

Foreign Language Education Reforms in Norway and Denmark

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Introduction:

The role of the English language in Norwegian society is wide-ranging. English has traditionally been viewed as a foreign language in Norway, although there was discussion of it becoming a second official language in the country in the 1990s (Graddol, 1997, pp. 11). The development of 'Norwenglish,' a Norwegian 'dialect' of sorts integrated with English words and slang, emphasises this ambiguity. English has been offered in schools since 1939 (*Normalplan for byfolkeskolen*, 1939) at the discretion of each individual municipality. This led to notable differences between the municipalities (Steenaaasen, 1958 as cited in Simensen, 2014). As such, to encourage equality (Then and Volckmar, 2020), it became a nationally mandatory language for students in 'grunnskolen' / primary education with the '*Grunnskolelova*' of 1969, from the 5th grade upwards.

In Denmark, English has been offered as an optional course in schools since 1809 (Olsen, 1947, pp.157), while French and German were mandatory to learn alongside Danish. Over the next two hundred years, the value of teaching English and other foreign languages fluctuated, until the 1970s when the structure of Danish schools were being reformed, leading also to an increased focus on foreign language education. Since then, there have been a variety of reforms developing the structure of English language and other 2nd foreign language learning, which have led to where the structure of the Norwegian and Danish educational systems and their teaching of foreign languages are today.

This report summarises the main reforms that had a relevant influence on foreign language education in Danish and Norwegian schools.

Methodology:

My first steps for this research were to read through Eurydice and Council of Europe reports on education in the respective countries, then to look for academic articles on the topic, and thirdly to examine government websites in the local languages to understand the different parts of each reform. I then compiled a list of reforms and

sources, and then went back to read each reform in-depth and extracted the relevant parts for a report to be used by my supervisor in his wider research project on the sociopolitical effects of these reforms.

The key foreign language education reforms were difficult to locate, both for Norway and for Denmark, and took quite a while, as they aren't advertised or researched much. While researching and taking notes on these reforms I was translating them from their original languages into English, which was an interesting part of the research experience.

Most of the reforms for both countries weren't targeted directly towards foreign language education, rather they were complex general educational policies with foreign language education aspects which were still relevant to my research.

For this report, I will begin with the relevant research I collected on Norway and follow with the information I found in Denmark.

Norway:

In 1974, the Mønsterplan 1974 ('Pattern Plan of 1974') was implemented in Norway. The first notable change with this reform was the introduction of a national 9-year compulsory basic school. Combined with this change came the option to take a 2nd foreign language in lower secondary school (years 7-9). German and French languages were to be offered at all schools, and some schools shall have the opportunity to teach other languages at their own discretion. At this point, one could only choose to study one 2nd foreign language. As an alternative to 2nd foreign language education, one could specialise in another language they already speak; Norwegian, English, or Sami, or choose to do a practical project.

After, in the 1990s, the aim of most Norwegian education reforms became to create a balance between the typical academic exam-school structure and vocational education.

Reform 94 was mainly focused on upper secondary education, including the introduction of the statutory right for everyone between the ages of 16 - 19 to upper secondary education (VGS), with the option to take either academic courses or vocational training at VGS. This included certain 'common' or 'shared' courses: Norwegian/Sami, English, mathematics, social sciences, natural sciences, and physical education (Meld. St. 21 (2020-21); R94) for students in all courses (incl. vocational), as well as mandatory 2nd foreign language for study-specialising (non-vocational only). This was introduced to make it easier for students to transfer from vocational to academic paths and vice versa (Meld. St. 21 (2020–2021), with the aim to lower dropout rates.

Reform 97 lowered the age of entry into primary education from 7 years to 6 years, and extended the length of primary and lower secondary education ('grunnskole') from 9 to 10 years. This year, it became mandatory for all children starting in the 1st grade of primary school (ages 6 and upwards) to study English, as seen with the 'Læreplan 97' ('Teaching plan 97') published together with R97 (see Figures 2 and 3). The total mandatory hours were 271 hours of English language teaching per year.

