

Researching Educational Practices, Teacher Education and Professional Development for Early Language Learning

Examples from Europe

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Chapter 7

Preparing teachers for multilingualism in Norwegian early childhood education and care provision through student active learning methods

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7 Preparing teachers for multilingualism in Norwegian early childhood education and care provision through student active learning methods

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Context

In Norway, which is the context for the present study, around 93 percent of all children between 1 and 6 attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions (Statistics Norway, 2023a). All ECEC centres are required to comply with the *Kindergarten Act* (2006) as well as the *Framework plan for kindergartens* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). The ECEC staff typically fall into two categories: “teachers” and “assistants.” The teachers hold a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education or its equivalent. Among the assistants, some are skilled workers who have a specialised vocational diploma related to childcare and youth work, while others are unskilled workers. The early childhood education (ECE) degree is regulated by the *Framework Plan for Early Childhood Teacher Education* (Forskrift om rammeplan for barnehagelærerutdanning, 2012) which constitutes the national curriculum for early childhood teacher education.

While Norwegian is the dominant language in mainstream ECEC centres, several other languages have special status in Norway. Sami languages (Northern, Southern and Lule Sami) have special protection under Norwegian legislation, and Kven, Romani/Romanés and Norwegian Sign Language have status as national minority languages. In addition, English is widely used and is taught in school from Grade 1. Swedish and Danish languages are closely related to Norwegian and frequently used in Norwegian society, with regular contact between the Nordic countries. Due to patterns of migration, several additional languages are also spoken in Norwegian society, with Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainian, Swedes, and Syrians being the largest migrant groups in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2023b). Twenty percent of children attending ECEC in Norway are minority language speakers, defined as children of two parents who speak languages other than Norwegian, English, Swedish, Danish or Sami languages at home (Statistics Norway, 2023c). As the definition of minority speaking children in ECEC is quite restrictive, the actual proportion of multilingual children in ECEC is likely to be much larger.

Background

As in many other European countries, the educational system in Norway is expected to address cultural and linguistic diversity, and ECEC teachers should be prepared to work in linguistically and culturally diverse settings. Research on multilingualism emphasises the importance of actively using the children's multilingual resources for learning in ECEC centres and schools (Cummins, 2019). The Norwegian policy documents for ECEC seem to be in line with these goals: *The National Framework Plan for Kindergartens* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) requires that kindergartens support multilingual children's development of both the home languages and Norwegian or Sami, and that staff shall "highlight linguistic and cultural diversity, support the children's different cultural expressions and identities and promote diversity in communication, language and other forms of expression" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 48).

Even so, the policy documents at national and municipal level, as well as lower level guidelines, seem to have proficiency in Norwegian as their primary goal (Gjæver & Tkachenko, 2020; Lindquist, 2019). Furthermore, the actual pedagogical work with multilingual children in ECEC tends to focus on supporting and promoting majority language skills (Lindquist, 2019). As teacher educators and researchers in early childhood education, we regularly meet ECEC teachers and student teachers (STs) who argue that multilingualism is not relevant for their group of children. This attitude is documented in Lindquist's (2019) interviews with ECEC teachers who considered that all 1-year-olds in ECEC would have the same needs and conditions for acquiring Norwegian, irrespective of whether they were exposed to other languages in the home.

Kirsch et al. (2020) claim that there is a challenge in implementing multilingual practices in education: Although teachers in general have positive attitudes towards multilingualism, they show little enthusiasm for drawing on the children's multilingual resources in their classrooms. The authors argue that this reluctance to implement multilingual pedagogical approaches might be due to teachers' monolingual beliefs, which still prevail in their practices. García (2017) stresses that it is still less understood *how* teacher education can ensure not only the development of teachers' understanding of multilingualism as a resource but also their enactment of such understanding in their teaching practices. García (2017), Duarte et al. (2020) and Alstad (2020) also identify multilingual didactics in ECEC as an area in need of more research. Alstad (2020) discusses how innovative teaching methods in teacher education, including active involvement, can help STs gain a better understanding of the challenges they will face in practice in multilingual contexts.

