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# Oral proficiency in second and third foreign languages in the Danish education system

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*In this paper, we analyze how oral proficiency is understood in the Danish education system in the three biggest second/third foreign languages taught in the country: French, Spanish and German. We adopt a comparative perspective and analyze how orality is addressed in these language subjects at primary school, secondary school and university levels. We compare the three languages to find similarities and differences, focusing on learning objectives, pedagogical approaches and examination forms, presented in the official curricula for each of the three educational levels. We relate the Danish stance on oral proficiency to current international research in the field and to European tendencies.*

**Keywords:** oral proficiency, official curricula, learning objectives, examination forms

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyze how oral proficiency is pursued within language education in Denmark from the point of view of its conceptualization in the official curricula for primary/lower secondary school and upper secondary school, respectively, and in the study programs for language studies at university. Our intention is to offer a thorough analysis of curricula and academic regulations in order to shed light on progression in the treatment of oral proficiency from primary school, throughout secondary school and up to university level (foreign language studies). We are aware that focusing the study in document analysis leaves central aspects of language learning/teaching aside (what actually happens in the classroom, what teachers know, think and believe about their subjects, available teaching materials, learner perspectives, etc.). Notwithstanding, we believe that curricula to a great extent define these other aspects of the learning environment and can be a relevant starting point for understanding current practices. Richards (2013, p. 6) has defined *curriculum* as “the overall plan or design for a course and how the content for a course is transformed into a blueprint for teaching and learning which enables the desired learning outcomes to be achieved”. Figure 1 below shows the place of curricula in the learner’s learning environment as a link between the immediate, local learning

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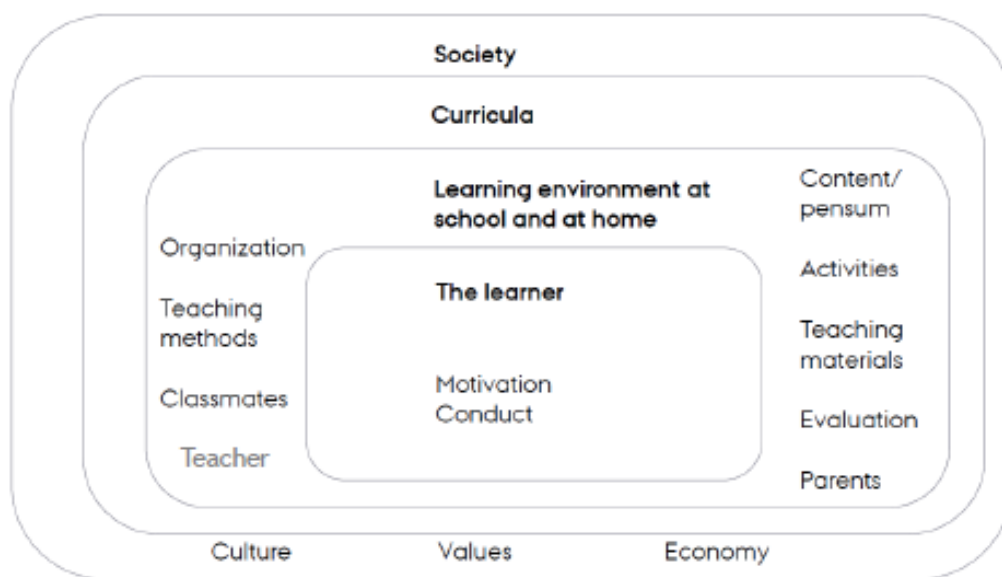
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environment and the macrolevel of society, with its set of values, cultural norms and economic resources.



**Figure 1.** Illustration of the learner's learning environment (translated, adapted and simplified from Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2005).

## 2 The speaking paradox

Oral proficiency – understood here as the ability to speak the language – has a paradoxical position as a component of foreign language learning and teaching. On the one hand, most language students and teachers highlight being able to speak the language as the most salient aspect of communicative competence (Andersen, 2010; Andersen & Blach, 2010; Fernández, 2009) and intuitively as the most important part of mastering a language (Ur, 1996). On the other hand, the teaching of speaking is often a quite neglected area within the language classroom, where writing is favored. At best, teachers aspire to provide opportunities for student talk, but direct, explicit teaching of oral skills, both dialogic and monologic, is rare or unsystematic, as orality is often taken for granted (Brown & Yule, 1983; Bygate, 1998; Roldán Tapia & Gómez Parra, 2006; Sim & Pop, 2016; Vijayarathan, 2017).

Denmark is unfortunately no exception to this paradoxical position. Our previous studies show that both teachers and learners at all three levels of the education system (primary and lower secondary school, upper secondary school and university<sup>1</sup>) consistently rate the ability of speaking the language as the most important objective of language learning and teaching. In a survey from 2009 among new students of language studies at a Danish university, 80% of the 123 respondents rated talking as very important, while all other language skills were rated as very important only by 50% of respondents or less (Fernández, 2009, p. 105). Similarly, a study from 2010<sup>2</sup> shows comparable priorities for both teachers and students at the Danish basic school (primary and lower secondary school) and at upper secondary school with regard to German and French teaching. Rating from a list of the most central objectives in language teaching and learning both lower secondary and upper secondary school learners and teachers found

“speaking” most important on a rating scale from “very important” (3), “important” (2), “less important” (1), and “not important” (0). Teachers rated speaking slightly higher than students did. Second on the list was listening, also very high. Both students and teachers agreed on giving middle level rating to reading, writing, learning grammar and translating. The only area where learners and teachers disagreed was learning about culture and society. Here, teachers rated one category above students, both in lower and upper secondary school (Andersen & Blach, 2010, pp. 76–77).

