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Sproglig kompetence og sprogundervisning: Using relevant material for the students to foster metalinguistic classroom talk

Teaching English through Hip-Hop

Historically the teaching of English grammar in Danish schools have been mainly concerned with accuracy, the grammatical rules and the correct linguistic form. The way of teaching has been influenced heavily by repetitive exercises in different kinds of teaching books, while repeated studies have shown that this way of teaching has had no indication of improvement on the quality of the students' writing (Kabel & Brok, 2017) (Myhill, 2020 p.6). This essay will focus on a more functional approach to grammar teaching, inspired by the work of Debra Myhill. The goal is to inspire a metalinguistic learning process, where the students must consider how different linguistic choices will affect a text, and in this case specifically a rap text (Myhill, 2020 p. 7). This aligns with some of the common goals presented by the Ministry of education. These goals work for a teacher as a requirement of what must be taught to the students before they graduate. Our teaching plan scaffolds the accomplishment of some of those goals but are not limited to them. The goals the teaching plan is aimed at are: *"Eleven har viden om nuancering af ordforråd."* and *"Eleven har viden om funktionel grammatik."* (Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, 2019)

Besides using Myhill's research, this essay will also be including Derewianka's research on expressing attitudes in texts and her research on in groups and out groups in relation to language and slang language.

In addition to this, Hip-Hop, and more specifically in this case, rap texts are commonly a popular hobby or interest for a lot of teenagers. Hip-Hop music has surpassed Rock music as the most popular genre on the charts, and it goes much further than that. Hip-Hop affects the fashion industry, the movie industry, the art industry and much more. This argues that even those of the students who doesn't find it interesting will at least have to acknowledge the relevance of it (Staff, 2021).

By combining these theories, this essay desire to answer my research question; *To what extend can Hip-Hop be used to improve the student's language choices in the classroom and enhance metalinguistic classroom talk?*

Myhill and Derewianka:

According to Debra Myhill the traditional way to teach students English Grammar is not the most effective. As mentioned above, the repetitive exercises and a strive for accuracy does not improve the quality of students' writing. As an alternative, she argues that working with grammar as a choice is a much more effective strategy. Myhill states that working with the different choices you have as a writer, the student will become more aware of how the different choices affect the text, and in what direction the writer wants to go in. She also makes it clear how comparing different versions of the same sentence is excellent in scaffolding the grammatical learning, as it then becomes clear to the students how different two sentences with the overall same meaning can come across very differently. (Myhill, 2020 p.6)

Myhill mentions that making learners aware of the power of their linguistic choices, not only improves their own writing process, but also improves their ability to comprehend texts reading them. This is due to the fact, that when working with the different grammatical choices one has when writing a text, the learner will also become aware of the different choices other authors have taken when writing their texts.

Myhill uses what she calls the LEAD principle to simplify her theory. LEAD is based on the acronym for each principle. It represents Links, Examples, Authenticity and Discussion, and it covers the 4 important elements, when working with grammar as a choice and metalinguistic classroom talk. When teaching grammar to students, you must create a **link** between the grammar being introduced and how it works in the writing. Using **examples** instead of long explanations is also required. The texts you use in you teaching has to be **authentic**, and lastly all of the above must be **discussed** in class. In the last principle about discussion, it is important for the teacher to scaffold a student-centered discussion, instead of searching for the answer in the teachers' head. (Myhill, 2020 p.7) While Myhill does present a different approach to teaching grammar with a method that is more general, Derewianka's theories can help explicitly creating different grammatical choices for our subject of rap texts. She identifies concrete words and expressions when evaluating the quality of things, expressing feelings and expressing attitudes. She presents examples of both positive and negative versions of the different categories, and this way it becomes very clear exactly what words can be inserted or removed from a sentence in order to create a specific effect or atmosphere. Furthermore, Derewianka works with what she calls in- and out grouping by language. She describes how specific language can be including and excluding. Having mastered a specific type of slang can include a person and boost their credibility in certain situations, while the opposite happens for those who is not able to join in on the jargon. Using the same slang as other people "in the group" can bring the members closer together, while excluding those who can't join in on that specific language. (Derwianka, 2020 p.119-121)

Practice element: A teaching plan

The practice element in this case is a teaching plan about Hip-Hop, and more specifically, rap texts. The teaching plan is created by me and my teaching practice group, and it has been used in our teaching practice. It was part of a full course on Hip-Hop. This means that the students already have been introduced to some of the culture and know a bit about both the culture and the history. However, this essay will focus on one specific lesson. In this lesson the students were first presented with a slang vocabulary, to ensure that they understood the words that they were about to encounter, because next up was an analysis of the rap song: *Check The Rhime* by A Tribe Called

Quest. The students then had to analyze the rhyme schemes in a selected passage of the song. Another song was provided to those who were finished before the time was up. After the students were done with this, they then had to create their own rap text. They were scaffolded a little bit, as we asked them to consider what their rap should be about, while giving them ideas. We further scaffolded them by giving them ideas for rhyme schemes that they could use in their rap, along with access to a rhyme dictionary. Finally, they were told to write a minimum of 8 bars (which is slang for lines).

