

Plurilingual Education across Educational Levels – Conceptualization, Curriculum Analysis, and Recommendations for Further Development

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Abstract

In the period 2020-2023, the research and development project *Plurilingual Education – Minority and Majority Students' Language Awareness across Educational Levels* (PE-LAL) investigated students' language awareness across educational levels in the context of plurilingual education in the mandatory language subjects in primary and lower secondary school (Danish, Danish as a second language, English, French, German) and in *Almen Sprogforståelse* in upper secondary school. Based on findings from the PE-LAL project, the article focuses on plurilingual education in a Danish educational context. First, the article presents the project's conceptualization of plurilingual education developed through an abductive approach. The conceptualization forms a continuum consisting of three pluralistic approaches and a transversal dimension. Then, based on the conceptualization, the article presents findings from the project's curriculum study showing that plurilingual education is integrated in all language subjects in primary and lower secondary school and in *Almen Sprogforståelse* in upper secondary school – albeit in different ways and with different objectives – leaving the Danish language curriculum with great development potential for plurilingual education. Finally, by drawing on the curriculum findings and other research results from the project, the article concludes with an introduction to the project's [*Recommendations to strengthen plurilingual education in language subjects in primary and lower secondary school and in Almen Sprogforståelse in upper secondary school in Denmark*](#). The 18 recommendations represent an ideal scenario for how plurilingual education can be strengthened at different levels vertically and horizontally in the Danish educational context, which is why the recommendations address both the macro level (curriculum and teacher education) as well as the meso and micro levels (school, teacher, teaching materials, teaching practice). Each single recommendation is an important contribution to strengthen plurilingual education.

Keywords: *Plurilingual education, conceptualization, curriculum analysis, recommendations for teaching practice development, primary and secondary education*

1. Introduction

In the period 2020-2023, the research and development project *Plurilingual Education - Minority and Majority Students' Language Awareness across Educational Levels* (PE-LAL), granted by The Independent Research Fund Denmark (grant number 0132-00208B), has investigated how students' language awareness can be conceptualized across educational levels in the context of plurilingual education in the mandatory language subjects in primary and lower secondary school (Danish, Danish as second language, English, French, German) and in *Almen Sprogforståelse* (General Language Awareness)¹ in upper secondary school. The design of the PE-LAL project is twofold, consisting of (1) a curriculum study and (2) a multiple-case study. The project's design is visualized in Figure 1.

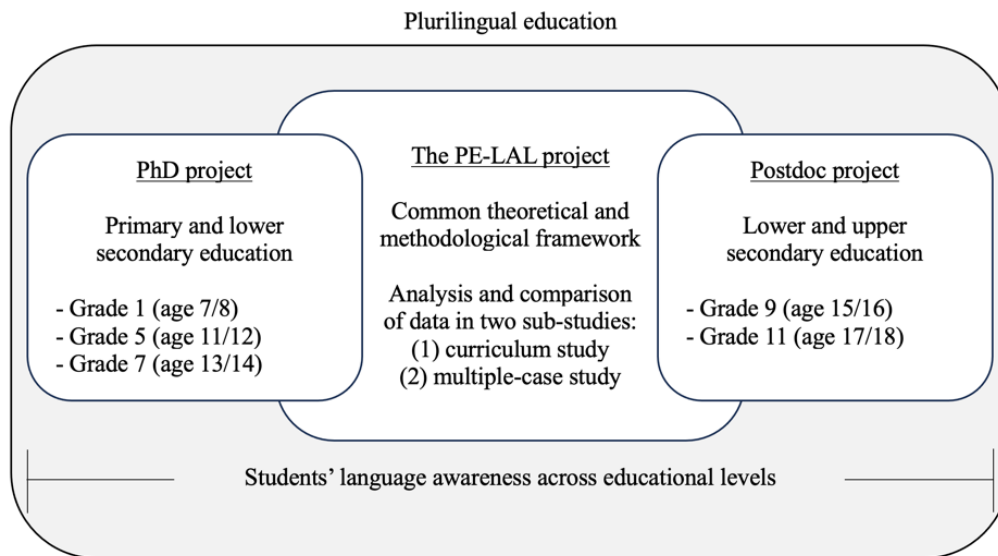


Figure 1. The PE-LAL project design.