Nevertheless, it is our claim that a systematic, explicit and theoretically based focus on orality is missing from the Danish education system, such as it has been reported to be in other parts of the world (for a recent study in the Faroe Islands, see Vijayarathan, 2017).

The above-quoted study by Andersen and Blach (2010) also shows that, at least in the minds of both learners and teachers, orality seems to be more clearly present in primary/lower secondary school than later on. When they were asked how often they work with different aspects of language, learners from primary/lower secondary and upper secondary schools, respectively, show some differences (Andersen & Blach, 2010, p. 83):

<b>(1) Primary/lower secondary school learners<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Upper secondary school students</b>
1. We learn grammar (2.68)	1. We learn grammar (2.79)
2. We do conversation exercises (2.62)	2. We translate (2.74)
3. We translate (2.62)	3. We work with our own writing (2.46)
4. We read aloud (2.57)	4. We work with vocabulary (2.43)
5. We work on pronunciation (2.55)	5. We do conversation exercises (2.33)
6. We work with vocabulary (2.39)	6. We read aloud (2.33)
7. We do listening exercises (2.11)	7. We work on pronunciation (2.04)
...	
(Key to the frequency choices: 0 never, 1 rarely, 2 once a month, 3 every week)	

Comparing lists, it is evident that grammar, writing and translation acquire a more central role in upper secondary school to the detriment of oral practice. When they were asked to elaborate on what they miss or would like more of in the language classroom, upper secondary school learners were not in doubt:

- (2)** More talk where we do not just briefly answer questions. Longer sentences and conversations. I miss talking more, so that it is not just doing grammar, reading and translating. I miss having more conversations in French (...) I think that we have too much writing and not enough conversation.  
I would like more conversation in groups in class. More group work, so more students can speak a bit more.  
(Andersen & Blach, 2010, pp. 154–155)

This gradual decline of oral practice is perhaps due to a particular teaching tradition in the country, but it may also have been influenced by a narrow interpretation of the way progression in language learning has been described in Denmark. In a report from 2003, the Ministry of Education places listening comprehension and dialogic skills as belonging to initial levels, followed by presentation, reading and writing, in that order (Ministry of Education, 2003). Another explanation can be the increased focus on grammar and accuracy, possibly caused by (again) a narrow interpretation of exam requirements. This is

illustrated by the following statement by a high school teacher of Spanish in a spontaneous letter to one of the authors:

- (3) In the Danish high schools, I think that the norm is that everybody starts with a beginner system and grammar books. At the same time, the students learn the alphabet, the numbers, the time, the weather, etc. I do not have anything against that, but the problem is that the students say very little in Spanish and instead the focus is on grammar and perfection. (Upper secondary school teacher of Spanish)

### **3 Theoretical framework: Oral proficiency in the language classroom**

In this section, we briefly introduce the area of oral proficiency in the language classroom, as it will be important to analyze the Danish curricula against the pedagogical state of the art in the field, taking into account the multifarious facets of teaching speaking in a foreign language.

A thorough focus on oral proficiency in the classroom requires a wide perspective, as several partial goals must be trained: accuracy, fluency, complexity, adequacy and intelligibility/comprehensibility. This, in turn, imposes high demands on teachers, who must be skilled in linguistic subdisciplines such as phonetics and phonology (sounds, stress and intonation patterns), lexicology (it is impossible to speak without the necessary vocabulary), syntax, pragmatics (speech acts, politeness, cultural scripts) and text grammar (gambits and discourse markers) (Andersen, Fernández, Frstrup, & Henriksen, 2015). Besides, teachers need to develop skills in training and supporting learners in the use of adequate communication strategies (Griffith, 2013).

Besides the above-mentioned challenges, fostering oral proficiency requires attention to different oral genres within the broad areas of monologic and dialogic communication. Face to face conversations, telephone conversations, text messages, audio chat messages, public speeches, news-readings, rap lyrics – these are but a few examples of oral genres with quite dissimilar rules and characteristics, some of them more “oral-like” than others, some of them more spontaneous than others (Henriksen, 2014, p. 104; Hougaard, 2003, p. 101). This brings into question the validity of the classical dichotomy between speaking and writing, which can perhaps be better understood as a continuum of communication modalities, as suggested by Hougaard (2003).

Speaking in the foreign language classroom poses high demands on the teacher due to its multifaceted nature, as mentioned above, and in connection with the teacher’s own oral proficiency (Chambless, 2012). It is also one of the most challenging activities for learners, as it engages them cognitively, socially and affectively (Burns, 2016).

From a cognitive point of view, Levelt (1989) has identified a number of demands that speaking imposes on language learners: conceptual preparation (selecting a topic), formulation (using the necessary grammar and vocabulary), articulation (producing sounds and intonation such that they can be understood) and self-monitoring (the ability to check acceptability and accuracy of own speech performance). Social demands are related to knowing how to handle social and pragmatic aspects of oral communication, including knowledge of genre, register and discourse, and being able to interact with different interlocutors. Finally, amongst the most crucial demands is the domain of affect. Here, motivation, self-esteem and, particularly, anxiety (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Horwitz, Horwitz, &

Cope, 1986) are key factors for a successful experience with oral performance and need to be carefully addressed by teachers.

