysts’. Finally, I briefly discuss whether genre pedagogy supports the newly arrived young foreigners on their path towards educational equality.

## The compulsory public school final examinations: knowledge tests or second-language tests?

The young people in 9.b have educational statistics stacked against them. For the probability for not passing the final examinations of the compulsory public school are higher for young new arrivals than for children who have come to Denmark at an early school age (Mehlbye, Rangvid, Larsen & Fredriksson 2011: 36).

This ought not to come as a surprise! Many young new arrivals are expected to take part in the final examinations a relatively short time after their arrivals under generally speaking the same conditions and those young people who have attended public school all their life. One important condition is that the exams take place in Danish in practically all subjects. This means that the exams very much take the form of a complex second-language examination for the young new arrivals, because they have to be able to master the Danish language both when it comes to everyday language and school language, speech and writing, and also be competent at relating to and practising a host of genres within the teaching and examination forms of each subject.

This places the young new arrivals and their teachers in a difficult position and calls for extremely well conceived efforts within second-language pedagogy, so that the young people in the course of a few years have “[...] developed both their subject-related competences and linguistic skills so that they are able to take the public school final examinations” (Guide to the subject Danish as a Second Language – basis 2016: section 3.1). To compensate for the fact that they are worse off from a language-competence perspective than students with many years’ experience of Danish school language, so-called bilingual students, including the newly arrived young people in 9.b, can be granted extra examination time at the written final examinations, and they are allowed to use dictionaries (Quality and Supervision Agency 2015: 3,10). In the actual assessment of the students’ exam results, however, no account is taken of whether the student’s second-language development can influence the appearance of the student’s subject-related performance. So when the young new arrivals are to be able to take the exams in various subjects “[...] on an equal footing with other students” (Guide to the subject Danish as a Second Language – basis 2016: section 3), this mainly means that they will be *assessed* on an equal footing with other students.

When the structure is so designed that new arrivals have inferior conditions in the examination situation that students living here, a key pedagogical is to what extent and how the young people in the

course of 2-3 years at school can build up the necessary, complex Danish school language that is linked to exams in the various subjects. Here, language-based approaches to subject teaching are relevant, since they specially focus on how subject-related knowledge and language skills can be developed at one and the same time. In the following, I intend to zoom in on the image analysis course in 9.b and illustrate how elements from language-based approaches are part of it and are modified by or combined with approaches from multicultural pedagogy.

## The focus in the teaching

When the lesson starts, the teacher introduces three types of teaching content: “the picture”, “the analysis” and “the oral examination”. In the ensuing class interaction, the main focus of the teaching sequence is clarified.

At the oral examination in Danish, students have to be able to present their *analysis* of a picture, and analysis as a genre is therefore a natural focal point of the classroom interactions.

The teacher begins the sequence with a discussion of the analysis process in which the students, who have a preceding sequence on the short story as ballast, manage to formulate that analysis as a process consists of three parts: reading, describing and interpreting. A similar understanding can be recognised from the copy handed out, which divides the analysis process into a description of the picture, an interpretation and an evaluation and perspectivisation.

The copy text has been written by the Danish teachers and addresses the students directly, among other things by using the 2nd person pronoun ‘you’. Three aspects are emphasised:

- Acts and speech acts in the analysis process, e.g. ‘say something about the colours in the picture’ or ‘read about the artist’.
- Language skills that are required to be able to carry out these acts and language acts. In this sequence the teachers have emphasised expanding the young people’s vocabulary with regard to prepositions, conjunctions, emotive words and colours. In addition a focus has been on the semantic function of prepositions and conjunctions in language used to analyse pictures.
- The importance of subject-related concepts, e.g. “It is a good idea to divide the picture into three areas: the foreground – the bottom third of the picture, the middle ground – the middle third of the picture – and background, the top third of the picture.”

After the clarifying discussion, the class make a common analysis of a picture, and this procedure is repeated in the following sessions with other pictures where gradually increasing demands are placed on independence in the students' oral presentation of pictorial analyses. In the course of the teaching sequence they also visit the museum 'Arken' ('The Ark'), where the artist's pictures are being exhibited.