In the curriculum study, we explored if and how language awareness is integrated into and across the Danish national language curricula in primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education, and to what extent the language curricula are based on plurilingual education (for curriculum findings see: Daryai-Hansen & Krogager Andersen, 2024; Drachmann, 2022, 2023b; Drachmann, Haukås & Lundberg, 2023). In the multiple-case study, we investigated how language awareness is manifested and expressed by students in Grade 1 (age 7/8), Grade 5 (age 11/12), Grade 7 (age 13/14), Grade 9 (age 15/16), and Grade 11 (age 17/18) in the context of plurilingual education (for multiple-case findings, see: Daryai-Hansen, Drachmann & Krogager Andersen, 2024, forthcoming ab; Drachmann, 2023c, forthcoming; Krogager Andersen, 2024).

In this article, we focus on plurilingual education forming the context for the PE-LAL project. The aim of the article is to present the project's research results related to plurilingual education and by drawing on these results, to disseminate the project's final recommendations to strengthen plurilingual education across educational levels in Denmark. First, the article presents the project's conceptualization of plurilingual education. Second, the conceptualization is used as a conceptual framework for unfolding key findings from the project's curriculum study. Third and finally, the article introduces the project's *Recommendations to*

strengthen plurilingual education in language subjects in primary and lower secondary school and in Almen Sprogforståelse in upper secondary school.

2. Conceptualization of plurilingual education

Plurilingual education can be defined as a teaching practice integrating multiple languages in teaching and benefitting from the linguistic diversity represented in the classroom, in society and in the world. Thus, plurilingual education is based on a *pluralistic approach to languages* integrating "several (i.e. more than one) varieties of languages", as opposed to a *singular approach to languages* focusing on "only one language [...] considered in isolation" (Candelier et al., 2010, p. 3). Plurilingual education builds on an understanding of plurilingualism being a universal human condition for everyone growing up and living in a modern, globalized world (Beacco et al., 2016; Haukås, 2022). From this perspective, all school students in Denmark can be considered plurilingual because they all learn at least three languages in school (Danish, English, French/German) and meet languages outside of school (e.g. through friends, social media, and travel), thus having more than one language in their linguistic repertoire. Hence, plurilingual education is relevant for and contributes to all students' language learning and education.

By drawing on an abductive approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2003; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), combining existing research literature and empirical findings from the curriculum and multiple-case study, the PE-LAL project has developed a conceptualization of plurilingual education (Daryai-Hansen, Drachmann & Krogager Andersen, 2024, based on Daryai-Hansen, Drachmann & Krogager Andersen, 2022). The conceptualization draws on Candelier et al. (2010) through the distinction between the three pluralistic approaches (*integrated didactic approach*, *intercomprehension between related languages*, *Éveil aux langues*) (in a Danish context see: Daryai-Hansen, 2018a, b; Daryai-Hansen & Drachmann, forthcoming; Drachmann, 2017, 2022). The PE-LAL project has added a transversal dimension to this distinction focusing on *learners' language resources including first languages beyond the language(s) of schooling*. The conceptualization is displayed in Figure 2.

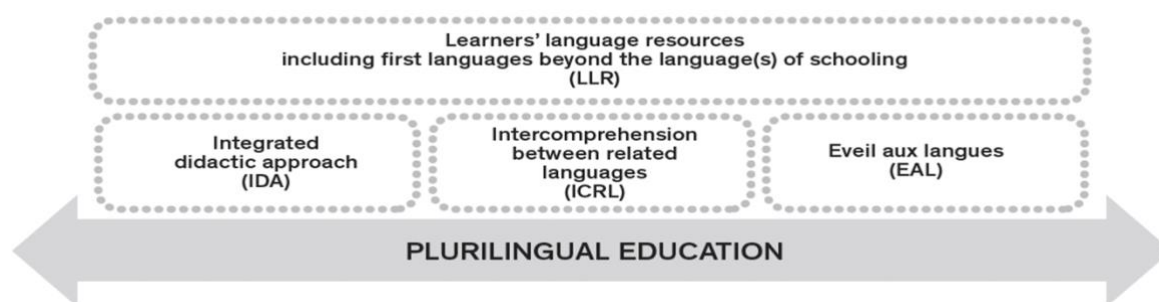


Figure 2. Conceptualization of plurilingual education.

