

Playing with languages through languages

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses multilingual workshops developed and tested in the project *Tværsproglighed i læreruddannelsen* (Plurilingual Approaches to Teacher Education) focused on the development of plurilingual approaches in teacher education in Denmark. We discuss the guiding principles underlying the joint teaching of English and French in teacher education. Our aim was to involve all our students and to ensure the development of a genuine plurilingual gaze and for them to take an additive approach (Holmen 2019) by not only teaching the students together, but also organising them in a manner which necessitated interdisciplinary collaboration. Furthermore, we consider the implications of a plurilingual approach to language learning with undergraduate students in teacher education, Danish lower secondary pupils, and their teachers. We exemplify how the inclusion of artefacts such as LEGO inspired by playful learning (Händel et al. 2021) in the development of multilingual activities promoted a willingness for undergraduate students and lower secondary pupils to participate. Our choice of LEGO had two main purposes: to inspire students to design their own activities for a given target group, focusing on a playful approach to learning, and to get students to focus less on themselves and to engage their entire linguistic repertoire.

Keywords: *Plurilingual education, playful learning, task-based learning*

1. Introduction

In this article we argue the case that more languages create more opportunities for participation for language learners if staged in language use situations which position them as valuable and competent contributors. A plurilingual and playful approach to language teaching is a possible way to do this as it seems to reduce anxiety (León & Cely, 2010), and, when linked to a task-based approach, has the potential to prompt a real communicative need (Ellis, 2003). However, such an approach also questions traditional beliefs about language teaching such as ‘languages should be taught apart’ and ‘the target language is the classroom language’.

In this article we share experiences from the development and research project *Plurilingual Approaches to Teacher Education* (“*Tværsproglighed i læreruddannelsen*”) (Kjærbaek et al., 2023). Within our designated role in the project as teacher educators in English and French respectively, our responsibility entailed the preparation of student teachers to conduct plurilingual workshops

aimed at lower secondary school pupils. Other project participants represented German, Danish and Danish as a second language.

Our aim was to involve all our student teachers and to encourage the development of plurilingual awareness and for them to take an additive approach to language teaching, considering access to more than one language as an asset rather than a disadvantage (Holmen, 2019) by not only teaching our English and French student teachers together, but also organizing them in a manner that necessitated cross-curricular collaboration. This was done through a number of language learning activities (See Figure 1). These activities were inspired by the playful learning concept (Händel et al., 2021), following the principles of task-based learning (Ellis, 2003): There must be a primary focus on meaning, there must be a gap, participants should draw on their own language resources, and finally, there should be a clear and well-defined communicative outcome of the activity.