In line with these queries, we ask the following question: How can teacher education prepare ECEC practitioners to deal with the multilingual realities of their work? In this chapter, we present a student active learning module on multilingualism in ECEC and discuss how this type of teaching can be used in teacher education to explore the complex topic of multilingualism, as well as the potential this approach can have for enhancing the understanding of

multilingualism in ECEC settings. We discuss how the teaching module was intended to bring theoretical perspectives on multilingual development and multilingualism in ECEC into play in teacher education, building on general theories of teaching and learning as well as more specific theories on professional development within multilingualism. We also present our interpretation of how the STs developed their understanding of multilingualism and multilingual practices in ECEC within the learning module, based on three data sources of course evaluation: (1) Our experiences as teacher educators from discussions with STs and continuous evaluations in the classroom, (2) a focus group interview with four STs and (3) e-mail interviews with nine STs.

We categorise the interview data as a documented in-depth evaluation of the courses, since the students who accepted to be interviewed in group were STs who were particularly enthusiastic and interested in research studies in general and in multilingualism in ECEC in particular. Although the e-mail interviews were set up to yield more neutral or negative comments on the teaching module, we still do not consider the interview data to be balanced and fully representative of the STs' experiences. We will therefore use the STs' statements as examples of reactions to the teaching module rather than as a data set to be interpreted and presented alone.

The processing of personal data in the interview procedures, the questionnaires and collection of narratives of practice that STs collected in their assignments in the module on multilingualism, was ethically evaluated by the national Data Protection Services and adjusted according to their recommendations. The teaching module and the interview data have been discussed in Norwegian in Garmann, Romøren and Tkachenko (2021) from the perspectives of research-based teaching and STs' participation in research. The narratives of practice and the questionnaire data have been discussed in Tkachenko, Romøren and Garmann (2021) and Romøren, Garmann and Tkachenko (2023), investigating teacher strategies and language choices in ECEC respectively.

Previous research

Several studies document that ECEC practitioners working in culturally and linguistically diverse groups experience insecurities, contrasts and dilemmas in their pedagogical work (e.g., Kultti & Pramling, 2020; Fredriksson & Lindgren-Eneflo, 2019; Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017). To be able to meet such contrasts and dilemmas, Kultti and Pramling (2020) suggest that practitioners should be encouraged to verbalise and reflect upon their professional knowledge and how this informs their practice. García (2017) proposes that all teacher education programmes need to develop prospective teachers' abilities to use what she terms "critical multilingual language awareness" (CMLA) in their pedagogical practice. In addition to the three key components traditionally included in language awareness for teachers (proficiency, subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical practice), she suggests adding three more: Awareness of plurilingualism and its merits for democratic citizenship, histories of the speakers and their struggles, and the awareness of

language as a socially constructed phenomenon. García (2017) also points out that theoretical courses on multilingualism alone will contribute little to the development of CMLA, and that theoretical concepts should be combined with authentic situated practice and critique of the observed practice for it to actually result in transformed practice.

Several studies have shown that education and personal experience may affect teachers' beliefs and lead to changes in their practice. Kirsch and Aleksic (2018), for example, showed how ECEC teachers, following a professional development course in Luxembourg, changed from being sceptical towards multilingualism in education and adhering to monolingual practices, to initiating new activities including the children's home languages. A study in Finland (Alisaari et al., 2019) investigated teachers' beliefs related to multilingual teaching in the process of implementing a new curriculum with more emphasis on multilingualism as a resource. This study showed that teachers who received training in linguistically responsive teaching, or had experience with teaching newly arrived migrant students, were more likely to have positive beliefs towards multilingualism and multilingual practices and a deeper understanding of the topic than teachers without these educational or personal teaching experiences. These teachers also more often used the students' multilingual resources in their own teaching (Alisaari et al., 2019).

Even though these studies have demonstrated that it is possible to change teachers' beliefs about multilingualism, research has also shown a complex relationship between teacher beliefs and teaching practices, and that changes in teacher beliefs may not necessarily lead to changes of practice (Pajares, 1992). In this line, Palviainen et al. (2016) have documented that teachers' beliefs may only be affected when teachers get actual experiences of new practices in their local contexts and reflect upon these experiences, i.e., that changes in practices can lead to changes in teacher beliefs. Such changes in practice can, for example, be the result of observing others and trying to implement others' practices in their own teaching (Kirsch et al., 2020). Trying out new approaches to teaching can also initiate a change in practice and affect teachers' beliefs.

The studies above demonstrate a complex interplay between teacher beliefs, agency, policy and practice, and show that teacher education and professional development programmes have the potential to address the challenges of implementing multilingual educational policies and developing multilingual didactics. Furthermore, these studies show that reflection on experienced practice, building on local needs, encouraging collaboration and offering opportunities for active learning are important components in the teacher development process. By relating theory to practice (student) teachers can identify and address the gaps between their own practice and intended pedagogical principles (Kirsch et al., 2020).

