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

Introduction

Hip hop as a theme for a teaching plan, originally held my interest because of my personal enthusiasm for the subculture. However, as I used it in a real classroom, I could see its potential for motivating the students. This turned out to be a successful experience, and before writing this paper I realized, that it also could be used to teach functional grammar. In previous years the education on grammar, especially grammar in English as a foreign language, teaching was attentive to form and general correctness. With this line of thought, grammar was thought of as something to be learned in isolation and not necessarily with context as to how the students should utilize their grammar knowledge. Researchers now know that teaching grammar in context better the learning outcome, and it provides the students with the ability to apply their grammar knowledge to real-life situations. So, by providing the students with material that may be relevant for them, the hope is that this will increase their motivation to work on grammar.

The teaching plan, which this paper is based upon, was not originally intended for grammar teaching, thus will this paper be analyzing and attempting to qualify the teaching plan, into a teaching plan that can be used to teach functional grammar. Furthermore, this paper will delve into how hip hop can be used to enhance metalinguistic talk in the classroom.

Research question

To what extent can hip hop be used to improve the student's language choices in the classroom and enhance metalinguistic classroom talk?

Theory

In the following section, the theory which will be discussed in this paper will be outlined, starting with the common objectives of the Danish public school, then Debra Myhill's LEAD principle, and ending with Beverly Derewianka's teachings about functional grammar.

The common objectives of the Danish Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education in Denmark has published a set of common objectives for the Danish public school. Within this, there are three competence areas: oral communication, written communication, and culture and society. In each category, there is a set of different skill and knowledge goals. This paper's focus lies in oral and written communication, specifically the linguistic focus.

In the oral communication's linguistic focus it states, "The student knows the nuance of vocabulary" and in the written communication section, also under linguistic focus, it states, "The student knows about functional grammar." (Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, 2019).

It is important to note that these specific skill- and knowledge goals are supposed to be achieved by students who are finishing year 9, and therefore it is not expected for students before 9th grade to be able to fulfill these requirements.

Debra Myhill and the LEAD-principle

Debra Myhill, professor of education in the UK, writes in her article *Introduction: Rethinking grammar – as choice* (2020) about the shift in grammar learning. Historically, when teaching grammar, it has been isolated from the rest of the English teaching and in general, the focal point was the correctness and accuracy (Myhill, 2020). Today grammar teaching has shifted to a more functional approach, where the focus lies on meaning-making, and the metalinguistic talk about this.

In this context, Myhill (2020) has developed the LEAD principle, which is a set of pedagogical principles to guide the teacher in teaching grammar. The LEAD principle builds on the word *lead* as an acronym.

The L stands for links, this should be understood as teaching grammar in the context of what is already being taught, in other words: functional grammar.

The E represent examples, it falls in line with the previous letter, here it is about providing examples for the students, as opposed to giving long explanations and descriptions of the grammar they are working with, and when working with grammar in context, the obvious example given

would be from the material the students are already working on.

Proceeding to A, which stands for authenticity, here it is important to use authentic texts as examples and models, as these are written for the 'real world' and will in the end better students reading comprehension, as well as analytic skills for other texts like it.

The last letter, D, stands for discussion. With this Myhill focuses on the importance of a good quality classroom discussion, where the model text is in focus, the discussion should be about how the author's choices have influenced the meaning and mood of the text, and what happens when you change these choices (IBID).

When working with grammar and Myhill's standpoint, the teacher needs to know the subject they teach, both the grammar aspect as well as knowledge of the overall theme of the lessons. When the teacher's knowledge about grammar is not adequate, they can tend to focus too much on grammar as form, and not as much on rhetorical effect, which is the goal of the LEAD principle.

[Beverly Derewianka's language for interacting with others](#)

"A functional approach looks at how language enables us to do things in our daily lives" (Derewianka, 2020)

Students need to know how to use language for achieving different purposes, and in line with this learn grammar in context. According to Derewianka (2020) there is five different categories within functional grammar for students trying to learn a language, in this paper the focus will lie on the category of interacting with others. This approaches language as a way we construct roles and relationships. This field is also called tenor (IBID). One thing this category deals with is how the text elicits a response from the reader. The category is also where students will learn about choices in grammar, and what it does for the mood and attitude of the text. Additionally, expressing attitudes is also about the different attitudes or attributes the writer assigns to the different roles, themselves, or others.