In spite of its obvious complexity - or perhaps precisely due to it - oral proficiency has not received the same amount of attention in the pedagogical literature as other components of language learning have (grammar, reading, writing). Nevertheless, a number of authors have described the area, often relying on dichotomies to explain opposing focus points. Bygate (1998) identified a bottom-up and a top-down approach to speaking. The former sees speaking mainly from the point of view of the speaker's motor perceptive skills and focuses on production from the smallest units (sounds) to words and sentences. The latter, on the other hand, sees speaking as based on interactional skills, integrating both interpersonal and psychomotor control (Bygate, 1998, p. 23), and as the product of two or more actors that cooperate in a shared context (Vijayarathan, 2017, p. 46). Bygate himself advocates for the top-down approach.

Goh and Burns (2012) identify two ways of teaching speaking that have been central in recent decades: a direct (controlled) approach and an indirect (transfer) approach. While the former focuses on accuracy and language analysis and makes use of drills, pattern practice, structure manipulation and the like, the latter is about developing fluency and language for communication through "authentic" language use in discussions, project work, role-plays, etc. The authors consider both approaches practiced on their own as insufficient, as each ignores crucial aspects of speaking development. Therefore, Goh and Burns propose to combine them in a holistic approach they call "the teaching-speaking cycle". It consists of seven stages to be repeated cyclically: focusing learners' attention on speaking, providing input and/or guide planning, conducting speaking tasks, focusing on language skills/strategies, repeating speaking tasks, directing learners' reflection on learning and facilitating feedback on learning (Goh & Burns, 2012, p. 153).

This approach, with stages that can be flexibly adapted to different contexts, intends to cater for the complexity of speaking and to support the learner's ability to manage cognitive, linguistic, social and affective aspects of speaking a foreign language (Burns, 2016). It fits well in the task-based tradition (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007) within the communicative approach (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1997) and adds an explicit focus on noticing and meta-awareness in the learning process. In that sense, the model is indeed holistic and highly systematic, offering an updated approach to teaching speaking. Other attempts of systematizing the teaching of oral proficiency have been made in recent years from a task-based approach (Shanta & Mekala, 2017) and from a pragmatic and strategic perspective (Teichert, 2016; see Pakula, this issue, for an overview).

#### **4 The present study: objectives and methodology**

As stated before, the focus of this study is to analyze how the Danish education system understands and deals with oral proficiency with specific reference to the three biggest foreign languages taught in the country apart from English: French, Spanish and German. Our decision to leave English aside is due to the special status that English is acquiring in Denmark, as well as in other Scandinavian countries, since the presence of this language in society is pervasive, particularly through media (Andersen & Fernández, 2011). English is today an obligatory subject already from the first grade of primary school to upper secondary school. In contrast, none of the three languages selected in this study enjoy the same

status. Primary school students must choose either French or German from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade (in practice, this choice is conditioned by the language availability at the given school – schools must provide German, but are not obliged to provide French<sup>4</sup>) and continue with the chosen language until the end of lower secondary school (9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>5</sup>). As from 2017, Spanish can be chosen as a three-year elective subject in 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade; before 2017, Spanish instruction was limited to upper secondary school<sup>6</sup>. Schools must offer no less than 360 hours of German and French from 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Spanish, as a three-year elective subject, must be taught a minimum of 240 hours. At upper secondary school, students have the choice of continuing with the second foreign language they had in primary/lower secondary school or choose a new one from beginning level. At upper secondary school level, Spanish is the most popular language of the three.

In order to fulfill our goal of understanding how the component of oral proficiency is conceptualized in the official curricula and academic regulations, a thematic comparative analysis of the following documents has been undertaken by the two authors in collaboration:

**1) Primary/lower secondary school level:**

- Fælles mål for faget fransk* (Common goals for French) (8 pages)
- Vejledning for faget fransk* (Teacher's Guide for French) (23 pages) (Ministry of Education, 2014a)
- Fælles mål for faget tysk* (Common goals for German) (8 pages)
- Vejledning for faget tysk* (Teacher's Guide for German) (34 pages) (Ministry of Education, 2014b)
- Fælles mål for valgfag spansk* (Common goals for elective Spanish) (2 pages)
- Vejledning for faget spansk* (Teacher's Guide for Spanish) (17 pages) (Ministry of Education, 2017a)

**2) Upper secondary school level (stx<sup>7</sup>):**

- Læreplan og vejledning for fransk begyndersprog A 2017* (Curriculum and guideline for French beginner language)<sup>8</sup>
- Læreplan og vejledning for fransk fortsættersprog A 2017* (Curriculum and guideline for French continuation language)
- Læreplan og vejledning for tysk begyndersprog A 2017* (Curriculum and guideline for German beginner language)
- Læreplan og vejledning for tysk fortsættersprog A 017* (Curriculum and guideline for German continuation language)
- Læreplan og vejledning for spansk begyndersprog A 2017* (Curriculum and guideline for Spanish beginner language) (Ministry of Education, 2017b)