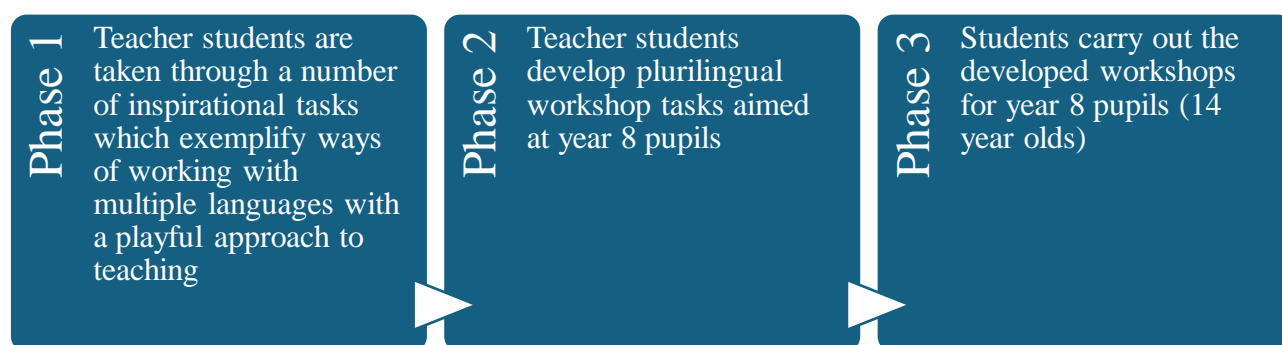


Figure 1 Phases of the project

The organisation of our teaching drew inspiration partly from research on teacher cognition, which suggests that learners' comprehension of theory is enhanced when experienced on their own bodies and when practical exemplifications are provided (Borg, 2006; Henriksen et al., 2020), and partly from the field of second-order pedagogy (Iskov, 2020). As opposed to many other types of education, teacher education entails teaching somebody who is going to teach others themselves. This can be done by implicitly or explicitly modelling certain ways of teaching, and in our case exposing our student teachers to exemplary ways of working with plurilingual approaches (phase 1 in Figure 1).

In the following we unfold the theoretical framework for the project: A section about plurilingual approaches and a section about playful learning.

2. More languages at play

The last few years have witnessed an increased interest in the development of how an additive view of language learners can be enacted through plurilingual pedagogies (Holmen, 2019; Holmen & Thise, 2021), acknowledging home languages as well as curriculum languages. Access to a wider repertoire of languages is seen as a resource which can be a vehicle for further language learning, positioning the learners as valuable contributors (García et al., 2017). Andersen (2020) sees plurilingualism as an intentional and inclusive teaching practice explicitly or implicitly building bridges between languages to promote students' opportunities for language learning and the development of language awareness.

Consequently, our work is inspired by a broad understanding of plurilingual pedagogies, drawing on translanguaging (García, 2009; García et al., 2017; Holmen & Thise, 2021) and the European plurilingual approaches (Candelier et al., 2012; Daryai-Hansen et al., 2019) Thus, a decision was made to teach our student teachers together, bridging as explicitly as possible the two foreign

languages taught in Danish school, English and French (as well as other languages). As a result, in our inspirational activities we worked cross-linguistically, accentuating possible tasks inherent in a plurilingual approach to language teaching. All instructional tasks, while focusing on one or more languages (e.g. English and French or student teachers' home languages), included the use of other languages as a means to completion: No task could be solved using only one language. For example, in one of the inspiration tasks where students were to explore a recipe in Spanish, they were prompted to use their knowledge of Danish, English and French and possibly other languages as a bridge to comprehension. Words like *recomendado*, *proporciones*, *los ingredientes* and *ajustar* are fairly transparent. Another task required the student teachers in groups to build a figure in Lego, following the instructions of one group member who had the choice of instructive language (e.g. Bosnian, Romanian, Arabic and French), the key point being that other groups members were not familiar with this language.

3. A playful approach to teaching languages in a Danish context

In Denmark, English is introduced from grade 1 and French or German from grade 5. Like in many foreign language learning contexts, teachers are experiencing difficulties motivating pupils to participate actively in activities using the target language (EVA, 2003; Lund et al., 2023). In line with a plurilingual approach to teaching and embracing a functional view on language, we were inspired by a playful approach to language teaching. Our rationale for a playful approach is that it has the potential to create authentic and meaningful communication and language use situations (Boysen et al., 2022; Fredens, 2018; Karoff & Jessen, 2014; Skovbjerg & Jørgensen, 2021). Furthermore, daring the unpredictable – as a teacher educator, as a student teacher or as a pupil – potentially opens up new perspectives, insights and surprises which a meticulously planned lesson will not necessarily lead to (<https://playful-learning.dk/>).

Furthermore, play may give the learner the opportunity to engage in other roles than usual, revealing new opportunities for participation (Luk, 2013). The quantity and nature of roles vary according to the type of play or game in question. We decided to include Lego in our task creation as this potentially would position students in roles as valued and necessary participants and contributors because of their linguistic repertoire. Moreover, a study has pointed to the fact that engagement in play and games reduces risks and consequences and thus language anxiety (León & Cely, 2010). We consider this an important reason to apply a playful approach to language teaching in a Danish context where foreign language teaching has been influenced by a structural view on language (Kabel et al., 2019; Lund et al., 2023). Requirements of accuracy relating to a native speaker norm potentially creates learner anxiety - a fear of making mistakes (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). A playful approach has the potential to reduce this fear as learners' attention will be on the game rather than on the language structure, and a playful element and the informal atmosphere that may come along with it potentially reduce language anxiety (León & Cely, 2010).