The model visualizes plurilingual education as a continuum consisting of the three pluralistic approaches and the transversal dimension. Common for the three approaches is that they all integrate multiple languages in teaching, but they integrate different languages and with different purposes, which is why the approaches are positioned differently on the continuum. *Integrated didactic approach* (IDA) bridges between languages already known by the students (e.g. students' home languages or languages learnt in school) with the aim of using

known languages as a springboard to strengthen the students' acquisition of and communicative competence in the target language. *Éveil aux langues* (EAL) includes a wide range of languages and language varieties represented in the classroom, in society, and in the world with the aim of strengthening the students' plurilingual competencies by developing their language awareness and recognition of language diversity. *Intercomprehension between related languages* (ICRL) builds bridges between languages already known by the students and languages that are part of the same language family. The aim is to use the students' already known languages to develop receptive competencies in related languages. The three pluralistic approaches are visualized with dotted lines indicating that the boundaries between the approaches are fluid and overlapping. This is seen, for instance, in German teaching when comparing German with Danish which is an example of IDA since Danish is a language already known by the students, but it can also be argued that it is an example of ICRL since Danish and German are related Germanic languages.

The transversal dimension, *learners' language resources* (LLR), *including first languages beyond the language(s) of schooling*, stresses that plurilingual education creates spaces for students to draw on and bring their linguistic repertoire into play. The transversal dimension is an integral part of the three pluralistic approaches but is visualized as an independent dimension in the model with the aim of focusing explicitly on the students' plurilingualism. The dimension appears as IDA, for instance, when languages that all students are learning in school are integrated, as ICRL when related languages integrated in joint activities in class are part of the students' linguistic repertoire, and as EAL when languages integrated in joint activities in class are part of the students' linguistic repertoire.

In the PE-LAL project, the model is used as a conceptual framework in the curriculum study (see, e.g., Drachmann, 2022; 2023b; Daryai-Hansen & Krogager Andersen, 2024) and in the multiple-case study to (a) develop new and re-design existing teaching materials forming the context for the multiple-case study (for a description of the development work see, e.g., Drachmann, 2023a) and to (b) analyse the collected student data in form of classroom and interview data (see, e.g., Daryai-Hansen, Drachmann & Krogager Andersen, 2024, forthcoming ab; Daryai-Hansen & Drachmann, 2024; Drachmann, 2023c, forthcoming; Krogager Andersen, 2024). Furthermore, an analysis of existing teaching materials for *Almen Sprogforståelse* has been carried out based on the model (Krogager Andersen, 2022). In the following section, we present findings from the PE-LAL project's curriculum study across educational levels.

3. Plurilingual education in the Danish language curriculum

The PE-LAL project's curriculum study examines how plurilingual education is integrated in the curricula for the five mandatory language subjects (Danish, Danish as a second language, English, French, German) from Grades 1 to 9 in primary and lower secondary school and in the curriculum for *Almen Sprogforståelse* in upper secondary school. The empirical basis for the study consists of the following curricular documents: The curriculum (*Fælles Mål*) and pedagogical guideline (*læseplan*) for the five language subjects (ME, 2019a, b, c, d, e) in primary and lower secondary school and the curriculum (*læreplan*, ME, 2020) and pedagogical guideline (*vejledning*, ME, 2023) for *Almen Sprogforståelse* in upper secondary school. The study focuses on the *explicit curriculum* (Eisner, 1994), i.e. what is explicitly stated in the curricular documents. However, due to the study's comparative perspective across language subjects and educational levels, the analysis also identifies aspects of *null curriculum* (Eisner, 1994; Flinders, Noddings & Thornton, 1986), i.e. what is *not* stated in the

curricular documents, for instance, due to deliberate omission. The study is conducted as a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015) with the model of plurilingual education as a conceptual framework.

In the following sections, we explore each of the three pluralistic approaches and the transversal dimension and unfold (1) how each of these is represented in the Danish language curriculum across educational levels and (2) what development potential relates to each of them. All quoted phrases from curricula have been translated from Danish to English.

