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Beginner Language

“The early language start makes considerable demands on the teacher, and must be organised with great care if it is to have a positive effect.”

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and Søgaard

AARHUS UNIVERSITETSFORLAG

SPROGforum

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SPRØGforum

Foreword

There would seem to be an increased momentum for beginner language in Denmark – caused in particular by the new school reform, which means that Folkeskole pupils from August of this year are to start English, German and French earlier than before. Which in turn means that one will now have younger pupils and new contexts in a social, cognitive and emotional sense, resulting in new challenges to teacher education programmes and the qualifications teachers must have.

The challenges most in focus here are the new linguistic and pedagogical ones. As well, perhaps, as challenges of the good kind, for with younger children one is forced to think creatively and work on the basis of communicative principles: it will no longer be feasible to consider grammar as the sole point of departure for learning the new language. Teachers will have to take as their linguistic point of departure what children are interested in, what they know something about, what they think is fun, so that they retain their positive feelings about learning a language. Nor will texts be practicable as ^{*}a way of learning the new language for the very young pupils of Class 1, since they cannot read. Here, too, then new thinking is called for, for teachers will now have to get used to the idea that texts must wait, and devote their teaching to oral communicative competences. And for slightly older beginners it will probably be an extremely good idea to place the main focus on oral competences. The written language has a tendency to swallow up all teaching time, which in the case of French, for example, has led to many people having poor conditions for building up oral competences with which they can make themselves intelligible.

It will be most exciting to see if pupils manage to build up a stable oral basic language that will form the necessary foundation for being able to continue to expand, make fine distinctions and be precise in their new language.

Beginner language is sometimes spoken of as if it is simply something that has to be got through, or something that goes over all by itself. It is as if beginner language and beginner teaching is not always ascribed the same value as continuation language teaching. As if beginner language is something you can use an assistant to

take care of, before oneself – as the expert – takes over and teaches the pupils what really matters. As if teaching beginner language is merely an introduction, a kind of instruction manual and nothing else. This view of beginner language is not shared by the contributors to this number of Sprogforum. Teaching beginner language is important, and in several articles it is stressed just how important it is that not least teachers of beginner teaching need really strong language competences, so that they can function as good language models for their pupils.

Why is teaching beginner language so important? Partly because the first meeting with a new language, if all goes well, makes one want more. It quickens the appetite for languages, nourishes a love of language and puts words to that love: 'I love Italian! His name's Giorgio!' But an abortive meeting, an unsuccessful date, a wrong moment in time or an unfortunate context can just as easily lead to resistance or a pronounced distaste for language: 'I hate language. Language is not for me; I've had Russian for seven years and can't say a word!' Meetings with beginner language can go both ways, which is one of the reasons why it is so important to get off to a good start. And the meeting with one beginner language is of importance for the meeting with the next one. If things go well, one welcomes further languages with open arms; if things go badly, one shuts up like a clam. For that reason, among many, teaching beginner language ought to command all the attention it can get, including its own number of Sprogforum. The number contains a series of articles that from various perspectives illustrate, exemplify, clarify, describe and analyse work with beginner language from the youngest pupils at the Folkeskole to students at the university. The issues raised are many: When ought the teaching of beginner language start? In Class 1, Class 3 or Class 5? What materials are we to use, and what role do the teacher, student, language and context play? The contributions to this number of Sprogforum differ considerably, but all of them spring from a common interest in beginner language, pedagogy and language learning.

Have an enjoyable read!

The editors

Early language learning

An opportunity to strengthen the intercultural dimension?

[Tidlig sprogstart – en mulighed for styrkelse af den interkulturelle dimension? Kronik]

Abstract

From 2014, Danish school children will start their English classes from their first year at school and their second foreign language, German or French, from their fifth year at school. The teaching of foreign languages continues throughout all the school years. This, however, raises a number of issues that language teachers ought to consider; is it time to challenge the content dimension of the communicative competence pedagogy? Should more focus be given to how we can teach critical cultural awareness and intercultural reflection? The author argues for a stronger focus on learning objectives to strengthen the content in otherwise fragmented communicative activities. The author also addresses selection criteria for text and media used in class, as they are central for a non-essentialist language and culture pedagogy. The author believes that teachers can find inspiration for their teaching of critical cultural awareness and intercultural competence in the fields of critical literacy and cultural studies.