Situasjonen for fremmedspråkene i grunnopplæringen

Engelsk

Engelsk ble innført som obligatorisk fag i norsk skole på 1960-tallet, med start på 5. trinn. Siden har starten, i tråd med den internasjonale utviklingen innen fremmedspråk, blitt lagt tidligere i utdanningsløpet. Fra og med skolereformen i 1997 (*L97*) begynner de fleste elevene i Norge med engelsk på 1. trinn. Skolene har en viss frihet i å fordele timene innenfor 1.-4. trinn. I gjennomsnitt får elevene ca. 25 minutter per uke i faget i løpet av trinn 1-4.

Læreplanen i engelsk (*L97*) er for barnetrinnet preget av utforskning, lek og muntlig rytmisk tilnærming til språket med dikt, rim og fortelling i sentrum. Det er usikkert i hvilken grad engelsk-opplæringen er systematisk i de første årene. Det vi vet, er at klasselæreren som regel også er engelsklæreren på de første trinnene, og at flertallet av disse lærerne er uten utdanning i engelsk.

Figure 1: (Source) Screenshot from *Språk åpner dører* (2005, pp. 17) about English language being taught from 5th grade in the 1960s, and from the 1st grade in 1997 via R97 (and accompanying L97). It touches upon the lack of official education in English of English language teachers in Norway.

Specific position of English

English needs to be differentiated from other Foreign Languages. English has been a compulsory subject for over four decades, and was introduced from the 1st grade in 1997. It is therefore not in competition with other foreign languages (except, maybe, in the 8th grade when additional English is offered as an alternative option to others such as the Second Foreign Language or Norwegian or a project development). In this way, the Norwegian situation corresponds with one of the points about English made in the Council of Europe's *Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe* where it suggested that the provision of English as a compulsory subject in addition to other foreign languages is an alternative to the competition of English with other Foreign Languages, which almost inevitably leaves English dominant.

English as a 'Second Language'

Figure 2: (Source) Screenshot from Council of Europe's Country Report (pp. 16) showing English language education becoming mandatory from the 1st grade in 1997.

The reforms from the early 2000s focused on the development of basic competence in a wide array of subjects (Kvalitetsutvalget), as well as ensuring that formal education was held to a similar high standard across the country. *Kvalitetsutvalget* from 2001, or 'the quality selection,' was somewhat of a preparation for *Kunnskapsløftet* (Store Norske Leksikon, 2022), suggesting that learning a 2nd foreign language should be mandatory in lower secondary school (NOU 2003:16). However, this wasn't implemented until *Kunnskapsløftet*, 'the knowledge oath,' was put into action in 2006.

Kunnskapsløftet also increased the amount of required hours of English classes in the child stage (school years 1-7) from 271 hours (R97) to 366 hours in an attempt to increase competence and literacy in the language, as well as developing new curricula that encourage steady progression and continuity between school years.

Den viktigste motivasjonen for å lære fremmede språk må være et ønske om og behov for å kommunisere med mennesker på tvers av kultur- og landegrenser. En fersk undersøkelse fra EU-kommisjonen viser at alle elever kan ha glede og nytte av opplæring i flere fremmedspråk. *Språk åpner dører* skal bidra til at dette blir en realitet. Vi trenger også mange dyktige lærere. Derfor er en del av kompetansemidlene i forbindelse med innføringen av Regjeringens skolereform, *Kunnskapsløftet*, øremerket til 2. fremmedspråk.

En liten nasjon trenger god kompetanse i fremmedspråk. Norge er svært avhengig av utenrikshandel, og flere store europeiske land er blant våre viktigste handelspartnere. Språk og kulturforståelse er blitt en viktig konkurransefaktor, men er like viktig for kulturutveksling og enkeltmenneskets livskvalitet. Kompetanse i fremmedspråk er også viktig for å motvirke intoleranse og fordommer. Vi må forstå hverandre for å kunne samarbeide.