3.1 Integrated didactic approach (IDA)

In curricula for primary and lower secondary school, IDA is represented as part of a cross-cutting topic in the foreign language subjects. This is seen, for instance, in the following phrase found in the curriculum for both English, French, and German:

Focusing on linguistic interdisciplinarity, you can work with, for instance, metalinguistic explanations and language awareness of both similarities and differences in language structure and the meaning of words, being relevant for all language subjects, including Danish (ME, 2019c, p. 49; ME, 2019d, e, p. 41)

However, in the specific competence goals and practical instructions for the foreign language subjects, IDA is only sporadically represented – primarily as a didactic tool in the first years of the early foreign language teaching (see also Drachmann, 2022; 2023; Drachmann, Haukås & Lundberg, 2023). In English, IDA is connected to language learning strategies, for instance, by emphasizing that students should "utilize resources from other languages" and gain "knowledge of transparent words and structures" (ME, 2019c, p. 11) and that they should decode English words by drawing on their "knowledge of word pictures being close to Danish" (ME, 2019c, p. 10). The English curriculum also stresses that the students' literacy development in English should "draw on what the students have already learned in Danish about reading and writing strategies" (ME, 2019c, p. 42) and that the English subject also has "a special opportunity to support parts of the content in Danish teaching, for instance, by working with the same reading comprehension strategies" (ME, 2019c, p. 28). In French and German, IDA is primarily represented in the bridging between the language subjects taught in school. In the German curriculum, it is stated that "Danish and German are languages being closely related" (ME, 2019e, p. 29), which is helpful in strengthening the students' communicative competence in German, for instance, because "knowledge of similarities and differences between Danish and German pronunciation" enables students to "imitate and repeat German words and expressions" (ME, 2019e, p. 11). The French curriculum also bridges Danish and English, but also opens for students' "other languages" (ME, 2019d, p. 29, 30, 31, 32, 34). In the curriculum, it is not made explicit what exactly is meant by *other languages*, but they are mentioned and often in the context of language transparency with the aim of supporting communicative competence in French.

In comparison, IDA is completely absent in the curriculum for Danish and Danish as a second language, despite the fact that Danish is included in curricula for the foreign language subjects. Thus, the Danish curriculum fails to place Danish in line with the other language subjects as part of the school's IDA.

In *Almen Sprogforståelse*, IDA is strongly and systematically represented in the bridging between Danish and the foreign languages offered in upper secondary school, as *Almen Sprogforståelse* facilitates a collaboration between the language subjects focusing on "the core content being common for all language subjects in upper secondary school" (ME, 2020, p. 1). Thus, the aim of *Almen Sprogforståelse* is to create "a common basis for the linguistic work [...] in upper secondary school" (ME, 2020, p. 1).

Figure 3 provides an overview of how IDA is integrated in the language curriculum in Denmark.

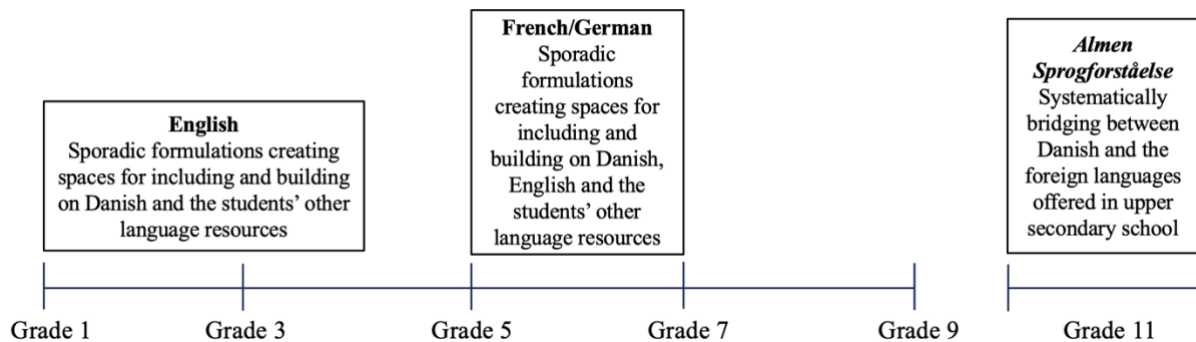


Figure 3. Integrated didactic approach in the language curriculum in Denmark – key tendencies.