Seven myths about beginner language

[Syv myter om begyndersprog]

Abstract

In the article the authors have selected seven myths about beginner language for discussion, reflection and possible rejection. These are (1) the myth about the necessity of mastering the system before being able to speak the language, (2) the myth about limited capacity on the 'hard disk', (3) the myth about 'the only thing' (*the* method), (4) the myth about "we've tried that before", (5) the myth about "one people and one teaching method, (6) the myth about easy and difficult languages, and (7) the myth about students with no competences and a worthless past. The article suggests language teachers to use a 'myth-detector' to detect, reflect on and possibly reject myths they may meet in their profession. The 'myth-detector' consists of four simple questions, namely (1) Where do we know it from? (2) What is it built on? (3) What views on learning, language and culture lie behind? and (4) Who (gets something out of) say(ing)s it?

Earlier start in language teaching

Rationales and recommendations for practice

[Tidligere sprogstart: begrundelser og praksisanbefalinger]

Abstract

The article reviews results from one Norwegian and three European research projects on early language learning/teaching in order to answer the questions of why we offer early language learning and what the main didactic principles of early language learning are. These studies provide both an empirical basis for discussing the pros and cons of starting language early in a Danish context and a platform for developing pedagogical practice. The research projects show that students are generally highly motivated to start earlier, but that the learning/teaching must be carefully planned if it is to have a positive effect. Among other things this research emphasises the need for setting clear learning objectives, developing strong progression, establishing a culture of feedback, and facilitating meaningful language use through activities which integrate both productive and receptive language skills. Furthermore students' existing plurilingual and intercultural competences have to be taken into consideration and learning strategies have to be discussed from the very beginning.

German from Class Five – but how?

[Tysk fra 5. – Hvordan?]

Abstract

At a time of transition to an earlier start of the second foreign language in Denmark, this article deals with already existing experiences with the teaching in Class Five and Class Six, with special reference to German. In earlier German learning there is a chance of more action-oriented, playful work with the language. When children are to learn a language, it must happen in a way in which sensation and movement are important aspects of language use, so that the motivation of the learners can be strengthened. The article discusses activities that have been shown to be rewarding in practice, including cooperative learning, creative work with songs and rhymes, and work with situations in which new realities are simulated. Finally, it is stressed that in elementary language teaching the language competence of the teacher plays a role that must not be underestimated. It is one of the teacher's tasks to make sure that learning outcomes are closely related to the formulated learning objectives. Evaluation and assessment, then, are not only for immediate use but are also tools for the further planning of the teaching process.

TESS – Early English Language Start at Brøndby Strand School

[TESS – Tidlig Engelsk Sprog Start på Brøndby Strand Skole]

Abstract

At Brøndby Strand School children start English in Class 1 (at age six) within the framework of the project TESS, which is the Danish acronym for Early English Language Start. The pupils have three lessons per week and the lessons are integrated into music and art/craft lessons. The teachers team-teach in the three lessons. Team-teaching is one of the significant benefits, as the pupils are exposed to a lot of language, due to the presence of two teachers in the classroom. The teachers use different approaches in the classroom, such as TPR (total physical response), a few Cooperative Learning structures and Interactive Whiteboard. One very important thing is that the pupils have the right to remain silent until they feel confident enough to speak.

At Brøndby Strand School there are many children with different cultural backgrounds and mother tongues other than Danish, and initially one of our worries was that these pupils would have a hard time learning another language apart from Danish. However, these pupils actually learn English very quickly because they already have experience of how to learn a new language from when they learned Danish.

In 2011, an evaluation was made of TESS with children in Classes 4-6 and it showed that the children are approximately a year ahead compared to a class who had not been taught English from Class 1. Brøndby Strand School will continue with three lessons per week and the school will use some of the good experiences from TESS when German and French teaching starts in Class 5.

Language awareness

An approach to improving language learning from early childhood

[Sproglig opmærksomhed – en tilgang til at styrke sproglæring fra den tidlige barndom]

Abstract

The article shows how language awareness can make learners better at both learning new languages and understanding their own language. It refers to experiments and materials aiming at the development of Language Awareness in Europe, the United States and Asia. The main point is that conscious reflection on language systems not known by the learners, such as Chinese, and comparison with languages already known by the learners, may further an evaluative and analytical approach to the target language among children as young as 6-8 years old. When learners are given opportunities of observing, discovering and playfully manipulating with different linguistic phenomena, they will focus their attention on the language and thereby get optimal opportunities for learning. The metalinguistic knowledge obtained through this work makes it easier for the learners to transfer knowledge from one language to another. In this way they develop their cross-linguistic competences.

