

Language subjects: Access to knowledge about the world

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Translated from Danish by John Irons.

I once read somewhere the following statement: ‘Why read German when one is interested in Vietnam?’ Now the two things ‘to be interested in Vietnam’ and ‘to learn German’ are not really comparable entities, but even so I thought: Those two things can certainly be combined, for there is plenty of literature about Vietnam in Germany. Germany and the other German-speaking countries naturally have a whole string of specialist institutions and centres that deal with Vietnam, there are associations and cooperations covering a wide spectrum – trade, industry, development, art, etc. – there are migration and tourism relations. In this sense, Germany really affords access to the whole world. In the German-language texts about Vietnam there is a perspective, e.g. the situation as seen by a German engineering company, but it is certainly all right to include these texts in German teaching since the language subjects in general aim at intercultural competence. Intercultural competence means to be able to relate to various perspectives on the world, and this is not just a matter of mutual national perspective such as – if we take the subject of German – the Danish perspective on the German and the German perspective on the Danish.

Vietnam is probably not the first thing one thinks of in connection with German teaching in Denmark. That this has a certain fo-



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cus on German-speaking countries and their role in Europe and the EU is obvious since learning the German language is a good reason for learning something about the large German-speaking area south of our border, an area that has also had a profound influence on Denmark for many centuries. But one can also support students' eventual curiosity about other parts of the world via German teaching (Risager 2003, where I argue that the cultural content of language subjects is naturally not restricted to the target-language countries).

What does 'the world' mean?

Outside a language-subject context, the word 'world' has many possible references in innumerable connections, cf. the world of literature, the Moslem world, the fantastic world of the oceans, the old world, the fourth world, Sophie's world, the world of animals, the business world, the world of art, etc. Language subjects are characterised by a subject-specific world picture where the world (the globe) is first and foremost viewed as consisting of a number of different languages, each with its language area, and as far as certain languages are concerned one speaks of this language area as constituting a 'world' with its particular cultural identity: the English-language world, the French-language world, the Spanish-language world. As far as English is concerned, 'the English-language world' must sometimes be seen more as including people from all over the world (globe) who have a knowledge of English. This global expansion of the meaning can also sometimes be seen for such languages as Spanish and French. In the curricula for language subjects in Denmark it is repeatedly emphasised that languages grant 'access to the world' or are 'windows on the world'. 'The world' is clearly a positive marker here. But what does this marker consist in, and what geographical references if any are mentioned in the curricula? In the following, I intend to discuss this with reference to foreign languages (English, German, French and Spanish) as well as Danish as a Second Language. For the sake of simplicity, I will restrict myself to the Danish Folkeskole (primary and lower secondary), but something similar applies to language teaching at upper secondary and university level. In the following, I refer to the curricula for the subjects in the Folkeskole issued by the Danish Ministry of Education.

‘The world’ and other geographical references in Folkeskole curricula

In the curriculum for *English* it states: ‘International contact focuses on the pupils’ initial contact with the English-speaking world’ and ‘English as an access to the world focuses on the pupils’ initial awareness of English as a world language’ (Ministry of Education 2014a: 7). It also states that ‘Pupils are to build up an understanding of English-language culture and society and the interconnection between language and culture’ (ibid.: 7). And later on: ‘[...] the focus is on special groups within the English-language areas, e.g. American youth culture and football culture in England’ (ibid.: 11). It is mentioned that English is used both ‘out in the world’ and in Denmark. And contact is also mentioned with ‘others abroad’ (ibid.: 11).

Here we can see four different types of geographical reference. Firstly, there is ‘the English-speaking world’, understood as all people who know about English, or all contexts where English is used. Denmark presumably belongs to the English-speaking world, since it is claimed at another point that English is also used in Denmark. Secondly, there is ‘English-language culture and society’ or ‘English-language areas’ which presumably are to be understood as all the areas where English is spoken as a native language or has the status of an official language – that which in the English subject tradition is referred to as The Inner Circle (Great Britain, USA, Australia, etc.) and The Outer Circle (India, Pakistan, Nigeria etc.) (Kachru & Nelson 1996). Thirdly, there are concrete examples that single out the most central localities in the world picture of the curriculum: USA and Britain. Fourthly, there is the expression ‘out in the world’, which places the world outside Denmark, ‘abroad’, but is otherwise unspecified.