3.2 Éveil aux langues (EAL)

In curricula in primary and lower secondary school, EAL is represented sporadically in the curriculum for Danish and English, from early to advanced language learning and in French and German in the last two school years. Common for the language subjects is, however, that EAL is only represented through a focus on varieties of the target language. In the Danish curriculum, the students should "talk about the classroom's varieties of the Danish language" (ME, 2019a, p. 11) and gain knowledge about "different ways of speaking Danish" (ME, 2019a, p. 11) as well as "communicate actively in different linguistic and cultural situations in a globalized world" (ME, 2019a, 17). The same applies to the English curriculum, where the students should "hear different types of English" and gain "knowledge of different types of English in the world" (ME, 2019c, p. 10) as well as "use English as an international medium of communication in different situations" (ME, 2019c, p. 14). The curricula for French and German open for varieties of the target language as the students should "communicate in French/German with language users locally and globally" (ME, 2019d, e, p. 13).

In *Almen Sprogforståelse*, EAL is represented through Latin, covering almost half of the course (20 of 45 lessons). In *Almen Sprogforståelse*, Latin is used as a bridge between the school's language subjects, for instance, by focusing on Latin terminology, and is legitimized through explanations such as: "a certain knowledge of Latin is fundamental for understanding language history, grammar, word formation, etc. in both Danish and a number of foreign languages" (ME, 2020, p. 2).

While EAL in curricula for the language subjects in primary and lower secondary school is only focusing on (varieties of) the target language, reflecting a very limited way of including linguistic diversity, EAL in *Almen Sprogforståelse* can be criticized for not including *today's* linguistic diversity.

Figure 4 provides an overview of how EAL is integrated in the language curriculum in Denmark.

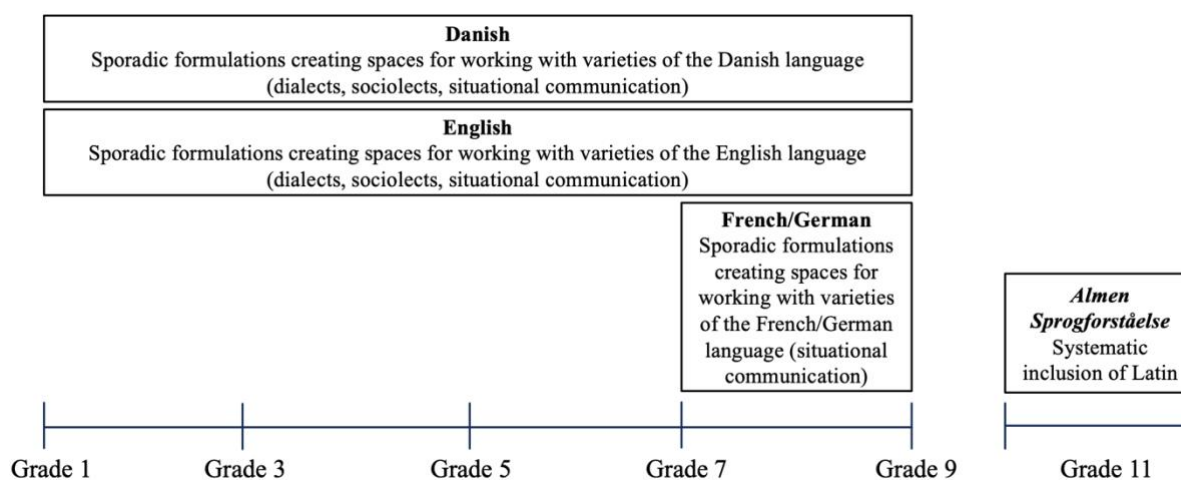


Figure 4. *Éveil aux langues in the language curriculum in Denmark – key tendencies.*

3.3 Intercomprehension between related languages (ICRL)

In primary and lower secondary school, ICRL is exclusively represented in the Danish curriculum through a mandatory, systematic, and continuous Scandinavian intercomprehension that runs like a red thread through all school years in Danish as L1 subject. At first, the Scandinavian ICRL focuses on developing the students' receptive competence by, for instance, "understanding simple Norwegian and Swedish words and expressions" and gaining "knowledge of differences and similarities in simple Danish, Norwegian and Swedish words and expressions" (ME, 2019a, p. 11). Later, the Scandinavian ICRL also focuses on developing the students' communicative competence, as the students should be able to "communicate in simple situations with Norwegians and Swedes" (ME, 2019a, p. 15). In comparison to the curriculum for Norwegian and Swedish, where the work with the Scandinavian language community is also represented, the Danish ICRL goes a bit further by focusing not only on inter-Scandinavian *understanding* but also *communication* (see Drachmann, Haukås & Lundberg, 2023). On the other hand, Danish as L1 subject opens only for a *Scandinavian* ICRL in contrast to Norwegian and Swedish as L1 subjects opening for a *Nordic* ICRL (Drachmann, Haukås & Lundberg, 2023).