Within this field, there are three different kinds of attitudinal language (IBID).

The first is about describing and expressing feelings, here there is the use of nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs.

The second kind of attitudinal language is about the evaluation of people, things, and behaviors, also known as evaluating the qualities of things. Besides answering with emotions, the students will also learn how to express opinions on something. Within this kind of language, there are three aspects to the evaluation of quality. There is their composition, their social value, and the reaction they provoke (IBID). The reaction within these aspects can be both negative and positive.

The last kind of attitudinal language is judging human behavior. This aspect is divided into two parts, one where we judge based on social esteem – which involves personal factors. The second is “social sanction”, regarding whether human behavior is morally, ethically, or legally accepted.

Another thing Derewianka (2020) talks about is the notion of in-group and outgroup, which is the understanding that the use of language can have excluding and inclusive effects.

Presentation of practice element

The following section will provide a presentation and overview of the teaching plan, which this paper is based upon. Furthermore, the context of the existing teaching plan will be supplied, to gain insight as to why the teaching plan is the way it is. The complete teaching plan can be seen in appendix one.

The teaching plan is intended to be used for 7th to 8th grade, and it covers two lessons of 45 minutes. The lessons are planned as a project-oriented teaching plan, where the students will end up writing and perhaps performing a rap, based on what they have learned in this plan. Usually, a project-oriented teaching plan ends up with a larger final product, but there is also used a lot more time, than what this teaching plan has planned for.

These two planned lessons were used in a real 8th grade in our first teaching practice in a Danish public school. They were the final two lessons in a larger teaching plan with the theme of subcultures. When this plan was originally thought out and taught, the linguistic focus was not the primary goal, but rather the competence area of culture and society.

In the following, a choice was made to use simple future tense, even though this plan is already completed, to describe the teaching plan with more objectiveness, rather than telling it like how it went.

The first lesson will begin with the teacher providing the students with a list of slang words. They will then get a couple of minutes to try to figure out what these words mean. Afterward, the teacher will go through the list with the students on the board. To begin the next activity, some students will read aloud in class, a small text about genres within hip hop. This will lead to a session where students will work with rhyme schemes, the teacher will provide some rap, where the rhyme scheme is already apparent, and a rap where it is not. The latter is intended for the students to work on in groups and thereby get a better feel of rhyme schemes in practice as opposed to just theory.

In the second and final lesson, the students will work on their rap. The teacher will begin by providing a task description, and through that provide a framework for the students to write a rap text based on. The lesson will finish with some students showing their texts.

Analysis of practice element

In the following, there will be an analysis of this paper's practice element – the hip-hop-based teaching plan. It will begin with an analysis of the teaching plans fulfillment of the beforementioned common objectives. This will be followed by ideas to qualify the existing teaching plan based on Debra Myhill's theory on grammar as a choice and the LEAD principle. Finally, to conclude the analysis section, this paper will discuss Derewianka's (2020) idea about interacting with others as grammar teaching, and how this pertains to the teaching plan.

In line with the common objectives of the subject of English in Danish public schools (Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, 2019), the existing teaching plan, seen in appendix 1, is not entirely adequate, as it was designed with other goals in mind, consequently, the following didactic rationale will not only be theoretical considerations, but also a reflection on how the teaching plan can be qualified to be further oriented towards grammar teaching.

The common objectives states in oral communication under linguistic focus "The student knows about the nuance of vocabulary". To fulfill this goal, one thing the teaching plan does is to provide a list of slang words to the students. Apart from scaffolding the students for when they eventually meet these words, they also provide a chance for the students to show some nuance and variety in their vocabulary. These particular words may not be academic English and are therefore not appropriate in work or school settings. Still, nevertheless, it is words students may encounter in this teaching plan or in their everyday lives. Besides being inappropriate for academic English, they provide a certain mood and attitude to the texts the students read or are producing. So, by presenting and talking about these words, the students will hopefully notice what a nuanced vocabulary can achieve.

The competence area of written communication also contains a linguistic focus, where it states, "The student knows about functional grammar.". The subject of functional grammar will be presented later in this didactic rationale.

As mentioned before, these common objectives are intended as the last step in their primary education, and it is for that reason, that 8th graders are not required to know all of this yet, but working with these goals, is the objective of the teaching plan, to take a step in the right direction.