In the curriculum for *German* it says: ‘German as access to the world focuses on the pupils’ understanding of German in Europe’ (Ministry of education 2014b: 10). The German-speaking countries are referred to many times and ‘German-speaking cultures’ on a single occasion. The concrete example given of localities are Germany and the German-speaking countries (so ‘the German-speaking countries’ here do not comprise Germany). German-speakers in Denmark are mentioned as well as international projects where German is the language of communication.

Here we see that ‘the world’ is understood as (German in) Europe. Furthermore, ‘the German-speaking countries’ are named, but the expression ‘the German-speaking world’ is not used. It is, though,

known to be used by, for example, the Competence Centre of the Foreign Ministry. As was the case with English, it is stressed that German is spoken in Denmark, so Denmark is presumably a part of the German-speaking world? Mention is also made of the use of German as an international language of communication, but the curriculum does not use the term 'lingua franca', which is more generally known in the subject English; in the curriculum for English its special status as a lingua franca is mentioned. With regard to geographical reference, the world picture in the curriculum for German is primarily European, very much in contrast to the subject English, where continental Europe is completely absent in the curriculum, even though English is the main language in the EU and the predominant lingua franca in all of Europe.

For *French* it says: 'French as access to the world focuses on the pupils being able to function sufficiently well in terms of language and culture as intercultural language users in the physical and virtual French-speaking world (Ministry of Education 2014c: 6). And 'The cultural encounter focuses on using the language to be able to act when meeting French-speakers and others learning French' (ibid.: 6). The concrete examples of geographical references that are given are The French Revolution (France) and the French colonies.

Here there is mention of 'the French-speaking world', supposedly that which in the French-subject context is called *la Francophonie*, a term which can both have the broad meaning of all people in all the world who know French (*la francophonie* with a small f), or in countries that have joined l'Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, which are countries where French is spoken as a native language or where French has the status of an official language, or is used by a certain section of the population, especially by the elite, e.g. Vietnam, Egypt and Morocco (*la Francophonie* with a capital F). Since the curriculum talks of 'the physical and virtual French-speaking world', the first, broad, interpretation is favoured, since the introduction of 'the virtual' de-territorialises, so to speak, the French-speaking world: communication over the Internet takes place irrespective of localities and in principle throughout the world.

For *Spanish* (which is a one-year optional subject) it says: 'the Spanish-speaking world' (Ministry of Education 2014d). So it is up to the reader if one prefers the broader or the narrower interpretation.

In the curriculum for *Danish as a Second Language* in the Folkeskole there is no mention of culture or society (this dimension has been deleted as an area of competence in Danish as a Second Language

with the drawing up of the new curricula in 2014), but in the section on Innovation and Entrepreneurship it says: ‘Pupils are to gain belief in their own ability via many success experiences so that they thereby believe that both inside and outside school they are capable of solving the language assignments they meet in a modern world’ (Ministry of Education 2014e: 9). One can compare this with what the corresponding section for the subject English says: ‘Pupils are to gain belief in their own ability via many success experiences so that they thereby believe that both inside and outside school they are capable of solving the language, textual and cultural assignments they meet in a modern, globalised world’ (2014a: 17). The bilingual pupils who have a multilingual and multicultural background do not, then, have to be able to use Danish in connection with cultural assignments in a modern, globalised world!

Ambivalence as to what ‘the world’ means in relation to language subjects

So one can say that there is ambivalence in the curricula as to what the positive marker ‘the world’ stands for. The whole world? Parts of the world delimited by use of the target language? Certain central countries within such areas? Is Europe ‘the world’? Is Denmark?