In addition to engaging the intellect, play encompasses bodily involvement and stimulates the faculty of imagination (Karoff & Jessen, 2014; von Holst-Pedersen, 2018). Given that human learning and communication is inherently a holistic process involving the entire body, we have placed particular emphasis on the role of gestures in task completion in one of the inspirational tasks for the students.

4. The choice of a task-based framework

A plurilingual and a playful approach to language learning shares a common ground of emphasizing meaningfulness for learners, and to support this, we have turned to Ellis (2003, 2019) who suggests a task-based approach to enhance meaning-focused language learning. He has set up four criteria for an activity to be termed as a task: There must be a primary focus on meaning; there must be a gap; participants should draw on their own language resources; and finally, there should be a clear and well-defined communicative outcome of the activity. With the last point, Lego seems a relevant choice as it represents a physical manifestation of the communicative outcome.

Additionally, insights provided by Gibbons (2009, 2015, 2018) on the significance of learners' engagement in meaningful and cognitively challenging activities served as an influential guide.

In this paper our focus is on one of the inspirational tasks for the student teachers created by us, the teacher educators, and on one workshop task for year 8 pupils created by the student teachers.

5. Lego workshop for student teachers

With the theoretical framework described above as our point of departure, we created a number of tasks for our students from which they could draw inspiration for their own development of plurilingual workshop tasks tailored for year 8 pupils.

When planning the inspirational tasks, our ambition was not only to draw students' attention to the benefits of a plurilingual and playful approach, but also to ensure that the tasks had an information gap to create an inbuilt need for communication, that students when solving the task could draw on a wide spectrum of language resources, and that there would be a clear outcome, for example a the building of an artefact.

The aim of this inspirational task was for the student teachers, organized in groups of four, to be able to construct a figure using Lego (see Figure 2). One group member should be appointed by the others to be the one to instruct them to build a specific figure using a language which was not familiar to them. The remaining group members had to communicate with each other to ensure the comprehension of the instructions and build the figure. We thus created roles for all group members and invited them to partake with any language of their choice. The instruction should be in a language other than Danish, English or French, the point being that the physical context (here: the Lego bricks) and the overall communicative purpose (here: being given an instruction) provide enough scaffolding for the remaining group members to build the figure required. As some group members wrote in their reflection log following the activity: "Alan knew he would have to make it simple as we [the others] didn't know any Bosnian" and "[the instructor] used a limited number of colours as we didn't understand Arabic" In other words, students seem to display a sensitivity to each other's language repertoire and task design. Additionally, the student teachers reported having drawn on what they referred to as: "transparency between words and on knowledge of languages related to the instruction language as well as similar phonetics". Our intention of activating relevant knowledge with our learners thus seems to have been successful as all students were actively participating in the task.

The informal atmosphere that comes along with a playful approach and the potential language anxiety reduction (León & Cely, 2010) along with the fact that the physical construction of the Lego figure would be the main focus of the student teachers' attention. Furthermore, with this activity we created a language use situation with an inbuilt opportunity to speak one's home language, signalling that knowledge of more than one language is not only legitimate, but also seems to position student teachers as active participants (Lave & Wenger, 2003). The activity described above lives up to the set of criteria which constitute a task (Ellis, 2003): there is a focus on

meaning, students get to choose their own language resources, there is a gap, and there is a clear outcome.



Build a figure in Lego

- 1) Choose a team member to instruct the activity (preferably someone who speaks another language than Danish, English or French).
- 2) The instructor instructs the other team members how to build a Lego figure. Preferably the instruction should be in a language which is not Danish, English, or French.
- 3) If the task is too easy for the participants, it is repeated without gestures, mimics, or other kind of action.