What should the teacher know?

New Nordic description of teacher competencies focusing on the teaching of initial literacy for adults with non-Nordic mother tongues

[Hvad skal læreren kunne? – Ny nordisk kompetencebeskrivelse for lærere sætter fokus på undervisningen i den grundlæggende literacitet for tosprogede voksne]

Abstract

The article focuses on quality assurance regarding initial and functional literacy education for adults with non-Nordic mother tongues. A report and supplementary studies have shown that most Nordic countries have very few formal requirements regarding teacher competence, very few descriptions and study plans, and little guidance relating to the training of teachers with regard to initial literacy training for adults. But recently the Nordic Adult Literacy Network (Alfarådet) has produced the report *Description of teachers' competence in initial and functional literacy for adults with non-Nordic mother tongues*, which is among the first descriptions in any of the Nordic – and European – countries of the areas that professionals need to master. It comprises six areas of teacher competence: Literacy in a global, local and individual perspective – theoretical and didactic aspects and approaches; adult formal learning in a creative and critical learning environment; materials for adult learning – multimodal, up-to-date and challenging; teaching oral communicative competence without written support – to adult L2 learners; initial and functional literacy for adult L2 learners; basic everyday mathematics (numeracy) for adult L2 learners.

Use of tasks in beginner teaching of Chinese

[Brug af tasks i begynderundervisning i kinesisk]

Abstract

This article deals with elementary instruction in Chinese language at various levels (primary, secondary and tertiary) in Northern Jutland in Denmark. It aims to describe, analyse, and discuss how problems with students' low motivation, lack of participation and limited uptake have been met. An interim analysis of audio and video data from a course we taught at Aalborg University indicates that the use of tasks may help solve the problems because tasks put students at the centre of the learning process and motivate them to active participation in the teaching in ways that language acquisition theorists consider important for language acquisition.

Evaluation of early English teaching in Denmark

[Evaluering af tidlig engelskundervisning i Danmark]

Abstract

This article contains a review of three recent studies of early English teaching in Denmark. The article contains some of the most important findings from a survey made by the Danish Ministry of Education in 2006 on the attitudes and experiences of teachers involved in early English teaching, which suggests that although teachers are generally positive towards early English, they require relevant qualifications and sufficient time to process experience in order for early English teaching to achieve maximum impact. A very recent study from the municipality of Elsinore (Helsingør) supports these findings and furthermore suggests the need for a firm grasp of classroom management principles and techniques to support early language acquisition. Furthermore, the Elsinore study raises the issue of materials for early English teaching, which is still a challenge within this new area. The final, still unpublished, study made for the municipality of Copenhagen supports the issue about teaching materials and suggests that although early English learners are highly motivated, they still need skilled and dedicated teachers to activate their knowledge of the language.

PETRA DARYAI-HANSEN, ANNETTE SØNDERGAARD
GREGERSEN, SUSANNE DUPONT LUNDH AND
SELMA MESIC

Early French and German

[Tidlig fransk og tysk]

Abstract

The article presents results from a research project that has been initiated in a collaboration between Randersgades School (the international profile school in Copenhagen), Roskilde University and UCC. The project aims to provide an answer to how theoretical recommendations for early language learning/teaching can be translated into teaching practice in the French and German classroom. In order to meet theoretical recommendations, we propose to combine a language portfolio with a three-phase model and a task-based approach. This combination aims to ensure that language learning/teaching not only entails clear progression, but that it is also cohesive, communicative, and content-based.

”Use your own words!”:

How can students make themselves legitimate as learners of Danish as a second language in History lessons?

[”Brug dine egne ord!” – hvordan gør man sig legitim som DSA-elev i historieundervisningen? Åbne sider]

Abstract

This article takes its point of departure in findings from a study in which a case of Danish as a Second Language was studied when embedded in a Class Five History unit taught in a school with 85% bilingual students. Using Legitimation Code Theory and Systemic Functional Linguistics as an analytical framework, conclusions from the study raise questions as to how the pedagogic practices support or impede students’ learning. Building on these findings, the article explores what is expected of students to be seen as ‘legitimate’ in situations where they are asked to ‘use your own words’ to demonstrate understanding. Observations from the classroom show that students must demonstrate mastery of four mental steps which are, however, both implicit and un-scaffolded, leaving students ‘floundering’ from both a History and a second-language perspective.