

Discovering pupils' linguistic repertoires. On the way towards a heteroglossic foreign language teaching?

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When school pupils start foreign language teaching – no matter whether it is English in Class 1 or Class 3, or German and French in Class 5 or Class 7 – they set out on a journey into a new foreign language with personal luggage in the form of their individual language biography. Many different factors typify this language biography, such as age, background, individual experiences, the school's teaching and their experiences and interests outside school. Some of them have a different mother tongue from Danish, while others have made the acquaintance of other languages in popular-cultural arenas outside school. Some have knowledge of various languages from their use of the social media, because they are in contact with families in distant parts of the world or chat with new acquaintances from near and far in the form of more or less isolated items of vocabulary learnt while on holiday. The sum of all these language experiences make up the individual's total linguistic repertoire.

The question, however, is to what extent these composite linguistic repertoires are formulated or brought into action when the pupils start to learn a new language. Are their broad linguistic experiences made use of, or is it more normal for them to retreat into the back-



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ground in the new national-language universe that the pupils come into contact with in meeting their first or second foreign language at school? I sat down with Nina Hauge Jensen (senior lecturer in French, teacher of Danish as a second language) in order to investigate this in a research and development project we carried out in an Aarhus municipal school (*folkeskole*). Focusing on the two Class 7s in the school, where the pupils had chosen either German or French as their second foreign language, we set out to explore the pupils' linguistic repertoires. We began by carrying out individual semi-structured interviews lasting about 45 minutes with the French and the German teacher about their basic views on foreign languages. We then asked the pupils in the class to complete so-called language portraits, after which we carried out short follow-up pupil interviews of about 10 minutes with selected pupils concerning their language portraits. In conclusion, we presented the two foreign-language teachers with the language portraits and asked, in an informal, subject-based conversation, for the teachers' comments on the picture painted by the pupils of their linguistic repertoires in their language portraits. Using part of the empirical material linked to German teaching as my point of departure, I wish in this article to say something about what we caught sight of during this voyage of discovery.

From a monolingual to a heteroglossic basic understanding in foreign-language teaching

In the project we found inspiration in the proposal made by the Belgian sociolinguist Jan Blommaert as to a suitable sociolinguistics for today, one that he refers to as a sociolinguistics of globalisation (Blommaert 2010). Here precisely the concept of *linguistic repertoires* is central. Blommaert defines linguistic repertoires as the complex linguistic, communicative and semiotic resources people have at their disposal and make use of in concrete communication situations:

Our focus should, therefore, be on repertoires, on the complexes of resources that people actually possess and deploy. [...] The resources are concrete accents, language varieties, registers, genres, modalities such as writing – ways of using language in particular communicative settings and spheres of life, including the ideas people have about such ways of using, their language ideologies (Blommaert 2010: 102).

In the project we used language portraits as a tool to gain insight into the concrete accents, linguistic varieties, genres and modalities of the

pupils' linguistic repertoires and their ideas about them. In doing so, we position ourselves both theoretically and methodologically within a basic *heteroglossic* understanding of multilingualism and language teaching (Blackledge & Creese 2010). While a monoglossic basic understanding conceives languages as delimited, separate and autonomous entities, a Bakhtin-inspired heteroglossic basic understanding emphasises the interaction between various linguistic practices across language, time and space.

The language portrait: A tool for investigating linguistic repertoires

Language portraits are a method that has been used in recent years by, among others, Austrian language educationalists and language researchers (e.g. Busch 2006, Krumm 2005; see also Sonne Jakobsen 2011). A language portrait is a body silhouette that is filled in, coloured and commented on by the individual language user. Different colours can be used for different languages, varieties or linguistic resources that the language user has various levels of knowledge of and emotional affiliations to. Via extent, position, choice of colour, use of symbols and the accompanying written comments, the language user can communicate information about their perception of their linguistic repertoires, and language portraits can thus provide strongly subjective and complex – and sometimes also difficult to assess – insights into lived language experiences. Language portraits combined with interviews therefore seem a suitable method of approach in our voyage of discovery into the linguistics repertoires of the foreign-language students.