Sociocultural theory and student active learning

Theoretically, the idea of relying on (student) teachers' personal and professional experiences is anchored in sociocultural theory (Rogoff, 2008;

Säljö, 2001), which assumes that learning is a complex interaction between the learner, the people interacting with the learner and the culture in which the learner is situated. According to this framework, people learn through their experiences, and they learn different things as everybody has different experiences depending on their context, e.g., people, culture and the physical environment. In order for ECEC teachers to become more confident in supporting children's multilingual development, teacher education needs to provide them with relevant experiences of multilingual contexts, both personally and professionally. Reflection on experienced practice encourages students' active learning (Kirsch et al., 2020). Kirsch et al. (2020) also point to active learning and collaboration in groups as valuable learning experiences.

According to Kember and Kwan (2000), building on the students' experiences is part of a learning-centred approach to teaching, as opposed to a content-centred approach. In a learning-centred approach, the teacher's role is to motivate students and ensure they maintain their interest in the course work. In a content-centred approach to teaching, the teacher leans on extrinsic motivational factors such as exams and syllabus. Typically, learning-centred teachers tend to use the strategies which encourage students to discover knowledge, have flexible types of assessments, utilise student experience and attend to individual students, strengthening skills where needed. On the other hand, the content-centred approach is characterised by a tendency to use the strategies of providing materials, frequent testing, giving examples from own experience, focusing on the class as a whole and paying limited attention to individual differences among students. The description of learning-centred teaching demonstrate the link between making students interested in a topic and arranging for student active learning which results in students discovering knowledge by themselves.

Student active learning, defined as being involved in an activity, may not only support students' learning but it may also change them for life, shaping their ways of being and acting in the world. Rogoff (2008) argues that learning in a group through experience may change the learner in profound ways through so-called participatory appropriation. She gives examples of participatory appropriation in situations where children who are involved in an activity change their level of participation in this activity through being involved, which makes them able to participate in similar activities in new ways.

The module on multilingualism

As teacher educators we have experienced a similar challenge to that described by Kirsch et al. (2020), i.e., although the STs appreciated multilingualism in theory, they were reluctant to draw on the children's linguistic competence in the classroom. It could be that the content-centred approaches used in teaching multilingualism in teacher education did not encourage change in their practices. We wanted to motivate them to implement multilingual teaching methods in ECEC; therefore, we set out to explore radical learning-centred approaches by engaging the STs in student active learning activities in a module on multilingualism.

This module on multilingualism was developed as part of the teacher education programme at a Norwegian university, in the final year of the STs' bachelor's degree studies, where they may choose to strengthen their knowledge concerning language development, language environment and language didactics in ECEC. By the last year of their studies, the STs usually have received some practice experience, through practicum organised in the teacher education programme, part-time employment in ECEC education, or both. Most of the students in our study have been working in ECEC centres, either temporarily or on a more permanent basis. Within these advanced-level courses, we developed a multilingual learning module with the following elements:

- *Content-centred lectures:*
 - At the beginning of the module, an introductory lecture was given on multilingual children and multilingualism in society and in ECEC.
 - The STs were also informed about the research ethics and anonymisation techniques when collecting data from ECEC.
- *Active learning assignments*
 - The STs were invited to draw their own language portraits (Busch, 2018) and discuss them in groups.
 - The STs were given a questionnaire to take to their respective ECEC centres, gathering information about the languages staff and children in their group knew, and which of these languages were actively used on a day-to-day basis in the ECEC centre. The questionnaire listed common ECEC contexts and activities (meals, literacy activities, excursions, washroom routines, etc.), and the STs had to indicate the frequency with which the listed activities involved languages other than Norwegian. The questionnaire also asked to what extent the ECEC worked systematically to match children and adults who speak the same language (excluding Norwegian).
 - The STs were asked to write narratives of practice that in one way or another concerned the use of languages other than Norwegian.
- *Workshop:* After having collected the data, the STs took part in a workshop where they shared and discussed the information they had collected in the questionnaires and narratives and participated in teacher educator-led discussions to reflect upon their learning experiences.

With this teaching module as the backdrop, we will now move on to discussing how student active learning and learning-centred teaching on multilingualism can be used in teacher education to prepare STs for a multilingual reality in ECEC.