Qualifying the practice element: Applying Myhill and Derewianka

In the teaching plan presented there are certainly things that could have been done different to create a more meaningful learning experience, while other things are in good alignment of what Myhill and Derewianka would approve of, keeping their theories in mind.

The slang vocabulary exercise has some great elements to it and a lot of potential; nevertheless, it could have been exercised better. Since the task was set up to be a vocabulary exercise, the main focus of the task was for the students to expand their slang vocabulary by learning the meaning of these words. The task was done as a pre-task to the next exercise, which was understanding the rap text and analyzing the rhyme scheme. However, if the task had been done while looking at the context in the rap lyrics, the students would, according to Myhill's research, have learned it better. Each word could have been looked up in the lyrics, as they were all picked from there, and the students could have learned the word in a context of an authentic rap text. By doing the task this way it could have included multiple elements from the LEAD principles. In this case both there would have been a link between the slang words and how they can affect the impression of a rap song or text. There would be an example from an authentic text, and already here we have fulfilled 3 of the 4 LEAD principles. It would have been possible to include the fourth principle by the teacher scaffolding a discussion on what effect these slang words have on the students, and how they interpret the text.

The next task was reading the rap text, comprehending it and analyzing the rhyme scheme and it would have been possible to go even deeper into the functional grammar learning. This could have been done by making the students switch the slang words with the "real" words from the vocabulary, and then discuss how that would have impacted the sentences and song. Here it could also be possible to include Derewianka's points about in-grouping and out-grouping, by discussing how authentic the Hip-Hop sound would be, if the regular words were switched up with the slang words, and how the students would then receive it, but also how they think the rest of the world would have received it, had it been the regular non-slang words being used. This way, the students are forced to reflect on the effect that the specific choices revolving the word use has on the overall impression of the text. This requires background knowledge about Hip-Hop culture, but as the students had already had multiple lessons on the topic, it would have been possible for them to reflect on some level about this. When requalifying this teaching plan, I would make the students discuss it in pairs or small groups and then discussing it in plenum in the class, for them to inspire each other, but also to create multiple perspectives on the same changes in the sentence, further exaggerating the importance of word choices for the students.

For the last exercise the students were presented with the task of writing their own rap text. We provided them with some scaffolding questions, as well as a link to a rhyme dictionary. Lastly, they had to begin their rap with: "My name is... and im here to say...". As mentioned, the lesson was focused on rhyme schemes, as were this task. We did provide the students with a little scaffolding on their text, but that was not in a way which ensured their functional grammar learning. The students were asked the question on what their rap should be about, then presented with possible topics such as politics, their hometown or social problems. This does not scaffold functional grammar learning, as Myhill mentions this in her research it is *talking for writing* instead of *talking about writing*. With other words, we created ideas for their content, instead of creating a talk about their writing, and how they may explore a sentence in multiple different ways. When talking about writing, what intention the students might have with the text and how they want the readers impression to be, you force the students to have a metalinguistic reflection on their word choice.

In order to scaffold them, they might need more vocabulary than just the slang vocabulary they were already presented with. While the use of slang words does improve the authenticity and fits well with the genre, rap is much more than just slang words. It is about expressing yourself, as every other art form, and in this case the expressing is through words. This expression is key in the rap genre, and it would have been very interesting to have a focus on this as well. Expressing attitudes such as describing your feelings, evaluating the quality of things and judging people behavior is three key components that a lot of rappers do use in their songs, which is why it would be relevant for this topic to learn. However, those are three qualities one must obtain in their English learning, as it is not only a thing that rappers include in their music, but some general things that most people do multiple times a day, no matter the language they speak. In this case, of course, it must be in English.