Figure 2. Inspirational activity based on principles for additive and plurilingual pedagogies and task-based learning.

6. Lego workshop for pupils created by student teachers

Our student teachers were subsequently invited to create activities for year 8 pupils for a day of plurilingual workshops (phase 2 in Figure 1). Several groups of student teachers chose to develop tasks using Lego as a physical artefact which we see as an indication that our attempt to involve a playful element resonated with the student teachers. Moreover, it is an indication that at least one of the task requirements have been fulfilled, i.e. that there is a communicative outcome.

The workshop task presented in this paper (Figure 3) was a set of numbered instructions in eight different languages including Danish, and the curriculum languages English, German and French. The main objective was to make groups of pupils collaborate in order to understand all eight instructions and build a city with Lego as the outcome. Prior to the main activity, the pupils had created their language portrait as a warm-up (Jensen, 2014), to create awareness of all languages they had access to and could draw on. As a follow-up activity, pupils were asked which strategies they had used while solving the task.

Having observed the workshop, we find that this task enhances collaboration and communication as it invites the participating pupils to draw from their linguistic repertoires, positioning each pupil as a needed and valued contributor. The task creates a legitimate need for communication between the participants, there is a focus on meaning, there is a clear outcome, and the pupils choose available language resources. The plurilingual instructions furthermore seem to provide opportunities for participation for pupils with knowledge of or skills in languages that are typically left out of a school context, e.g., Turkish and Romanian. The objective is for pupils to see their complete language repertoire as a resource in the classroom. The task can be adapted to suit different learner groups by adding other languages.



1. Dansk: Jeres gruppe skal bygge med LEGO. I skal starte med at bygge tre huse på en stor plade. Husene skal være i hver sin farve. Husene skal være henholdsvis rødt, grønt og blått.
2. Engelsk: Now you must build a garden for each house that you build. Each garden should include at least two flowers.
3. Fransk: En plus de ça, il faut aussi qu'il y ait une route et une piscine bleue que toutes les maisons partagent.
4. Tysk: Am Ende der Straße befindet sich eine gelbe Brücke mit Wasser darunter.
5. Spansk: En la casa roja viven un hombre, una mujer y un niño. En la casa verde viven dos mujeres y un niño. En la casa azul viven un hombre y dos niños.
6. Rumænsk: Pe drum este și un supermarket de unde oamenii pot face cumpărături.
7. Polsk: Zbuduj szkołę w mieście.
8. Tyrkisk: Şimdi şehirde halka açık bir park inşa edin.

Figure 3. Workshop activity designed by student teachers and carried out by grade 8 pupils

The design of the activity seems to invite pupils to think strategically about language. The student teachers' follow-up reflection notes show that the pupils were looking for cognates: "Montagna (Italian) is similar to montagne in French", that they made broad associations in their guessing strategies: "Route (French) sounds like route", and that they used the exclusion method: "Azul means blue, verde means green, so roja must mean red because the last house is red". French, which in some cases is deprioritized at the expense of English, suddenly plays the role of access to other Romance languages like Italian: "Hombre, isn't that like homme in French?".

7. Concluding remarks

With this article we have shown our approach to engage student teachers to design tasks that elicit plurilingual practices among pupils. Moreover, we have provided examples of the use of tasks involving physical artifacts for playful use with student teachers and year-8 pupils in Denmark that required the use of languages in their repertoire that are not shared with others. Multilingual students/pupils exposed to an additive and plurilingual pedagogy potentially have more opportunities for participation when their complete language repertoire is invited into the classroom. Taking part in language use situations where playfulness plays a significant role, they are enabled to focus on playing rather than on linguistic accuracy.

If, as teacher educators, we want to promote playful and plurilingual practices in primary school, we must acknowledge the importance of showing the way for our students.

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