Discussion

Before starting this project, we were puzzled when STs commented that they did not consider multilingualism relevant to their lives or their current ECEC professional practice, while at the same time professional development

programmes related to language have been in high demand. Even though we emphasised multilingual perspectives in our lectures, only a limited number of STs chose to explore the topic further in their final bachelor's degree dissertations. One reason for the lack of engagement in multilingualism could be the lack of experience with the phenomenon due to monolingual biases in their surroundings which support the STs' own monolingual beliefs (as discussed by Kirsch et al., 2020). As we see it, this lack of experience does not have to mean that the phenomenon was not present in their environment, but possibly that the discourse on multilingualism makes it seem more relevant for some STs than for others, for example, with reference to racial or ethnic backgrounds. An illustration of this could be when STs considered some of the tasks given in the module to be irrelevant, as they had the impression that no languages other than Norwegian were in use in their own ECEC centre or group, even though these were culturally diverse. In addition, they showed little interest in critically exploring why they held such a view.

To show the STs that multilingualism is indeed relevant both personally and in their professional practice, we decided to go from a more content-centred to a more learning-centred approach to teaching (Kember & Kwan, 2000) and designed a module that would require more student activity. By use of assignments aimed at developing the STs' relatedness to multilingualism and multilingual children, and through the involvement in and discussion of their own examples from the practice field, we hoped to make the STs more interested in the topic, change their beliefs about multilingualism and reach participatory appropriation (Rogoff, 2008) in the way that they would later change their practices.

Language portraits to discover multilingualism in themselves

The students' work with language portraits (Busch, 2018) aimed at exploring the concept of language as a socially constructed phenomenon and making STs more aware of multilingualism in their own lives. By drawing language portraits and discussing them in groups, some of the STs discovered that they had multilingual experiences they had not considered before, or, if not, that their peers had such experiences. In this way, their attention was drawn to otherwise hidden knowledge about the semiotic resources and language repertoires they possessed. Hence, the STs approached a more nuanced understanding of language as a socially constructed phenomenon, an important prerequisite for developing multilingual language awareness according to García (2017).

Some of the STs portrayed certain languages in their drawings, even if they did not have full command of these languages but used them only in some situations. For example, one of the STs represented her knowledge of a song in several languages that they usually sang with children in their ECEC. Such cases might indicate that through their drawings, the STs addressed theoretically complex concepts, such as "language proficiency," "language domains" and "linguistic repertoire," relating these concepts to their own experiences. The STs were also pushed to explicitly discuss the category "multilingual," in

relation to both their own identity and that of their peers, thereby becoming more aware of various aspects of multilingualism and histories of multilingual speakers and their struggles (García, 2017). In other words, the STs experienced multilingualism in themselves and in the society around them, which is the basis for learning (Rogoff, 2008; Säljö, 2001).

Student active learning assignments as a way to connect with multilingual reality

One of our intentions with the questionnaires and the narratives of practice was to oblige the STs to observe and discover the concrete presence (or not) of different languages in their ECEC centres, and to analyse situations where languages other than Norwegian were in use. The data they gathered also allowed for comparisons between different ECEC centres, and we assumed that such comparisons would stimulate workshop discussions on the contexts and reasons for the observed practices. In this way, we encouraged our STs to investigate multilingualism and multilingual practices in ECEC by themselves, hence exploring learning-centred teaching as suggested by Kember and Kwan (2000). In a focus group interview and during the workshop, many of the STs said that the questionnaire activity contributed to helping them realise that the children and the staff in the ECEC centres they investigated knew more languages than they had expected, hence building the STs' knowledge about multilingualism in ECEC. This is illustrated in the two following statements from the focus group interview:

I was surprised how many children had parents with a different mother tongue than Norwegian. I was not aware of this before, we actually had to count, I thought many languages was something they had in other parts of the city. It was also interesting to see how the parents were consistent in using their mother tongue with the children, I was not aware of this before.

(ST1)

I thought that multilingualism was non-existent in my ECEC centre, but it turned out that two of the pedagogical leaders actually used other languages than Norwegian on purpose in their everyday practice. I was positively surprised how these two made choices to make multilingualism more visible.

(ST2)

In our opinion, these statements also illustrate the existence of a monolingual bias in ECEC professional practice, as the children and the staff's multilingual competence seem to remain invisible unless special attention is drawn to their available linguistic resources, something which our STs experienced by completing the questionnaire.