We did not know the pupils of the two Class 7s in advance, and we therefore decided to take as our point of departure our own idea of personal language portraits in presenting ourselves to the pupils. Our own language portraits thus functioned both as a presentation of us and of the task we were presenting the pupils with when they subsequently were to complete their own language portraits.

Above is an example of a language portrait, drawn up by a girl I will call Signe in the following. Signe has a Danish background and has chosen German as her second foreign language. Her language portrait is meticulously coloured in red, black and yellow as its predominant colours, divided into head, torso, arms and legs, supplemented by a little punk, light blue and grey on thighs, hands and feet. Red she links to Danish, which she has 'grown up in', while English is linked to black and is described as a language she both thinks in and sometimes uses with her parents. In addition, Signe mentions



FIGUR 1. Signes sprogportræt

Black = English:
 Sometimes think in English and speak it sometimes with my father and mother.

Yellow = German:
 Sometimes speak it and sometimes when I am in Germany.

Red = Danish:
 I grew up with Danish, and think and speak it almost the whole time.

Pink = Japanese:
 I can count to 10 in Japanese and know a few more words.

Light blue = French:
 I can say a few words such as 'Bonjour'.

Red/Black = Danish-English,
 Sometimes I think it's fun to speak both Danish and English.

Dark blue = Swedish:
 I read it sometimes on Wikipedia.

Grey = Norwegian:
 I sometimes read Norwegian when on Wikipedia.

“Danish-English – sometimes I think it’s fun to speak both Danish and English’ – a language-mix that is underlined by the mixing of black and red in both text and colouring of one leg. Signe links yellow and German together, with the accompanying comment that she sometimes speaks German, e.g. when she is in Germany. The other mentioned languages take up minor territories of the body, apparently reflecting both the importance of the languages for Signe as well as the level of her knowledge of them.

Signe’s language portrait provide a glimpse of how they can be perceived, to use Brigitta Busch’s words as ‘a mode of meaning-making in its own right, which follows another logic than the verbal mode” (Busch 2012:12). The qualities and potentials of the language portrait thus lie in the extra possibilities of expression that the multimodality of the portrait offer, and that separate the visual expression of the portrait from verbal descriptions of, for example, language portfolios. At the same time, Signe’s language portrait indicates how a follow-up and explanatory conversation may be necessary to avoid both over- and under-interpretation of the portraits – both when they are used as a teaching method and when used for survey purposes.

The pupils’ language portraits: A heteroglossic reality

If we compare the 25 language portraits drawn up by pupils with German as their second foreign language, a picture emerges of a complex heteroglossic reality. One where references to known and unknown languages and linguistic varieties cut across social and cultural norms, traditions and geographical spaces.

Not surprisingly, English plays a prominent role in the language portraits. The pupils list English as the language which they – apart from Danish – most often use outside school, on holidays and in their spare time when listening to music, watching films, playing on the computer and in order to stay in contact with friends outside Denmark. Nor is it surprising that most children with a multilingual background state that they also communicate with their parents or siblings in another language than Danish. Furthermore, many pupils refer to languages that they neither learn in school nor use in the family. They mention Russian or Korean expressions, numbers in Japanese or Portuguese – and Turkish swearwords. Linguistic varieties are also mentioned: ‘I can understand Bornholm dialect’, one pupil writes, while another writes about ‘talking languages that other people don’t understand’, the reference being to Southern Jutland dialect.

It is more surprising that a number of students (10) actively stress not only English but their second foreign language, German, with a certain pleasure, linked to a wide range of social contexts. They use German in their spare time, e.g. for handball, or when they are on holiday. They see German films on the Internet and listen to German music, and they exchange small idioms and whole sentences with their friends in the club or with their parents at home. And this informal use of German is accompanied by such comments as ‘German is fun’. The language portraits provide important information here about the pupils’ attitude towards German. This also finds expression in the concluding interview with the German teacher: ‘... the first thing that strikes me is that they think they can speak German. When you happen to be their German teacher, I think it’s funny that already now they have the idea that they actually speak German. It’s not that I disagree with them, but I think, since I happen to know them, i.e. know from experience the course of events in German in Class 7, and they think this is fun and the tendency is also that this is something new and they are not afraid to venture out into it and it’s nice they have the feeling knowing some German.’