If one takes such expressions as ‘the English-speaking countries’, ‘the French-speaking countries’, etc. seriously, one can get around a relatively large part of the world. For the English-speaking countries are not only Britain, USA and Australia but also, for example, Singapore, South Africa and Kenya. The German-speaking countries are not only Germany and Austria but also, for example, Switzerland and Argentina. The French-speaking countries are not only France and Canada (Québec) but also, for example, Belgium, Cameroun and Madagascar. The Spanish-speaking countries are not only Spain and Latin America (which is often treated as one unit) but also USA and Equatorial Guinea. The area of the language subjects, in this broad interpretation, comprises quite a few of the world’s countries.

Marginalised parts of the world

Despite this, the area of the language subjects in this broad sense does not include all the world. There are many countries where English, German, French and Spanish are neither the native language nor an official language/a language used by the elite. The current school

languages in Denmark do not actually introduce one to the world but to the world's masters, i.e. to the former large empires created by European powers. This can be seen when one makes up a list of the holes in the world map which the school subjects English, German, French and Spanish together leave behind, particularly in Europe and Asia:

- *Europe*: Albania, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, The Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, The Faroes, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey (if counted as part of Europe), Ukraine.
- *Asia*: Afghanistan, The Arab Emirates, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China and Taiwan, Georgia, Iran, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Oman, The self-governed Palestinian areas, Saudi-Arabia, South Korea, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Yemen.
- *Africa*: *Angola, Ethiopia, Libya, Mozambique, Somalia, Sudan.*
- *America*: Brazil, Greenland (geographically part of North America), Surinam.

These holes in the world map can precisely be filled in (some of them!) if one includes them occasionally in language teaching – e.g. with a theme about Vietnam or Nepal in German teaching, or one about Brazil in Spanish teaching.

The focus on the target languages English, German, French and Spanish naturally means a marginalisation of all the other languages in the world. And here we are really dealing with a great many languages, since there are reckoned to be about 6000 languages in all worldwide. All our target countries are multilingual, partly because of immigrations, partly because one or more indigenous languages are perhaps spoken in the country which are not identical with our target language. Since every language community to a certain extent forms the framework round a particular discursive universe (a particular 'culture'), there are a very great number of discourses and world understandings to which we do not gain access. To say that the language subjects English, German, French and Spanish grant access to 'the world' can only mean that it offers the opportunity to take a few steps out into 'the world' as it has been shaped by Western colonial powers.

The above focusing on countries can, however, divert one's attention from all the transnational phenomena that characterise our age, and that are also relevant to take up in language teaching as a cross-border activity: more or less worldwide exchange of commodities and ideas, innovations and ideologies, migration and tourism, IT and the social media, climate changes, etc. (Risager 2003; Risager 1998).

Conclusion: including the marginalised parts of the world

The example with Vietnam in German teaching shows, as mentioned, how one can occasionally include some of the marginalised parts of the world in order to take into account the interests of the class, certain pupils or just one pupil. The theme about Vietnam could of course also be studied in French, Spanish or English teaching, and also in relation to the teaching of Danish as a Second Language.

Another example could be the refugee situation around the world: There is without a doubt a great amount of material (videos, etc.) in French, German, Spanish, English and Danish about this important, transnational and controversial subject. If, for instance, one searches on the Internet for various countries' websites for Amnesty International (AI), e.g. AI France, AI Deutschland, AI España, AL Danmark, one will find many interesting subjects, headlines and images/videos that deal with refugees everywhere in the world. It can be extremely interesting to compare what AI France has compared with AI Tunisia, or AI Deutschland compared with AI Österreich or AI Australia compared with AI New Zealand. One can go on searching under other countries.

Something else one can make use of is websites like that of the Danish Kid's News, which contains many kinds of news written for children. There is at any rate Time for Kids in English and Helles Koepfchen in German.

Dealing with such subjects and sources in language subjects would mean taking 'the world' seriously as a geographical term that makes the entire globe relevant.

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