Norske elever er flinke i engelsk, i hvert fall i muntlig. Det ble nylig bekreftet av en europeisk undersøkelse, som viste at norske elevers muntlige engelskferdigheter er blant de beste i Europa. Noe av forklaringen på dette er at norske elever får mange års undervisning i engelsk. Men forskning tyder på at de ikke er like flinke til å skrive engelsk. Når det gjelder undervisning i andre fremmedspråk har Norge hittil ligget dårlig an i forhold til andre europeiske land. **I forbindelse med *Kunnskapsløftet* blir 2. fremmedspråk obligatorisk på ungdomstrinnet fra 2006.**

Språk åpner dører er en ambisiøs plan som vil involvere mange aktører. Planen viser til skoleeiers sentrale rolle, men også til at aktører utenfor skole-Norge kan gi viktige bidrag til styrkingen av fremmedspråkene i grunnsopplæringen. I juni 2005 ble det etablert et nasjonalt senter for fremmedspråk i opplæringen ved Høyskolen i Østfold. Senteret vil bli viktig i arbeidet med å realisere tiltakene i strategien.

Lykke til i arbeidet med å styrke våre ferdigheter i flere språk!

Kristin Clemet
Utdannings- og forskningsminister
Oslo, 12. juni 2005

Figure 3: Foreword in *Språk åpner dører* (2005) about 2nd foreign language becoming mandatory in lower secondary schools.

Denmark:

In Denmark, on the other hand, was mandatory to study French and German alongside Danish since the School Act of 1809 (Olsen, 1947, pp.157; Sørensen, 1971). In 1871, English was introduced as an optional subject for classical and academic paths of study in secondary schools, but became mandatory for 'Realskoler,' a form of lower secondary education which propels the students into the working world, rather than the academic (Olsen, 1947, pp.157). From 1903 onwards, after the Secondary Schools Act was passed, English as a subject increased in popularity and prestige according to Olsen (1947), and subsequently (with German as well) "replaced Latin and French" (pp.157) in secondary education.

From 1937 until the Folkeskolereform in 1975, 'folkeskolen' was only up to 7th grade, after which further education was voluntary.

§ 17. I børnehaveklasser beskæftiges børnene under hensyntagen til deres alder og udvikling. Det skal herved også tilstræbes at gøre børnene fortrolige med den daglige tilværelse i skolen.

Stk. 2. I 1.-4. skoleår skal undervisningen omfatte skriftlig og mundtlig dansk, skrivning, regning, kristendomskundskab, historie, geografi, biologi, legemsøvelser med lege, musik, formning og håndarbejde. Undervisningen planlægges med jævn fremadskriden, således at fagrækken først bliver fuldstændig i 4. skoleår. Undervisningsministeren kan tillade, at andre fag optages på undervisningsplanen.

Stk. 3. I 5. og 6. skoleår skal undervisningen tillige omfatte engelsk (eller eventuelt tysk) og sløjd og i 7. skoleår desuden tysk (engelsk), matematik, naturlære og husgerning, men ikke musik og formning. Undervisningen i håndarbejde og sløjd kan planlægges således, at de enkelte elever kun følger undervisningen i et af fagene eller i en del af skoleåret. Undervisningsministeren kan tillade, at andre fag optages på undervisningsplanen.

Figure 4: Stk. 2 and 3 of §17 on pp.324 of the Lov om folkeskolen from 8th May 1972, (including law nr.300 passed on 12th June 1970, with the changes from law nr.112 passed on 31st March 1971, law nr. 234 passed on 19th May 1971, and law nr. 121 passed on 17th April 1972). It states that schooling will be done in Danish from school grades 1-4, and English (or German) will be taught (mandatory) in 5th and 6th years, and German (or English - the opposite language to what you had taken before) in year 7. It says this law was put in place on the 1st of October 1972 (pp.333)

Folkeskolereformen of 1975 is the product of a few years of proposals, initially Knud Heinesen's draft law in December 1972 (which aimed to introduce English as a mandatory subject from grades 4-9, and German from grades 7-9, but apparently only managed to have English or German from years 5-6 and the opposite 2nd foreign language in year 7, as seen in Figure 5), and Tove Nielsen's similar proposal in 1974 (danmarkshistorien.dk, N.D.). In January of 1975, however, Ritt Bjerregaard took over as education minister with the Social Democratic party, and put this reform into place. His reform was broader than Heinesen and Nielsen's initial proposals, with a focus on the following for the language-learning aspects:

- Shifting teaching methodologies to become more interactive and student centred, developing the students' conversational skills in the language, as well as encouraging proper education of language teachers.
- Introduction of the option to study other foreign (European) languages (mainly French and Latin)

The 1993 Lov om Folkeskolen replaced the 1975 reform, and included changes in language curriculum and teaching approaches of languages in secondary schools, placing greater emphasis on oral communication skills. This year, English became a mandatory subject starting in the 4th grade (danmarkshistorien.dk B).