One of the reasons why it might have been more evident to focus on the language, the word choice and a metalinguistic approach, is because it aligns better with the common goals. While the students did produce nice rap texts, and hopefully improved their English language and got a better insight in Hip-Hop culture, they perhaps would have produced better texts, had they had the functional grammar approach. The intention for this class was based on some of the common goals, as mentioned, and quite possibly reaching these goals would have been more efficient, had we used the functional grammar approach. The goals in question are as mentioned; "*Eleven har viden om nuancer af ordforråd.*" and "*Eleven har viden om funktionel grammatik.*" (Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, 2019). There is no requirement for the students to acquire knowledge about rhyme schemes, even though we felt it important when first planning the lesson plan. Looking back, it seems like my passion for the subject overshadowed my focus on the learning goals. The two goals I've highlighted does however fit in well with both Derewianka and Myhill's theories, which is why we in hindsight can see, that another approach could have been more appropriate.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I've tried to explore how it was possible to requalify an already existing teaching plan on Hip-Hop, to further scaffold English learning through improving the students' awareness on language choice and enhance their ability to participate in metalinguistic classroom talk. It became clear, that the approach originally used, was not the most appropriate in achieving the goals that we had set for the lesson. The original teaching plan had focus on rhymes and rhyme schemes, rather than evolving the student's language skills. In order to scaffold their learning in terms of nuance of vocabulary and knowledge of functional grammar we would have to tweak the

exercises a bit. The tweak would consist of changing the focus from rhymes to word choice, and the effects hereof. This way the students would gain knowledge of the effects of using slang opposed to regular words, and what effect that would have on the impression of the same text. By doing this, it should become clear to the students, just how big an influence each word actually has. The intended effect would be that the students reflect on their own choice of words, when writing a rap text, and improve the quality, not just of their rap text, but of all their future writings. Furthermore, the students' abilities to discuss meaning and different possibilities in sentences should also be improved, had we chosen another approach. This would not just benefit the individual student, but actually further qualify the classroom discussions and thereby improving the learning for all participating students in the classroom.

To this extend Hip-Hop as a subject could be used to improve the student's language choices and enhance their ability to participate in metalinguistic classroom talk.

References

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Appendix: Practice element

1. Individually + jointly – From slang to standard English

Try and see if you can figure out what these hip-hop related slang words mean in standard English.

Slang	Standard English
Shorty	Girl
Dope	Something nice/cool/drugs
Crib	House/ street gang
Hood	Neighbourhood
To diss	To insult somebody
Fly	To look cool
To kick it	To hang out
MC	Microphone Controller
Crew	Group of people
Bashing	To insult somebody
Punk	Loser

Instead of working with rhyme schemes, we could go in the direction of making the students include rap slang in their text, and later discuss the effect of using slang instead of “correct” english.

This way **links** is introduced between the grammar (in this case hip hop grammar in the slang?) and what effect it has on the overall impression (and sound?) of the text.

Examples are shown from **authentic** hip hop songs (and of course texts)

A discussion on the effect of the use of slang will be scaffolded, maybe through the use of examples from both the students texts and the authentic rap songs.

1. Together – Read out loud

Genres:

Within the rap culture a lot of different genres and styles exist. Some rap texts has the purpose of bragging, others are more sensitive. Gangster rap has a bragging style – they are telling about how good they are. Hardcore rap can be about social injustice or about being proud of where you come from. Another style is old school rap which has a more simple and slow rhythm. It's often without dissing/bashing other people.

There is no correct answer when it comes to the content of the rap as long as it has a rhythm, beat and a flow.

Analyse the rhyme scheme:

Now here's a funky introduction of how nice I am
Tell your mother, tell your father, send a telegram
I'm like an energizer 'cause, you see, I last long
My crew is never ever wack because we stand strong
Now if you say my style is wack that's where you're dead wrong
I slayed that body in El Segundo then push it along
You'd be a fool to reply that Phife is not the man
'Cause you know and I know that you know who I am
A special shot of peace goes out to all my pals, you see
And a middle finger goes for all you punk MC's

How complicated it can get:

<https://genius.com/a/check-the-rhyme-breaking-down-kendrick-lamar-s-verse-on-schoolboy-qs-that-part-black-hippy-remix>

Here's another one:

[Missy Elliott – Get Ur Freak On \[Official Music Video\]](#)

Quiet!
Shh, hush your mouth A
Silence when I spit it out, in your face B
Open your mouth, give you a taste B
Holla, ain't no stoppin' me C
Copywritten, so don't copy me C
Y'all do it, sloppily C
And y'all can't come close to me C

I know you feel me now (yes) E

I know you hear me loud (yes) E

I scream it loud and proud (yes) E

Missy gon' blow it down (yes) G

People gon' play me now (yes) G

In and out of town (yes) G

'Cause I'm the best around (yes) H

With the crazy style I

1. Write your own rap text!

Now you are going to use all the knowledge from today and write your own rap song.

Your rap needs be min. 8 bars.

Here is some inspiration:

What should your rap be about?

- Yourself?
- Your hometown?
- Your friends?
- Social problems? (Rich vs. Poor etc.)
- Politics? (BLM, sexism etc.)

What kind of rhyme scheme do you want to use?

- AABB?
- ABAB?
- ABCB?
- Something else?

If you need inspiration for your rhymes, you can use this website to find words that rhyme:

<https://www.rhymezone.com>

Insert your rap here: