



ISSN 1901-3809

ISSN en ligne 2261- 2807

How a national strategy for foreign languages may help save French in Denmark

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Résumé

Cet article décrit brièvement la situation des langues étrangères au Danemark tout en présentant la stratégie nationale récemment introduite dans le système de l'éducation nationale pour renforcer l'éducation des langues étrangères au Danemark. Cette présentation implique également une description du nouveau centre national des langues étrangères (The Danish National Center for Foreign Languages) ainsi qu'une analyse d'un certain nombre des défis auxquels le centre doit faire face. De plus, l'article présente quelques initiatives entreprises par ce nouveau centre national.

Mots-clés : stratégies nationales des langues, Danemark, langues étrangères, centre national, politique des langues

Comment une stratégie nationale pour les langues étrangères peut sauver le français au Danemark

Abstract

This article will briefly describe the state of affairs for foreign languages in Denmark and introduce the recent national strategy for the strengthening of foreign languages in the education system in Denmark. This involves a description of the new Danish National Center for Foreign Languages and an analysis of some of the challenges that the center needs to help overcome. Additionally, some of the initiatives of the center are presented.

Keywords: National language strategies, Denmark, Foreign languages, National Center, Language policy

Despite having had a 'laissez-faire' language policy (Siiner, 2010), leaving strategic decisions about language to individual institutions, Denmark has always been known as a country where people spoke many languages. However, as in much

of Europe, also in Denmark, young people no longer choose to learn other languages than English. An overwhelming focus on English in schools has led young people to believe that English is enough.

The laissez-faire and “English is enough” policies have naturally led to other languages suffering as they are not ascribed much value in the general discourse; and hence, to children and young people, there is little or no motivation for choosing to learn other languages than English - and the advantages of knowing many languages have not exactly been made crystal clear to them. For instance, over a ten-year period, the percentage of Danish upper secondary school leavers with three A-level languages has dropped to a negligible number (Regeringen, 2017), and there are few signs that this decreasing tendency has stopped. An additional factor in the demise of languages other than English is the fact that education within the humanities has suffered many budget cuts, leading to educational programs involving languages having been shut down - whether language was their core or an additional competence to another core competence.

One example is that the desire of export engineers to receive language training in other languages than English can only be met in one small engineering program, which is even located outside of the two biggest university cities in Denmark. One prominent example of reductions in language programs in the capital is the Copenhagen Business School, which, until approximately ten years ago, was one of the few business schools in the world that offered programs for translators and interpreters as well as quite a few programs where language was an additional competence. Now, however, there is only one such program, *Business Language and Culture* (BLC), which is not marketed as a language program; and translators and interpreters are no longer trained here.

The problems for languages are also seen in the still dwindling number of students who choose a career as language teachers - or other types of language professionals. Especially German and French suffer, both at the BA programs for primary and lower secondary level teacher education and a master’s level programs at universities. A very high percentage of the current teachers are expected to retire within the next 10-15 years, and if there is no one to replace them, well....

In order to address this situation, Denmark was given its first ever *National strategy for foreign languages in the education system* (Regeringen, 2017)¹ in November of 2017, drawn up by the Danish government. The strategy was much-awaited as the remedying of the above situation required political goodwill and assistance.

The strategy has two main aims:

- *Aim no. 1: More students [from primary to tertiary] should choose foreign language (FL) subjects and achieve substantial language competences in FL subjects in addition to English*

- *Aim no. 2: Language programs are to be academically strong and relevant programs, which attract and retain the strongest, most able students. This is also the case for teacher education programs.*

(Regeringen, 2017, p. 4)

In order to bring about change, the strategy holds several initiatives, three of which are aimed at the educational system:

- A new one-year master's program in conference interpretation at Aarhus University
- An opening for new collaboration and educational experiments in language programs at universities and university colleges
- The establishment of a national center for foreign languages

As directors of the national center, we will concentrate on the center.

100 million Danish Kroner (approximately € 14 mn.) has been earmarked for the establishment and running of The Danish National Center for Foreign Languages (NCCF) over a period of five years. The center is one entity, but placed at the two biggest universities, Copenhagen and Aarhus, and has two directors. This duality, which seen from the outside appears to be illogical, has proven to be an asset: It allows us to deal with the varied problems that exist in demographically diverse areas, just as it makes sense in terms of securing local anchorage because the challenges for languages differ geographically - even in the tiny country of Denmark.

The two sections of the center harbor a total of eight employees whose work involves trying to meet the diverse expectations of our many stakeholders. To contribute to the attainment of the aims of the strategy, the center aims to:

- Provide a general boost to the foreign language field
- Spread results from R&D projects involving foreign languages
- Carry out quality development initiatives and enhance the quality of foreign language teaching
- Support knowledge sharing exchange
- Support the development of continuing professional development (CPD)
- Build new and strong networks and transversal collaboration - both across educational levels and across languages
- Support the provision of language training in non-language programs
- Accumulate and share knowledge concerning the inclusion of languages in non-language programs
- Assist the development of local foreign language strategies at educational institutions as well as at municipal level²
- Provide financial support for high-quality development projects in various areas

This is no small task, but a few things are worthy of note:

With the NCF, Denmark has gotten an institution that is charged with the task of taking a look at languages at *all* levels of the education system - something that has not happened before, among other things because Denmark has two separate ministries that govern each their section of the educational system: The Ministry of Higher Education and Science, which oversees all post-secondary programs, and the Ministry of Education, which is in charge of the lower levels.