In *Almen Sprogforståelse*, ICRL is represented by linking between Latin and Greek, as well as through work on relatedness between the Romance language subjects offered in upper secondary school and between Indo-European languages. In the curriculum, it is, for instance, highlighted how knowledge of "Latin and Greek prefixes and suffixes is a great help in understanding the meaning of foreign words and glosses in the other European languages" (ME, 2023, p. 10), and that students – during work with language history – discover how "Danish and Latin are Indo-European languages [...] and that the Romance languages have evolved from Latin" (ME, 2023, p. 9). Previously, the Scandinavian ICRL was also a part of *Almen Sprogforståelse* (see, e.g., curricula from 2017), but it is no longer represented in the curriculum although the work with Norwegian and Swedish – initiated and mandatory in the

Danish subject in primary and lower secondary school – continues as a mandatory objective in the Danish subject in upper secondary school.

Figure 5 provides an overview of how ICRL is integrated in the language curriculum in Denmark.

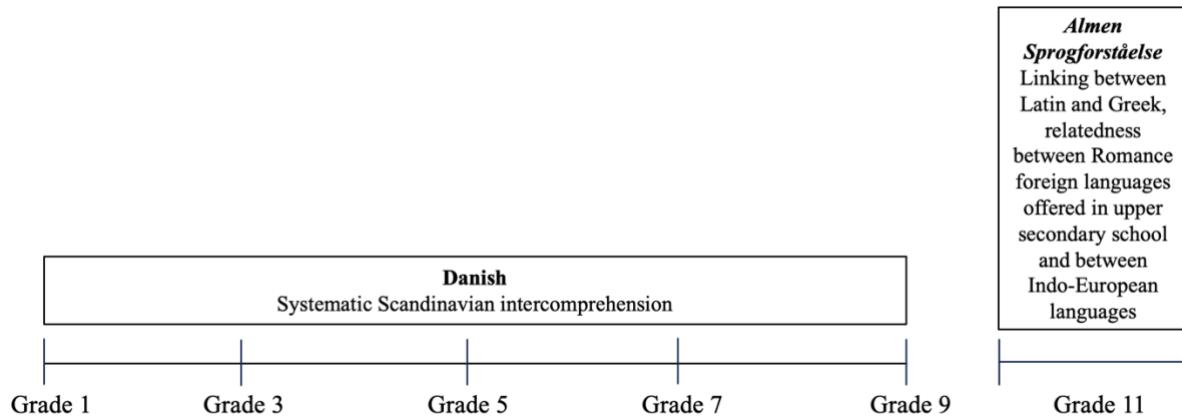


Figure 5. Intercomprehension between related languages in the language curriculum in Denmark – key tendencies.

3.4 Learners' language resources (LLR), including first languages beyond the language(s) of schooling

In primary and lower secondary school, LLR is represented in the curriculum for Danish as a second language as part of the subject's overall objective stating that students with a first language beyond Danish should learn Danish "based on their language resources" (ME, 2019b, 7). However, this phrase in the subject's objective has not resulted in concrete competence goals or practical instructions concretizing why or how this should be done.

While LLR is completely absent in Danish, there are sporadic explicit formulations in curricula for the foreign language subjects recognizing students' language resources, including first languages beyond Danish (see findings under IDA).

In *Almen Sprogforståelse*, there are very few sporadic explicit formulations opening for LLR. The few formulations are linked to practical examples in the curriculum describing how to work with language creativity and imagination, such as when first languages beyond Danish are suggested being integrated in activities such as *guess a language* and *guess an alphabet* (ME, 2023, 6). Based on formulations like these, LLR is not described as an important and valued resource in the curriculum of *Almen Sprogforståelse* but more as an exotic feature in teaching.

Figure 6 provides an overview of how LLR is integrated in the language curricula in Denmark.