The questionnaire also included a question about most common situations where multiple languages are used, and we observed that this made the STs more aware of these situations. For example, ST2 in the quote above mentions that she discovered that her colleagues used languages other than Norwegian in their work, a practice that had gone unnoticed before. This might be because the use of languages other than Norwegian in this ECEC centre was more common in certain situations involving a few children with only one teacher (see Romøren et al., 2023; Tkachenko et al., 2021).

Student active learning assignments as a first step to changing practice

Another aim of the assignments in this module was to give the STs the possibility to explore new ideas for more inclusive and more multilingual practices and to implement multilingual didactics in their pedagogical practice, as recommended by García (2017) and Kirsch and Aleksic (2018) for example. It seems like the questionnaire assignment as well as the written narratives of practice assignment inspired the STs to try out new practices. For example, in the interview about the module, one ST shared a story about a Norwegian-Somali girl in their ECEC centre whose home language was Somali, but who herself refused to speak it. Inspired by the assignment in this module, the ST and her colleagues started reading the same books in Norwegian and Somali, as well as using digital tools where stories were told in Somali. After the ST had learned to read a little in the girl's home language, she gradually began to use some words in Somali and to express that she understood what was being said. Then, one day the Norwegian-Somali girl exclaimed after a reading session: "When I heard it in Somalia [sic!], then I became so glad in my heart!"

Several aspects in this example are interesting: First, the ST herself initiated the practice of using the child's home language in some ECEC situations (book reading and digital resources); second, it seems that the ST also managed to involve her colleagues in this new practice; third, this new practice seems to have led to positive experiences both for the child and the staff. Following the line of argument in Kirsch et al. (2020), all three aspects may be good prerequisites for changes in current practices. The example also shows the power of learning through taking part in an activity (Rogoff, 2008; Säljö, 2001).

As changes can be the result of noticing specific aspects of professional practice and implementing these in one's own practice (Kirsch et al., 2020), we claim that the questionnaire and narratives of practice assignments encouraged at least some students to take the first steps to changing their practices related to multilingualism in ECEC. To the extent that other members of the ECEC staff also observed the STs work with active learning assignments and subsequently adjusted their practices, we may also witness what Rogoff (2008) refers to as "participatory appropriation." This participatory appropriation serves to illustrate a synergy between teacher education, professional practice in ECEC and research on multilingualism.

Student active learning assignments as a way to change teachers' beliefs

We also assumed that the STs' work would lead to participatory appropriation (Rogoff 2008) in the way that they would change as professionals and perhaps also that the ECEC staff they involved in their work with the assignments would also change their attitudes and approaches to multilingualism. When working with the questionnaire results in groups, we hoped that even students who themselves were related to relatively monolingual ECECs might discover that their next workplace may look different, and that they would have to adjust to other practices, thereby going through participatory appropriation. Additionally, since some of the STs in the focus group interview reported that taking the questionnaire with them into the ECEC centres resulted in reflections among the ECEC staff, we expected that the assignment in itself would result in participatory appropriation.

However, as the assignments could be carried out through observations of others and did not have to involve the STs' own practices, this may have been a weakness since it perhaps only changed the STs' beliefs. As claimed by Pajares (1992), a change in belief does not necessarily lead to a change of practice. If we had, instead, designed a course where the students were to change their practices, then changed beliefs may have followed in more cases (Palviainen et al., 2016).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed how student active learning and learning-centred teaching in a module on multilingualism in teacher education could create opportunities for STs to relate more to the topic of multilingualism, develop a more nuanced understanding of multilingualism at both personal and professional levels, and explore the implementation of new multilingual practices.

Through our discussion, we have shown that student active learning and learning-centred teaching can help STs become more prepared for the challenges they will face in practice with diverse groups of children, and better support them to deal with insecurities, contrasts and dilemmas that have been reported by ECEC practitioners in their work in multilingual settings (Fredriksson & Lindgren-Eneflo, 2019; Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017). We believe that such approaches in teacher education have the potential to change both teachers' beliefs and practices, positively influence the STs' motivation towards and commitment to the topic and help ECEC and teacher education resolve the challenges related to the implementation of multilingual practices, as pointed out by Kirsch et al. (2020). Based on our experiences from running this module, we believe that student active learning in teacher education can also contribute to creating a positive synergy between teacher education, professional practice and research, thus providing ECEC STs with both theoretical and practical knowledge about how they can involve different languages in their practice.

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