Language portraits: Possibilities and limitations – and truncated repertoires

Language portraits do not give a precise 1:1 picture of the pupils’ communicative competences in (foreign) languages, nor can they function as a means of measurement. What they give insight into is the diversity of the individuals’ linguistic repertoires. Jan Blommaert characterises these repertoires as ‘truncated’ (Blommaert 2010:103), hereby underlining that one does not learn or have entire languages, but rather bits of language depending on the surroundings of the individual: ‘highly specific “bits” of language and literacy combined in a repertoire that reflects the fragmented and highly diverse life-trajectories and environments’ (Blommaert 2010:8). This cuts across linguistic categories such as mother tongue and foreign language: ‘That counts for our so-called mother tongues and, of course, also for the other “languages” we acquire in our lifetime’ (Blommaert, 2010: 103). The term ‘truncated repertoires’ does not contain a normative evaluation and does not, as does the interlanguage concept, focus on lines of development towards a ‘target language’; instead, Blommaert by the use of the concept of truncated repertoires focuses on the linguistic pieces of a heteroglossic reality – as we also saw the pupils refer to in their language portraits.

In the semi-structured pupil interviews we get a more nuanced picture of the pupils' linguistic repertoires. A boy that I here will call Lars explains, for example, how his family history is a strong impetus for him to learn languages. He actually talks a lot of English in his everyday life, e.g. via games on the computer, but a visit to his German great-grandfather's grave has aroused his interest in precisely this ancestor's language – German. A girl that I here call Jannie speaks of how she occasionally says something in German to her mother when she has just done her homework. She often speaks English with her girlfriends on her way home from the club, and they may from time to time say 'something or other in German'. If they cannot precisely recall the words, they say it in Danish or English, Jannie explains.

A third pupil, referred to here as Thomas, speaks Vietnamese with his parents and his brother, but also often speaks English with his family. 'When you speak English, it's just simpler like that. Because practically everyone in the world can some English, also because it's one of the easiest languages,' Thomas explains. Thomas shifts effortlessly between and across languages; depending on the social context, he speaks Vietnamese, Danish, English, German and Korean at Taekwondo training.

The language portrait as an eye-opener: an overwhelming profusion of colour

It is clear from the language portraits and the follow-up interviews how actively and creatively the pupils draw on their entire linguistic repertoires when meeting with their families, friends or in virtual spaces, thereby moving through diverse language-use situations and themselves being active in creating and conquering new language spaces. The analysis of the pupils' language portraits points to what Li Wei refers to as a 'translanguaging space' – one that is transformative, i.e. a space where multilingual language users connect their personal histories, experiences and surroundings, their attitudes and opinions and their cognitive and physical capacity into a coherent, meaningful presentation, thereby turning it into a lived experience (Li Wei 2011:1223).

The pupils' German teacher comments on precisely this 'translanguaging space' when, in the concluding interview, she is presented with the pupils' language portraits. She notes that the pupils 'have many languages', continuing by saying: 'I think it is overwhelming how many colours there are. They think many languages

in their lives, in their mind-set – I find that interesting.’ The German teacher is pointing out here how the language portrait is not only relevant as a research method but also very much as a useful tool in the classroom. The language portrait can give a nuanced insight into the pupils’ linguistic repertoires and into the diversity of their language experiences, both in terms of the individual and the class. Language portraits can function as eye-openers, not only for the foreign-language teacher (see also Mossakowski, Busch 2008) but also for the pupils themselves and the other pupils. Perhaps language portraits could form the point of departure for a project where the pupils communicate with other pupils via Skype, using their language portraits as their starting point? The use of language portraits can be adapted to the pupil group in question and be used at all class levels – perhaps with special relevance for an earlier foreign-language start in future? Language portraits can be a step away from the traditionally monolingual universe of foreign-language teaching, towards a heteroglossic didactics of foreign languages – one that perhaps gets more pupils to come to the same conclusion as one of the Class 7 pupils did when he wrote in his language portrait: ‘I love loving languages’ ...

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