## Long-time planning and prioritisation

The pictorial analysis sequence in 9.b is part of a general three-year curriculum which the teachers at the school have prepared for this group of students. By analysing what knowledge and which skills and language skills it will require of the students to take the examinations in the various subjects, including those in Danish Education, they have decided what can best be taught and when. In that way, the school has made an effort to ensure that, within the given time framework, targeted work will enable the students to participate in the best possible way in the public school's final examinations.

## Parallel consolidation of everyday language and school language

One strategy is for the students to acquire Danish everyday language and school language parallel with each other and supplementing each other, i.e. via the acquisition of subject-related discourse the students become acquainted with Danish everyday language that is closely related to such discourse. In the teaching sequence described here, it is colours, emotive and emotional words and the difference between an artist and an ordinary painter that are to be clarified while building up a finely nuanced language for pictorial analysis. In addition, students are to be able to use prepositions and conjunctions correctly in their oral presentations, for which they train in an assignment the aim of which is to describe the picture with the aid of the prepositions mentioned in the copy.

## Inclusion of the students' other everyday languages and school languages

Much genre pedagogy has as its starting point that in terms of language the students are to move from everyday language modalities to subject-related language modalities. This shift some of the students of 9.b have already made in their native tongues or other

languages of teaching. So it is not necessarily the subject-related register that is unknown to the students, only that they are to express themselves within this area in a new language. The same applies to the students' everyday language. In a multilingual context, genre pedagogy therefore involves considerations as to how the already acquired everyday language and school language can be included meaningfully in the teaching. In 9.b the teacher and the students use various strategies, e.g. electronic translation programmes, dictionaries, the participants' translations for each other, of students discussing concepts in their native language/common language in order to clarify them.

## Culture-sensitive teaching

The teacher calls his own teaching culture-sensitive. By using this term, he is indicating a multicultural pedagogy that has a number of strands (Kubota, Lin, Taylor, & Hammond 2006). For reasons of space, they cannot be dealt with here, so I intend to concentrate solely on the culture-sensitive strategies in 9.b. Firstly, it is striking that the chosen painter: Bjørn Wiinblad, is "inspired by the sumptuous oriental style" (Wiinblad 2016). Via this choice, the teacher has probably made the semiotics and symbolism of the picture more accessible to many of the students (if not to all) than if he had chosen a picture from Danish national romanticism. The students identify, for example, the woman in the picture with 'a woman from Tajikistan'. The teacher is also good at opening up unexpected interpretations and supporting the students in the view that their suggestions are qualified suggestions.

By choosing educational content that the students can identify themselves with, the teacher is thus able to shorten the distance between the students' everyday language and everyday experiences and the school language they are to build up.

Secondly, one can see what one could call a culture-sensitive preparedness in the teacher in connection with the interactions. By that I mean that the teacher regards the students' questions as cultural hypotheses. When a student wonders, for example, if Bjørn is a man's name, the teacher treats this query with an understanding of the fact that the name is new to the student and therefore it can be difficult to decide the gender referred to.

## Concluding reflections

The use of a language-based approach with elements from genre pedagogy is used in this case to accelerate the young people's adaptation to the Danish education system. Within the existing political-educational and organisational framework, the school is highly successful, and by the precise choice of texts and images with transcultural markers it is obvious that the teacher is attentive to the students' present and former worlds of experience. The materials thus offer the young people a possibility of easy identification, and space is given to the young people's multilingualism to be used as a resource for learning.

The young new arrivals can achieve a great deal via multilingual, culture-sensitive, language-based subject teaching. So it does not have to be a problem for them to take a subject-related examination in the Danish examination system after only a few years in Denmark. It is, however, problematic when the conditions laid out for being able to take part in the examination are discriminatory. As long as no regard is taken in assessing the students' performance of whether the examination language is a first or second language for the students, even the most well-organised genre-pedagogical teacher will not be able to contribute to equality of the newly arrived young people in the Danish education system.

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