**3) University level<sup>9</sup>**

- Studieordning for Bacheloruddannelsen i fransk sprog, litteratur og kultur 2017* (Academic regulations for the Bachelor's program in French language, literature and culture 2017)
- Studieordning for Bacheloruddannelsen i tysk sprog, litteratur og kultur 2017* (Academic regulations for the Bachelor's program in German language, literature and culture 2017)
- Studieordning for Bacheloruddannelsen i spansk sprog, litteratur og kultur 2017* (Academic regulations for the Bachelor's program in Spanish language, literature and culture 2017) (Aarhus University, 2017)<sup>10</sup>

It is perhaps worth clarifying that each education level in the Danish system is governed by its own specific type of legal document. At primary school level, there are curricula, called "common goals", and teaching guidelines, and something similar applies for upper secondary schools, where we find curricula

(which are ministerial orders and thus valid laws for the subjects) and teaching guidelines which are interpretative and exemplified. At university level, individual study boards create the local curricula or academic regulations for each study, which are then approved at faculty level after a hearing before the relevant head of external examiners. In contrast to the other education levels, no pedagogical implementation guidelines accompany university curricula (Andersen & Fernández, 2011, p. 118).

In our analysis, we compare the three languages and the three educational levels in order to find similarities and differences within a number of parameters related to the pursuit of oral proficiency. We look into aspects such as learning objectives, pedagogical approaches, types of orality, examination focus and, above all, progression.

As both primary and secondary school levels have recently undergone a comprehensive structural reform, we focus on how oral proficiency has been renewed (or not) as part of the reform process in these two particular educational levels.

As part of our study, we benchmark the Danish stance on oral proficiency against current international research in the field and European tendencies, for example through the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2001)<sup>11</sup>.

## 5 Curriculum analysis

We devote this section to the content analysis of the different documents, taking one level at a time. It is important to mention at this point that documents belonging to the same level share a number of characteristics regardless of the language in question. This is due to the fact that curricula and academic regulations for the individual language subject are normally elaborated at the same time (for instance, in connection with structural reforms, as is the case for primary/lower secondary school in 2015 and for upper secondary school in 2017) and by commissions that normally collaborate with each other across languages. In the next subsection, we start the analysis with primary/lower secondary school.

### 5.1 Primary and lower secondary school

The primary and lower secondary school curricula have been revised in 2014 with the intention of simplifying the specific learning objectives and reducing them in number. Spanish only existed as a one-year elective in 2014, but a new curriculum for a three-year elective starting in grade 7 has been elaborated in 2017 based on the existing curricula for German and French. The teaching of French, German and Spanish must cover three competence areas: 1) Oral communication, 2) Written communication, 3) Culture and society. Since curricula and learning objectives are developed in parallel, the differences between the languages are minor and irrelevant to the vision of oral language teaching represented at this education level. We will use examples mainly from French and German in this analysis, but our findings apply in general to the three languages.

Following the teacher's guide, the focus of these language subjects is on communication (oral and written):



to communicate orally and in writing in French about familiar everyday topics and get knowledge of culture and society in French-speaking countries that they can include in their communication ... (Ministry of Education, 2014a)

but also on intercultural competence:

The subject German focuses not only on skills and on knowledge in the areas of oral and written communication, but also culture and society, and thus contributes actively to the individual student's intercultural education. (Ministry of Education, 2014b)

The link between the communicative focus and culture and society is also very clear from the formulations of overall objectives in a progression from 5<sup>th</sup> class to 9<sup>th</sup> class (no new learning objectives are added for the 10<sup>th</sup> class):

**Table 1.** Common objectives for French (Ministry of Education, 2014a).

5 <sup>th</sup> -7 <sup>th</sup> class		
<a href="#">Oral communication</a>	<a href="#">Written communication</a>	<a href="#">Culture and society</a>
The student can communicate orally in French on familiar topics in a very simple and understandable language	The student can communicate by writing in French on familiar topics in a very simple and understandable language	The student obtains knowledge about him/herself as part of a French-speaking community
8 <sup>th</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> class		
<a href="#">Oral communication</a>	<a href="#">Written communication</a>	<a href="#">Culture and society</a>
The student can communicate orally in French in a comprehensible and coherent language	The student can communicate by writing in French in an understandable and coherent language	The student can act as part of a French-speaking community

At each level, the objectives are divided into three phases, distinguishing between *skills* (færdighedsmål) and *knowledge* (vidensmål) (see Table 2 below). In turn, oral communication consists of four areas: listening, conversation (or dialogue)<sup>12</sup>, presentation, and language focus, the last one comprising a few very simple elements about phonetics and later syntax. Conversation is defined as an interaction between two or more interlocutors and involves both listening, speaking, and turn taking. In this context, a number of speech acts are listed in the objectives as language use for interaction purposes, for example asking about age, how you feel, requesting something or shopping.

**Table 2.** Learning objectives for conversation. Teacher's Guide (Ministry of Education, 2014a).

Conversation		
Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
<b>Skill:</b> The student can use language in songs, games, plays and movement	<b>Skill:</b> The student can ask and answer simple questions about familiar topics	<b>Skill:</b> The student can participate in short dialogues on familiar subjects with support from a model
<b>Knowledge:</b> The student has knowledge of simple words and phrases	<b>Knowledge:</b> The student has knowledge of relevant question and answer strategies	<b>Knowledge:</b> The student has knowledge of simple communication strategies

Progression in this aspect of oral proficiency at the 5<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> grade goes from communicating through simple words or expressions in plays, games or songs (Phase 1), over working with facial expressions and gesticulation as reactions to spoken words (Phase 2), to working on movement and games, such as *Jacques a dit*, charades or the CL structure quiz-exchange (Phase 3) (Teacher’s Guide for French, Dialogue, LEVEL 1: 5<sup>th</sup> + 7<sup>th</sup> Grade).

Clearly, the vision of oral communication reflected in these curricula includes some of Levelt’s demands (1989), presented in our theoretical framework. This is also the case at the next level, that of Grades 8 and 9. Here, vocabulary and language knowledge are expanded, but so is the use of gambits: “At the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, learners are required to have a conversation on a prepared topic, and it is therefore appropriate to work with gambits, i.e. phrases and words that make the conversation more fluent and suppler.” The teacher’s guide also underlines that it is advantageous to focus on role-play: “Roleplay creates an authentic and meaningful context and pushes pupils into situations where they discover that they need to use language. Dialogue includes practice on how to buy (a croissant in a bakery), order (a room in a hostel), get to know a person, talk about interests and spare time, talk about their own daily lives and that of others, simple past events and plans for the future.” (Teacher’s Guide for French: 8<sup>th</sup> + 9<sup>th</sup> Grade).

When it comes to assessment, orality and writing are at an equal level<sup>13</sup>. The oral exam covers presentation and conversation and consists of a presentation of a subject chosen by the student, and then a conversation on a topic from one of the texts studied in class. It is quite clear in the assessment criteria that “focus is on the students’ communicative competence and skills” and “includes students’ application of cultural and social knowledge”. The “Evaluation sheet for examiners underlines the communicative focus<sup>14</sup>”:

- › The student listens, reacts and takes initiative in the conversation
- › The student uses expressions to keep the conversation going
- › The student uses expressions of opinion
- › The student expresses him/herself clearly in a simple language
- › The student brings in relevant knowledge in relation to the theme and texts

We can establish that the approach to oral language teaching and learning at the primary and lower secondary level has a focus on communicative competence, practicing both presentation and conversation (monologic and dialogic skills). It has a clear practice-oriented focus, minimizing complexity in grammar and knowledge about grammar, while upgrading knowledge about exchanges and situations, and thereby the pragmatics of language. We interpret this as a partial top-down approach to speaking (Bygate, 1998).

## 5.2 Upper secondary school<sup>15</sup>

The upper secondary school curricula for our three languages of interest have indeed more similarities than differences. Particularly the curricula for French and Spanish share almost the exact same formulation, as they were written by two commissions working in close collaboration. This is a difference between the current curricula and the previous editions from 2013. The German curriculum appears more autonomous, but the main points concerning speaking are not far from the other two. Already in the first sentence of the French and Spanish curricula, the focus of the subject (defined as “knowledge subject, skills subject

and culture subject”) is described as “the acquisition of intercultural communicative competence”<sup>16</sup>. That is, communicating in the foreign language is of course a central aspect of the subject together with a number of other linguistic and cultural/intercultural objectives. The German curriculum mentions intercultural communicative competence in the second section of the document (section 1.2. about Purpose). In section 2.1. of all three documents, we find an enumeration of the subjects’ learning objectives and the first direct mentions of orality. The Spanish and French curricula start with two objectives about receptive skills (understanding oral language and reading and understanding texts) and move on to two objectives about oral proficiency:

- (4) – Participating in a conversation or discussion in a clear and more or less fluent French/Spanish on known and general topics, including describing experiences and events, and justifying and explaining attitudes<sup>17</sup>.
  - Presenting and explaining known problems in a clear and more or less fluent French/Spanish

Here we see a clear division between the dialogic and the monologic modalities of oral communication as the organizing principle for the oral focus in the subject, in accordance with The Ministry of Education (2003). Likewise, the German curriculum starts with two receptive objectives and moves on to three productive objectives related to orality, although the phrasing of the objectives is less explicit:

- (5) – Explaining in German studied German language topics and texts, analyzing and interpreting these and putting them into perspective, using a nuanced vocabulary and correct elementary morphology and syntax.
  - Conducting a conversation in a clearly understandable, coherent and more or less fluent German about topics the students are familiar with, and explaining and discussing different points of view.
  - Expressing themselves in oral German about unknown German language texts and topics with a simple vocabulary and using frequent idioms and expressions.

The first objective mentioned above is in fact unclear as regards written or oral modality; the third one is perhaps ambiguous as to whether its focus is monologic or dialogic, although the first option is more likely, taking into account that it comes after a decidedly dialogic objective (“conducting a conversation”). In contrast with French and Spanish, the German curriculum also includes an objective about “using relevant oral and written communication strategies”. This concept appears only later on in the other two curricula under the heading of “Pedagogical principles” (section 3.1.). In the section about “Central matter” (2.2.), vocabulary, grammar, norms and rules for oral usage and communication, pronunciation and intonation are mentioned in all three curricula with slightly different phrasings. Similar are also the respective sections 3.1. about Pedagogical principles and 3.2. Work forms, where all curricula emphasize the usage aspect, i.e. the development of communicative competence, the opportunity of own language production and, in the case of French and Spanish, the inclusion of communication strategies.

As regards evaluation, the three curricula emphasize the importance of ongoing evaluation of oral (and written) performance. Spanish and French specify that this evaluation should give clear indication of how the learner can improve. The final oral examination, which is set at national level, has a duration of 30 minutes, with 60 minutes preparation in all three language subjects. It consists of

two parts for Spanish and French: a) a presentation in Spanish/French of an unknown text dealing with a studied topic followed by a dialogue with the examiner, b) a conversation in Spanish/French on general topics based on an unknown picture. Meanwhile, the German exam has only one part: a presentation in German about an unknown text dealing with a studied topic followed by a dialogue with the examiner. In all three cases, the assessment criteria focus on conversation skills and text comprehension and on fluency rather than accuracy.

If we turn our attention to the question of progression in French and German, i.e. the two languages that have beginner and continuation levels at Danish upper secondary school today<sup>18</sup>, it is quite interesting to notice that the curricula are almost identical to each other as regards orality. As regards progression from beginner to continuation courses, it seems that the only difference is in the choice of different adjectives to describe language use, for example “clear and more or less fluent French” for beginner French versus “varied and fluent French” for the continuation course, or “a simple vocabulary” (beginner German) versus “a nuanced vocabulary” (German continuation course). Otherwise, there is no difference in the kind or number of oral modalities specified as learning objectives or in the assessment criteria for beginner and continuation levels, respectively.

Ministerial curricula are brief documents offering little explanation and concept definition. Instead, this is presented in the around 15–20 pages long teaching guidelines, where each sentence in the curriculum is further elaborated on and in some cases accompanied by examples and ideas for application. From these documents, we would like to highlight their insistence on the fact that both monologic and dialogic forms of communication must be present. Besides, dialogic and monologic communication are presented as two separate language skills (making a total of five – listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing), following the lines of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001). The guidelines also pay attention to defining and explaining the need to work with communication strategies, and – an interesting point – stating how technology can support the promotion of oral language skills with both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools like chat, videoconference, podcasts, etc. Less space is devoted to explaining to teachers how to work with pragmatics and conversation building, at least compared to the focus given to grammar and vocabulary.

To summarize the findings of this section, we have observed that oral proficiency is pursued at upper secondary school level in the two modalities of dialogic and monologic communication. Focus lies on communication consisting in presenting, describing, justifying and explaining events, attitudes, etc., related to topics and texts presented in class. Other daily speech acts such as inviting, apologizing, greeting or asking for information appear to be overseen. This means that curricula for this education level emphasize oral work with the kind of sociocultural topics that are the target of the culture/society contents of these language subjects. Everyday communication in informal contexts does not seem to be in focus either in class work or in the final exam.

### *5.3 University level*

When we get to the academic regulations for university studies in Spanish/French/German Language, Literature and Culture, one first striking difference from the other education levels is the fragmentation of the different components (language, literature and culture) in separate subjects or modules. In

the previous levels, all these aspects of the subject were closely integrated, with explicit mention that “the subject disciplines must be taught as a whole” (Ministry of Education 2017b). At university level, in contrast, we find a clear tendency towards separation rather than integration, and this is not only a Danish phenomenon, but seems to be deeply rooted in most educational contexts (Crystal, 2007, p. 27; Schultz, 2005).

Nevertheless, in the academic regulations selected for this study, oral proficiency is not explicitly mentioned in the title of any of the subjects. Rather, it is a more or less implicit component of one or two subjects per study, like “Language and Communication I and III” (Spanish) or “Language in theory and practice” (German), or is simply mentioned in the general competence description for the whole study (French). In these new academic regulations, we observe the tendency of clustering linguistic content, including writing, speaking, translation and grammatical analysis, into big subjects of 10 credits, a difference from previous academic regulations, where subject matter was even more fragmented, and where “orality” was more explicitly mentioned (Andersen & Fernández, 2011).

Another tendency we observe is subjects that very explicitly include theory and practice, or rather practice based on theoretical knowledge, as shown in the following formulation from Spanish:

- (6) In the theoretical part there is a general introduction to basic levels of language description, including phonetics and phonology (pronunciation), morphology (word formation), parts of speech and basic syntax (sentence construction), and to principles of oral communication and text production (...). In the practical part, the goal of the subject is to train the student into the use of the basic forms, constructions and vocabulary, both in writing and in speaking. In oral practice, the student is trained to be able to participate in communicative interaction based on principles of phonetics and phonology, and of oral communication. (Aarhus University, 2017, subject “Language and Communication I”, Spanish)

As regards targeted spoken modalities, it seems that academic presentations are the key element, as the ability to communicate theoretical content is explicitly mentioned in all three studies’ competence profiles and in several subject descriptions, as the following example from German illustrates:

- (7) Being able to communicate complex relevant subject matter to both academic and other target groups in a situationally adequate manner, both in writing and orally. (Aarhus University, 2017, German)

In contrast, we find no explicit mention of dialogue or examples of different communication situations or speech acts.

Another interesting feature of the academic regulations is the fact that oral proficiency appears indirectly in a number of subjects, linguistic and literary/cultural alike, in the sense that the language of teaching, classroom participation and examination is the target language. Although teaching in the foreign language is welcome and offers opportunity for practice, we fear that this tendency could be a sign of a presumption that working with content matter in the foreign language is sufficient to train students’ language skills and their insights into speaking processes. This could be a reason why orality is explicitly targeted in so few subjects. Research into foreign language learning indicates, though, that a certain focus on form is necessary in order to learn a language in a classroom setting (Long, 1991; Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Therefore, opportunity for

practice should be combined with a direct focus on language, cf. the “teaching-speaking cycle” (Goh & Burns, 2012) presented in section 2.