When teaching grammar today, it is more about grammar in context and less about the form and correctness. Debra Myhill has developed the LEAD principle, which can be used in this teaching plan, by linking grammar teaching with the overall theme, in this context hip-hop (Myhill, 2020). This can be exemplified in the teaching plan, by removing or altering any words that provide a certain attitude or mood to the lyrics, the students can then work in groups, perhaps with pre-prepared questions by the teacher to scaffold them, before talking in plenary, and hereby moving on to examples. Here it can the teacher show a selection of a few sentences on the board, to explain the variety of choices. Following this, the teacher then alters the sentence with the students, to see what the changes do to the sentence. Ensuing the examples can be a classroom discussion, this is very dependent on the students, and is very difficult to plan. This is also why it is important for the teacher to be knowledgeable about grammar and the subject they are teaching. When teaching grammar this way, it is essential to choose an authentic text, but if we alter the teaching plan this session could be instead of focusing on rhyme schemes.

When teaching about rap, grammar work on the mood of the text, and how to elicit a response from the listener will fit nicely with the overall theme. As the students will be producing their own rap text, instead of focusing as intensely on the rhyme schemes, the teacher can give them another task description, about which reaction or response the students, as the authors, want to bring out in their listeners. Since this relates well to the previous work with Debra Myhill, there is something to be built upon.

For the last lesson, the students could be in groups and given an authentic text, and together they will find the different words that relate to expressing attitudes. This lesson could be changed to be task-based (Ellis, 2017). the pre-task would be a short presentation from the teacher about the importance of expressing attitudes in things like rap texts. The during-task can be the group work, and the rest of the lesson will go with the post-task – writing their own rap. The task description for this should, as mentioned, be something about what they want, the reader to feel when listening or reading. The description can also scaffold the students from the beginning by providing a list of words they can draw inspiration from, as well as prompts such as “who do you want to listen to your rap?” and “what will the mood of your rap be? Will it be sad, angry, happy, etc?”. As interacting with others is depending largely on the audience, the focus is then shifted from rhyme schemes, to how the students want their rap to be perceived.

In the beginning, this should be enough to at least get the higher-level students started. As the students are working on this in class, there will be plenty of opportunities for the teacher to further scaffold the students who need it.

By bringing both Derewianka's (2020) and Myhill's (2020) theories on grammar into the classroom, the students will be able, with scaffolding by the teacher, to use metalanguage to speak about their choices in grammar. It is up to the individual teacher to assess what kind of metalanguage is appropriate for the students' grade and English level.

Conclusion

As a result of years and years of grammar teaching being isolated and focused on form and correctness. Grammar has been seen as the boring part of learning a language – whether it be the learner's mother tongue or a foreign language. Grammar can be fun and exciting when the students learn what choices in grammar do to a text and how it affects the recipient. Considering a theme such as hip hop, or let it be other themes that the students may find interesting and relevant, grammar ceases to be 'just' grammar and moves into the territory of playing and experimenting with language. That is one of the many perks of the language subjects – there is never just one correct answer, and when working with the grammar of expressing feelings and attitudes that rule applies as well. Just by bringing material that the students find relevant for themselves, can be an enlightening experience for both the students and the teacher.

This idea of functional grammar is not only in theory anymore, the common objectives for the subject of English published by the Ministry of Education, now require the students to be knowledgeable in functional grammar at the time they graduate.

Myhill's LEAD principle provides an approachable take on grammar and metalinguistic talk in the classroom, which some teachers may find is a difficult subject to approach. There are rich opportunities for discussion, looking at real-life texts, and introducing the students to whatever grammar one wishes to approach in the classroom, provided the teacher is knowledgeable on the subject, as this way of teaching grammar invites classroom discussions, which cannot and should not be planned.

When approaching the LEAD principle, the teacher should be clear on what kind of grammar she wishes to bring into the classroom, and with a theme such as hip-hop, Derewianka's language for approaching others fits with the overall theme. This is not the traditional grammar, where there is a focus on accuracy and the different tenses. Language for interacting with others focuses on both the writer's choices and the recipient's reaction to these. Talking about these choices and what it does for a text is the kind of metalanguage that is appropriate for 8th graders in a Danish school, and hereby the metalanguage in the classroom is enhanced by using relevant material for the students.

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Appendix: Practice element

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 - Neighborhood

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 are 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.

Together - Read out loud

Genres:

Within the rap culture a lot of different genres and styles exist. Some rap texts have 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

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>