§ 4. Undervisningen i grundskolen omfatter for alle elever: 1) dansk, 2) matematik, 3) engelsk og tysk, 4) fysik/kemi, 5) kristendomskundskab, religion, historie, geografi, biologi og samtdsorientering, 6) formning, musik og idræt, og 7) håndarbejde, sløjd og hjemkundskab. Stk. 2. Undervisning i dansk og matematik gives på alle klassetrin. Stk. 3. Undervisning i engelsk gives på 4.-9. klassetrin. Undervisning i tysk gives på 7.-9. klassetrin, men er frivillig for eleverne på 8. og 9. klassetrin. Stk. 4. Undervisning i fysik/kemi gives på 7.-9. klassetrin. Stk. 5. Undervisning i kristendomskundskab, historie, geografi og biologi påbegyndes senest på 3. klassetrin og gives i mindst 5 år. Undervisning i samtdsorientering gives på 8. og 9. klassetrin, men kan påbegyndes tidligere. Undervisning i religion gives i forbindelse med kristendomskundskab, historie, geografi eller samtdsorientering. Stk. 6. Undervisning i formning, musik og idræt påbegyndes senest på 2. klassetrin og gives i mindst 5 år, idræt dog på alle følgende klassetrin. Stk. 7. Undervisning i håndarbejde, sløjd og hjemkundskab gives på henholdsvis 5., 6. og 7. klassetrin, men kan påbegyndes tidligere og afsluttes senere. Stk. 8. Undervisningsministeren fastsætter regler om	§ 5. Indholdet i undervisningen vælges og tilrettelægges, så det giver eleverne mulighed for faglig fordybelse, overblik og oplevelse af sammenhænge. Undervisningen skal give eleverne mulighed for at tilegne sig de enkelte fags erkendelses- og arbejdsformer. I vekselvirkning hermed skal eleverne have mulighed for at anvende og udbygge de tilegnede kundskaber og færdigheder gennem undervisningen i tværgående emner og problemstillinger. Stk. 2. Undervisningen i den 9-årige grundskole omfatter for alle elever: › 1) a) dansk på alle klassetrin, › b) engelsk på 4.-9. klassetrin, › c) kristendomskundskab på alle klassetrin bortset fra det klassetrin, hvor konfirmationsforberedelsen finder sted, › d) historie på 3.-8. klassetrin › e) samfunds-fag på 9. klassetrin, › 2) a) idræt på alle klassetrin, › b) musik på 1.-6. klassetrin, › c) billedkunst på 1.-5. klassetrin, › d) håndarbejde, sløjd og hjemkundskab på et eller flere klassetrin inden for 4.-7. klassetrin, › 3) a) matematik på alle klassetrin, › b) natur/teknik på 1.-6. klassetrin, › c) geografi og biologi på 7. og 8. klassetrin og › d) fysik/kemi på 7.-9. klassetrin. Stk. 3. Der skal tilbydes eleverne undervisning i tysk på 7.-9. klassetrin. Stk. 4. Der kan tilbydes eleverne undervisning i fransk i stedet for tysk på 7.-9. klassetrin. Stk. 5. Undervisningen kan i de enkelte fag tillige gives på højere klassetrin end fastsat i stk. 2.
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Figure 5: comparison of 1972 suggestion for the Lov om Folkeskole 1975 reform (left) and 1993 renewed Lov om Folkeskole reform (right)

In 2004, general frameworks for expected language comprehension levels of students were implemented. These were the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and European Language Portfolio (ELP).

In 2005, an upper secondary school reform (Gymnasiereformen) increased the range of choices of languages to study in upper secondary education, and encouraged an increase in international exchanges and partnerships. Its focus was, rather than purely increasing students' academic capabilities, instead the use and consideration of language as a tool for cross-cultural communication.

