



How is grammar instruction practiced in L1 and foreign language classrooms in lower secondary education in Denmark?

Grammar instruction in school is a key tool in developing students' literacy competencies, but we have little research knowledge about how grammar instruction is practiced in the subjects where language is a core element of subject knowledge. This study aims to understand how grammar instruction is practiced and how teachers and students perceive the role of grammar in three central language subjects: Danish, English and German.

About the project:

In the 21st century, language competencies are essential for students' active and future participation in education and society. Children and young people need to learn how to communicate adequately in different contexts in and out of school, as well as in more languages. Furthermore, technological developments emphasise the need for literacy competencies, in order that students may participate in 21st century forms of communication.

In Denmark, we have very little empirical evidence that sheds light on grammar teaching practices. We know little about how grammar is taught, what parallels – if any – can be drawn across language subjects such as L1 Danish, English and German in Danish schools. So far, no empirical studies focusing on student and teacher perspectives on grammar instruction have been carried out, and as such this study aims to contribute new knowledge to an under-investigated field in education.

The project's data are gathered from language classrooms in year 7 and 8. At this stage in lower secondary education in Denmark, German is no longer a new subject (German as a foreign language is taught from year 5, English from year 1) and hence no longer taught to novice students who have to express themselves in the language for the first time. Furthermore, in year 7 and 8 the explicit demands from year 9's final exams in – among other things – formal grammar can be presumed not to have taken effect yet.

The research questions:

How is grammar instruction practiced in the three main language subjects (Danish as L1, English and German as foreign languages) in lower secondary education in Denmark?

Two central sub-questions are:

How is grammar instruction perceived by teachers and students?

Why is grammar instruction practiced the way it is?

The research questions are answered by applying methods from focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2015) and drawing on knowledge and experience from existing international research literature.

This study aims to provide new knowledge about how teaching is practiced, perceived and can be developed on both subject-specific pedagogical levels and in terms of the theoretical linguistic foundations underpinning the instructional practice. The study includes a perspective on learning resources, as we expect to see a significant use of digital and more or less standardized learning materials in the shape of so-called learning platforms. In this way, this study also contributes knowledge about learning resources, their theoretical and linguistic foundations and pedagogical affordances. Because the study is designed as a cross-curricular study of grammar teaching practices, the study also provides new knowledge about cooperating across language school subjects.

Theoretical framework

In a social-semiotic view of language, grammar is understood as a language about language, thus as a metalanguage, addressing the level of the sentence, but also the level of the text, where text, as quoted by Myhill (2018) is "a process of meaning making in context" (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2004, p. 20). Hasan (2014) highlights how grammar can be understood from two different approaches connected to Saussure's (1970) distinction between "la langue" and "la parole", in other words between language as system and language in use. One tradition foregrounds language as system and hence focuses on the development and description of a formal, prescriptive grammar, where the other approach incorporates language in use and is interested in developing a functional, descriptive grammar. This study takes inspiration from Macken-Horarik et al. (2015), who use the term *multilevel* grammatics to coin this view of a language about language.

Language and knowledge about language are a central part of the curriculum in Danish as L1, English and German, and, in this project, the connection between grammar instruction and literacy competencies is central. However, for this connection to be meaningful, grammar instruction needs to be functional, descriptive and contextualized and must include a metalanguage able to describe and reflect upon language use. In addition, this grammar instruction must feature a "multilevel" view of grammar and make room for students' linguistic experiences in classroom discussions. Following Macken-Horarik et al. (2015), this view of grammar can be described as a holistic grammar. In a holistic view of grammar, the teaching of grammar does not limit itself to addressing syntax and morphology, but includes metalanguage on texts and context, and hence also the relation between lower-level phenomena such as morphology and syntax, and their relation to the meaning and use of the texts as a whole.

This study is an exploratory study, seeking to understand how grammar teaching takes place in language classrooms in Denmark. By applying a holistic notion of grammar, we aim to make sure that we are able to capture grammar teaching in many forms and shapes; both when grammar teaching takes the shape of decontextualized activities focusing on morphology and syntax, as well as when it takes more innovative and less traditional forms.