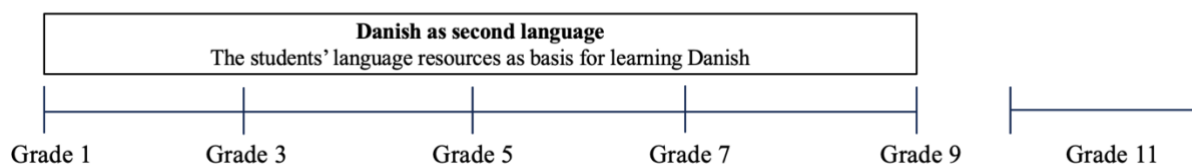


Figure 6. Learners' language resources, including first languages beyond the language(s) of schooling, in the language curriculum in Denmark – key tendencies.

3.5 Summary of curriculum findings

The curriculum findings show that plurilingual education is represented in all language subjects in primary and lower secondary school and in *Almen Sprogforståelse* in upper secondary school. However, the findings also indicate that plurilingual education (i) is integrated in different ways in each language subject, (ii) is predominantly not included systematically in the language curricula, and (iii) does not take into account continuity and progression across language subjects and/or educational levels.

In primary and lower secondary education, the *integrated didactic approach* (IDA) is part of the curricula in the foreign language subjects focusing on early foreign language teaching, reflecting that plurilingual education is primarily understood and used as a didactic tool being relevant only for young learners (see also Drachmann, 2022, 2023b; Drachmann, Haukås & Lundberg, 2023). In the Danish subject, *intercomprehension between related languages* (ICRL) is integrated continuously and systematically throughout all school years. However, from a plurilingual education perspective, the intercomprehension approach in this subject is linguistically exclusive as it only bridges to Norwegian and Swedish not including – like the Norwegian subject in Norway and the Swedish subject in Sweden – the larger Nordic language community. Also, common to the Danish subject and the foreign language subjects is that they to some extent reflect an *Éveil aux langues* approach (EAL) by focusing on language varieties. However, the language subjects only include varieties of the target language (Danish/English/French/German) being a very limited way of integrating linguistic diversity in today's classrooms, schools, and the world.

In comparison to the language subjects in primary and lower secondary education, *Almen Sprogforståelse* in upper secondary education includes plurilingual education more broadly. *Almen Sprogforståelse* establishes a collaboration between the school's language subjects Danish and foreign languages (IDA), works systematically with Latin (EAL), mainly serving as a terminological framework for the language subjects in upper secondary education, and builds bridges between Latin and Greek, but also between Romance languages being part of the school's curriculum as well as between Indo-European languages (ICRL).

Concerning the transversal dimension *learners' language resources* (LLR), Danish as a second language is the only subject in the Danish language curriculum explicitly emphasizing the value of integrating first languages beyond Danish in language teaching. However, the inclusion of first languages beyond Danish has not been manifested in concrete competence goals or practical instructions in the curricular documents.

Based on the curriculum findings, it can be stated that plurilingual education to some extent is part of the Danish language curriculum but has a clear development potential both within each of the language subjects but also from a cross-curricular perspective. The development potential

is reflected in the PE-LAL project's final recommendations to strengthen plurilingual education in Denmark.

4. Recommendations to strengthen plurilingual education in Denmark

In the final phase of the PE-LAL project, a stakeholder workshop was held with representatives from different parts of the Danish educational context, including consultants from The Ministry of Education, the National Centre for Foreign Languages, teacher organizations, teacher educators, publishing houses, school managements, and teachers. The aim of the stakeholder workshop was to discuss how plurilingual education can be strengthened in language subjects in primary and lower secondary school and in *Almen Sprogforståelse* in upper secondary school. The basis for the discussions was the project's conceptualization of plurilingual education and empirical findings from the project's curriculum and multiple-case study. Based on discussions at the workshop, the PE-LAL project group has formulated a working paper with 18 recommendations to strengthen plurilingual education across educational levels in Denmark (Daryai-Hansen, Drachmann & Krogager Andersen, 2023). The working paper can be found on the [project's website](#). The recommendations seek to strengthen plurilingual education at all levels vertically and horizontally in the Danish educational context, which is why the recommendations address both (1) the macro level (Beacco et al., 2016) focusing on curricula and pre- and in-service teacher education and (2) the meso and micro levels (Beacco et al., 2016) focusing on the school, the teacher, teaching materials, and teaching practices. The working paper should be seen and read as an ideal scenario on how to strengthen plurilingual education. However, each recommendation is an important contribution.

Endnotes

1) *Almen Sprogforståelse* is a mandatory three-month introductory course on general language awareness in upper secondary education in Denmark.

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