## 6 Discussion of results

Briefly stated, our results show a clear sense of progression in the Danish educational system’s curricula, ranging from dialogic communication about everyday topics as main focus for primary school training, through dialogic and monologic communication – mainly as information exchange – at secondary level, to monologic academic communication at university. Even if from a certain understanding of progression this seems to make sense, we believe that this kind of changing focus from one level to another is in fact problematic. Progression seems to be understood as taking one orality type at a time, leaving behind the types practiced earlier on, instead of building up more accuracy and more fluency at all types of orality as learners make progress in their acquisition process. Of course, it seems quite reasonable to avoid academic monologic presentations at primary school level, but there is no such logical justification for avoiding dialogic exchanges on everyday issues at university level. At this point, students actually begin to have a language level that allows them to communicate with a certain ease and, besides, they need to be able to cope with everyday communication, particularly in their semesters abroad and in their future lives as language professionals. The following statements from two university students of Spanish upon return from their exchange semester in a Spanish speaking country illustrate the problem and prove that an exclusive focus on academic monologic communication at this point seems narrow-minded:

- (8) I think I was a bit surprised about the way they make conversation. How you “steal” the word by just starting to talk/shout louder than your interlocutor.
- (9) In the stores or the post office I was insecure about what they would ask me when for example sending a package, so it was not possible to “plan” my answer, which made communication extremely challenging.

Oral proficiency in primary and secondary school explicitly comprises the two modalities of dialogic and monologic communication, which is not the case at university level. Here, oral proficiency refers to monologic presentation. The double focus at the first two education levels is probably connected with the fact that The Ministry of Education (2003), which decides about primary and secondary school, divides language proficiency into five different skill areas (instead of the usual four) and thus separates dialogue and presentation. Besides, in primary and secondary school curricula there is a certain focus on the pragmatics of dialogue, with mention of role-play, initiation and reaction in conversation, the importance of facial expressions, etc. This focus is not equally visible at university level, where oral proficiency is limited to presentation, and where the theoretical level is prevalent, manifested through a clear focus on grammar and phonetics.

When it comes to thematic content, we observe a progression from everyday/personal topics to more sociocultural and academic subjects. This is, again, a narrow interpretation of The Ministry of Education (2003), as this report does not promote abandoning first level content areas in favor of new ones, but

rather working accumulatively with old and new ones. We find that everyday communication in informal contexts is poorly developed both at upper secondary and university level, and this is an area where we believe curricula/academic regulations can be improved, particularly if we would like more students to understand and feel that learning language is useful and has an impact on their lives.

Regarding the linguistic focus needed to promote fluent oral interactions or presentations, primary and secondary school curricula (and their related guidelines for teachers) seem to partially fall short. They place their emphasis on vocabulary and on grammar, the latter understood in a traditional sense of morphology and syntax, but are less explicit as regards conversation structure or pragmatics, although there is a certain focus on the pragmatics of dialogue, with mention of role-play, initiation and reaction in conversation, the importance of facial expressions, etc. Communication strategies and strategy training, on the other hand, receive high priority, particularly at upper secondary level, and this is no doubt a positive side of the upper secondary school curricula. University academic regulations exhibit a much less explicit focus on linguistic resources for oral communication, particularly dialogic communication, as oral proficiency is limited to presentation. Language contents are presented at a highly theoretical level manifested through a clear focus on grammar and phonetics. Table 3 summarizes our findings regarding progression and the discussion points presented in this section:

**Table 3.** Summary of findings.

Progression in:	Primary and lower secondary school	Upper secondary school	Language studies at university
Type of orality	Dialogue	Dialogue and monologic presentations	Mostly monologic communication
Topics	Familiar and everyday topics	Social/cultural matters	Academic content
Speech acts	Different kinds of everyday speech acts	Mostly information exchange	Presentation, argumentation
Linguistic focus	Sounds, vocabulary, simple sentences	Vocabulary, grammar, some pragmatics, communication strategies	Language theory, e.g. phonetics

## 7 Concluding remarks

Our main finding and point of criticism regarding the pursuit of oral skills in the Danish education system applies to our three focus languages alike and is related to the conceptualization of progression in the official curricula. Progression seems to be interpreted as a division of tasks, so to speak, between the different education levels, rather than as a continuous expansion of both knowledge and skills at the five skill areas. Thus, it seems that primary school takes up the practice of everyday dialogue, upper secondary school is in charge of information exchanges about social matters and university undertakes the communication of academic stuff. This

implies that dialogue is a responsibility area at elementary level, but not at the highest levels. In this understanding of progression, the first skill levels (listening and dialogue) are present only at basic school level and then replaced rather than complemented by the next. This is not in accordance with The Ministry of Education's report (2003), where the highest level may have a main responsibility for writing, but maintains a co-responsibility for the rest of the skill areas, including dialogue, and it is without a doubt an area where language curricula have room for improvement. Otherwise, we have also found positive features in the curricula. We particularly commend the clear separation of two oral skills, dialogue and presentation, at primary and secondary levels, following international tendencies, and the explicit focus on communication strategies at upper secondary school level, as this focus can potentially promote learner autonomy and improved oral performance.