In 2014 (with Folkeskolereformen 2014), English became a mandatory subject from 1st grade onwards, and new national curricula were introduced that had an increased focus on their core subjects: Danish, Mathematics, and English. Next, the 'Language Strategy of 2016-2020' was passed, including a variety of minor reforms that aim to emphasise early language learning and increase teacher competence.

Reflections:

The impact of L97 in Norway on making studying English mandatory from the 1st grade with 271 teaching hours in years 1-7 versus LK06's increase in mandatory hours to 366 were investigated in a study by Helland and Abildgaard (2011). Cohorts of 6th and 7th graders were tested in 2001 (post-L97, pre-LK06) and 2009 (post-L97 and LK06) on their English proficiency. It was expected that the 2009 (post-LK06) group would score higher in all areas, with the increase in teaching hours and years of language learning. However, it was found that this group had weaker results in grammatics and 'formal' comprehension than the 2001 group, whereas the 2009 group had higher conversational fluency. This could, however, be due to the consumption of English-spoken media rather than educational reforms.

The most relevant or valued foreign language in Norway is English, which has been offered in schools since 1939, made mandatory from 5th grade (age 10) in 1974 with M74, and most recently made mandatory from 1st grade (age 6) onwards in 1997 with R97/L97.

Utdanningsnytt.no's article written to 'celebrate' 20 years of English language learning in the 1st grade discusses the lack of research and evaluation of the impact of foreign language education reforms in Norway. It poses a particularly relevant question: whether Norwegian schools were ready to offer English to 6 year olds already in 1997 or not, particularly considering the lack of formal training and competency in English language teachers that is still an issue today. The Norwegian government developed a reform in 2015, Kompetanse for Kvalitet (KfK / Competence for Quality), which states that by 2025, all teachers must have successfully completed a set amount of education in English in 'grunnskolen' (grades 1-10), which should be a step towards tackling this issue.

2. fremmedspråk

Med innføring av en felles niårig grunnskole (M74) ble 2. fremmedspråk (tysk, senere også fransk) et valgfag. Med reformen i 1997 (L97) ble 2. fremmedspråk et såkalt tilvalgsfag som konkurrerte med andre fag som praktisk prosjektarbeid, engelsk fordypning og norsk fordypning. Faget har vært preget av inkonsistente og motstridende signaler: Det skulle være et fag for alle elever, men fikk tildelt rammebetingelser som gjorde det vanskelig for skolene å ta hensyn til elevenes behov for effektiv læring i faget. Spesielt gjaldt dette timeplanlegging og progresjon i læringsprosessen – bl.a. lavt timetall, mangel på etterutdanning av språklærere, konkurranse med praktisk prosjektarbeid, valgfri karakterordning og ikke tellende til opptak i videregående opplæring.

Faget 2. fremmedspråk har m.a.o. ikke utviklet seg i takt med læreplanens mål og krav til innhold, læremidler og arbeidsmåter. Den tradisjonelle holdningen til faget som et fag for "flinke" elever står fremdeles sterkt. Lindemann/Speitz (2002) viser at over 60 % av lærerne i undersøkelsen mener 2. fremmedspråk ikke er et fag for alle elever. Arbeidet med tilvalgsspråk er i svært stor

Figure 6: Screenshot from Språk åpner dører (2005, pp. 18) about 2nd language education in Norway, elaborating on how this was "supposed to be a course for all students, but was put in place with strict framework which made it difficult for the schools to consider their students' need for effective teaching/learning in the course.

It seems that, while past reforms have created a base for foreign language learning to be made possible and accessible, the quality of teaching and learning outcomes still need to be improved. It also seems that learning a foreign language at a young age may not be as important to comprehension and quality of learning as one would think (Utdanningsnytt.no, Friisberg 2023).

Similarly to the Norwegian educational reforms, there are multiple minor reforms and policy changes that have been put in place in Denmark over the last 50 years. The continuous changes and updates to policy make it relatively difficult to track, and as these reforms also emphasise and change other aspects of education simultaneously, it may be difficult to form a correlation between solely the foreign language aspects and the country's sociopolitical views.

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