When taking a holistic view, it becomes quite clear that there are many barriers: Views of language differ from one level to the next as do also views of grammar, knowledge of foreign language pedagogy, the type of vocabulary worked with, etc.; and finally, there is very little transversal knowledge: teachers from one level know very little of the aims, content, expectations, and general conditions of the next - or previous - level, leading to unsaid and often unmet expectations of both students and the other levels. To put it very simply: typically, the institution receiving new students from a lower level find that the students haven't learned "the right things". This situation needs to be improved as it reduces student motivation, and one NCF initiative in this area is to focus on transitions and alignment of expectations - among other things through supporting projects that aim to enhance the quality of transitions. Much of the same can be said for the individual languages, whose teachers are seldom coordinated in the areas mentioned above, and valuable synergies may be lost due to this.

Furthermore, it is very important that although the NCF has its addresses at the two universities, it is not a university center; it is a center for *all* educational levels and is dedicated to supporting, servicing, and developing all of them. The NCF wants to highlight and provide visibility for the many local projects at all levels whose effect and dissemination have been limited to an entirely local institutional, municipal, or regional context.

But how about French? Even though Denmark has led a *laissez faire* policy with regard to foreign language policy it could be claimed that German and French have had a prominent place in the Danish education system, being the ones that have traditionally been most frequent in schools. Therefore, it is not surprising that the strategy mentions English, German, and French several times. When it comes to French, there are many obstacles and difficulties, some of them structural or legislative: First, in the fifth grade, schools *have to* offer German as a second foreign language - French *may* be offered. This optional status means that out of the approximately 2200 Danish primary and lower secondary schools, only approximately 300 offer French - and 70 per cent of these are located in the vicinity of

Copenhagen, meaning that the challenges for French are very different in eastern and western Denmark.

In upper secondary, students have to have a second or third foreign language, and these can be chosen at different levels depending on whether a student is a complete beginner or has been taught the language in lower secondary. However, still fewer students choose to study French (or German) for three years and instead opt out after the first two years. One reason for this might be the perceived low value of mastering languages, but it may also be found in structural obstacles: For many students, the choice of a language at the highest level entails an additional workload compared to the choice of many other subjects. And Danish students are clever and strategic in their choices, so why choose to work more than necessary if they can avoid it?

When it comes to teacher education aimed at primary and lower secondary level, only a negligible number of students choose French - which can therefore only be offered in one or two places and with very few students, numbers varying annually. Also at tertiary level, student numbers are low.

It is obvious that the NCFE cannot solve or influence structural difficulties, but we can hope that, being a political initiative, we have the politicians' ears and can point to the problematic areas often and loudly enough for changes to be made.

So, what does the NCFE *do* to help the foreign languages in Denmark?

First, we try to (re-)instill enthusiasm and passion in the existing language teaching environments across all levels. In many areas, professionals seem to be somewhat despondent, having experienced a long period of "humanities bashing" in the media and from politicians, of decreasing numbers of students, and of the shutting down of programs all over. However, now, with the strategy and especially through the establishment of the NCFE, there is encouragement for languages and attention to the plight of the languages in the educational system. We try to promote positive attitudes by telling all the good stories of the value of languages, of which, fortunately, there are many; and we do it by providing financial support to development projects which teachers and institutions at all levels devise based on the problems they see and the knowledge that the NCFE has. Additionally, in order to act sensibly, we initiate projects that allow us to gain more knowledge as to correlations in and across programs and educational levels.

Second, we arrange local and national seminars and conferences to enable teachers at all levels to be updated and engage in various levels of continuous professional development (CPD) - from local, inspirational afternoon seminars, to

local and national conferences; and we aim to ensure that these activities are not limited to one level or one language, but are transversal in character. In this vein, we are working on the establishment of a 10-ECTS³CPD course on foreign language pedagogy aimed at teachers of grades 1-13. We know that much hinges on good teachers as well as on continuity and alignment longitudinally and horizontally, so these aspects are part and parcel of almost all activities the center engages in or supports.

Third, we plan all sorts of initiatives, and as with the above initiatives and actions mentioned, these will, naturally, be developed in more detail as we go along, depending on the needs of stakeholders, as these arise over the NCFE's - planned - five-year life span.

Finally, as also previously mentioned, working towards a change of the general discourse about the value of (more) foreign languages, be it in educational, political, organizational, NGO, or business contexts, is a main aim of the NCFE. And that is something that we all need to work towards, putting aside the animosities that have - at least in Denmark - sometimes existed between educational levels, languages, etc. If we are to win the battle, we all need to go to bat for *all* foreign languages at all educational levels - and to the benefit of individuals, organizations, businesses, and countries. And in Scandinavia, we need foreign languages more than many other countries.

Despite having been given an appropriation covering just five years - a minute drop in the vast ocean of time, and certainly not a lot of time to bring about significant change - we have an ambition of becoming a permanent institution in the Danish education system; an institution that advises on political and educational initiatives, that always puts languages first, and that can help push an agenda and discourse allowing young people to see the value of languages - for society, for their careers, and in their personal lives.

We are certain that the NCFE will be able to alleviate *some* of the difficulties of the foreign languages and bring about change within the time we have been given. In view of the gravity of the situation, the strategy's explicit recognition of there being no quick fixes is very positive. In the strategy, it says:

This strategy and the initiatives in it will not, in themselves, solve the challenges we are facing in the field of foreign languages. It is a long haul that must be anchored in the municipalities and the educational institutions, but it is our hope that we may now, by collaborating, turn the negative development around. (Regeringen, 2017, p. 4).

Fortunately, we already sense traces of optimism in the language teaching communities and look forward to continuing our work with politicians, policy-makers and all other stakeholders.

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Notes

1. All Danish language titles and quotes have been translated by the authors.
2. Although it had been hoped that this would be a governmental requirement, the strategy only *encourages* the formulation of local strategies for foreign languages.
3. European Credit Transfer Points