In order to modulate the findings of this analysis, it would be relevant to undertake studies of how Danish curricula and academic regulations are understood by teachers, parents and other stakeholders, how they are crystalized in Danish teaching materials and, last but not least, how they are implemented in actual classroom practice.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Danish education system is divided into a basic education, comprising primary and lower secondary schools (grades 1–10) known as Folkeskolen, an upper secondary school (3 years) and university, with bachelor, master and PhD programs. An overview (including vocational education) can be seen at the Ministry of Education's website: <http://eng.uvm.dk/general-overview/overview-of-the-danish-education-system>

<sup>2</sup> The study builds on a large e-survey with answers from 56 lower secondary school learners, 295 upper secondary schools learners, 6 lower secondary school teachers, and 20 upper secondary school teachers. The authors did focus group interviews with teachers to supplement the survey results (Andersen & Blach, 2010, pp. 53–54).

<sup>3</sup> All examples in the article have been translated from Danish to English by the authors.

<sup>4</sup> French has therefore been seriously declining in lower secondary school since 1989 when it was declared not obligatory. It is almost non-existent outside Copenhagen and its suburbs. In the whole country, about 10% of the learners study French and 80%, German. The remaining 10% are exempt from choosing a second foreign language.

<sup>5</sup> 10th grade is optional.

<sup>6</sup> Spanish as a three-year elective subject in lower secondary school has been established as a two-year trial period in 2017 and 2018 to be evaluated in 2020. Only four schools in the whole country enrolled to participate in this trial in 2017 and a bit over 30 schools in 2018, so the choice of Spanish is still very limited outside upper secondary school. See the Ministry of Education's website for more detail: <https://uvm.dk/aktuelt/nyheder/uvm/2017/maj/170509-spansk-styrkes-i-folkeskolen> Before 2017, Spanish appeared only as a one-year elective in 7th, 8th or 9th grade (this applies still today for our three focus languages), but this one-year elective does not qualify for any kind of continuation in upper secondary school.

<sup>7</sup> There are four main upper secondary school programs in Denmark: stx (3-year Upper Secondary School Leaving Examination), hhx (3-year Higher Commercial Examination), htx (3-year Higher Technical Examination) and hf (2-year Higher Preparatory Examination). We have chosen to focus on the general program stx, which is the program with the highest number of students. The curricula for language subjects in the three school forms are quite similar with minor changes aiming at targeting specific needs of each school form (for instance, focus on business communication in hhx).

<sup>8</sup> Curricula for upper secondary school language subjects are roughly 3 pages long and guidelines, about 20 pages long.

<sup>9</sup> As a rule, foreign languages as subjects are absent from the Danish university outside Bachelor or Master's programs in a foreign language. Thus, students of e.g. medicine or engineering do not have the opportunity of taking a foreign language subject as part of their studies. An exception to this rule is Roskilde University, where "language profiles" were recently established for students of humanities and social sciences (see: [http://forskning.ruc.dk/site/da/projects/sprogprofler-paa-ruc\(ec642760-73f4-4fb4-b740-e36c543279ce\).html](http://forskning.ruc.dk/site/da/projects/sprogprofler-paa-ruc(ec642760-73f4-4fb4-b740-e36c543279ce).html) for more information). The University of Copenhagen offers extracurricular workshops for students to develop their language skills for study or internship abroad, as well as improving their academic reading in German, Italian or French.

For our analysis, we have chosen the Bachelor's programs in French/German/Spanish language, literature and culture at Aarhus University. It is

worth mentioning that the academic regulations for university studies are local documents valid for the university in question, whereas the curricula for both primary and secondary school have national status. This may have an impact in the way the different documents are formulated, as university curricula are meant to be read by a limited number of colleagues.

<sup>10</sup> The university documents are not page-numbered. The quotes in English from primary and secondary school curricula are the authors' own translations. The quotes from the university academic regulations are from the official English translations posted at the university homepage.

<sup>11</sup> In the Danish educational system, CEFR is taken as an inspiration source in a broad sense, and it is only recently that some efforts have been made to align learning objectives with CEFR level markers. This alignment work is in progress.

<sup>12</sup> In Danish "samtale".

<sup>13</sup> German and French as subjects are not part of the obligatory final assessment in primary school, but the Ministry of Education can draw them for exam by lot.

<sup>14</sup> Evaluation sheet for German examiners, FP9. <https://www.uvm.dk/folkeskolen/folkeskolens-proever/forberedelse/proevevejledninger> (accessed 26.9.2017).

<sup>15</sup> In contrast to primary and lower secondary school, objectives are for the sum of the three years and are not divided by level/grade.

<sup>16</sup> This concept is not defined in the curriculum itself, but the guidelines explain that the learner needs to be competent in communicating in different contexts, with respect for others and with an open attitude, using knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical, pragmatic and discursive competence (e.g. French guideline, p. 8).

<sup>17</sup> The phrase "including describing experiences and events, and justifying and explaining attitudes" is new compared to the previous version of the curriculum from 2013 and adds a more detailed (but far from comprehensive) picture of what speech acts the student should be able to perform.

<sup>18</sup> So far, Spanish only exists at beginner level.

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