



KØBENHAVNS PROFESSIONSHØJSKOLE
KMP ENU ENGELSK, 4.-10. KLASSETRIN

KOMPETENCEMÅLSPRØVEN I ENGELSK

June 2022

FRB:LU:KMP ENU Engelsk, 4.-10. klassetrin - lufe20enu2l_kmp, 30 timers skriftlig prøve
Senior Lecturer PhD: Lone Krogsaard Svarstad (LOSV)

Characters: 20.554, the equivalent of 8 pages (2600 characters per page)

Title: Intercultural Learning and Representation

Competence area 3: Intercultural competence

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Research Area

The overall frame of this paper is the intercultural competence and the intent of learners' interactions with other cultures through different types of media also known as the common objectives for English in 7th grade (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019b). This paper seeks to qualify English foreign language teaching materials about New Zealand (NZ) by using a national approach to help decode and deconstruct representations and foster students' development of critical cultural awareness as active and engaged citizens (Risager, 2017, p. 148).

Our second outline on intercultural competence introduced some of our initial thoughts and intentions, such as teachers playing a key and scaffolding role in intercultural learning, and emphasis of the different demands or requirements of learners which are reading and thinking critically or described as key concepts: critical media literacy, critical cultural awareness, and perspective awareness (Gibbons, 2015, p. 95, Lund & Villanueva, 2020, p. 160).

We also find that the world is becoming increasingly global, and today's learners have access to loads of information about typical English topics through social media, blog posts etc. without using traditional teaching materials. This means that learners and teachers must be aware and take a critical stand on shared information but also when introducing online portal teaching materials, such as the one being analysed later, because teaching materials often reproduce national stereotypes and colonial views (Risager and Svarstad, 2020).

Research Question

The following research question focus on how we as English foreign language teachers can steer clear of stereotypical reproductions, unnuanced stories, visualisations, and instead pave the way for diverse perspectives while strengthening learners' intercultural competence:

- How can Alinea's portal material on New Zealand be qualified by using a national approach to help decode and deconstruct representations? foster students' development of critical cultural awareness?

As the attentive reader might have noticed in our outline, the research question is seemingly unfinished which is of course unintentional. I acknowledge this possible confusion, and to clear out any doubt, I wish to emphasise that the question mark should have been a sentence connector such as “and” to create more cohesion. I hope that the reader will take this correction into account.

Theoretical Standpoint

Culture is diverse and dynamic, not something definite or fixed to one nation (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2019a). This perspective and understanding on culture will serve as the theoretical starting- and standpoint as I introduce the following theoretical concepts and thereafter take on a critical analytic approach when analysing the practice element.

Analysing culture in teaching materials

We predict that online portal materials such as the one to be analysed find its way into considerable number of classrooms and to gain an understanding of the role of teaching materials in education and society, we need to relate to not only the communicative activities and tasks, but also the “culture” that is presented (Risager, 2014, p. 78). As Risager further states, this is all the more interesting as the cultural content in many cases is not the result of systematic professional considerations, but has a more unreflective and thus ideological character, for example characterized by various kinds of perspectives or discourses, such as colonial or patriarchal (Risager, 2014, p. 78). Risager concludes that everyone contributes to the construction of culture, meaning that the author delivers a presentation, a potential of meaning, which the readers (teacher and learner) continue to work with and react on, based on their knowledge and life experiences as well as addressing learners' preconceived ideas about a country (Risager, 2014, p. 85 & Lund & Villanueva, 2020, p.161). The point is, that all readers must analyse and study the material by asking critical questions as well as debate their own assumptions.

A National Approach and Key Concepts

A national approach is based on the understanding that the world is seen as a collection of individual countries or nations, and how they are described as one (Risager & Svarstad, 2020, p.

81). In an intercultural learning environment, we must take the global perspective seriously and be aware of the reasons for choosing one country over another and ask why there are nations that seem to be left out (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 82). Teachers must strive to create a fair and balanced representation of the world and in doing so, learners must also understand which countries are target language countries and that English can be used as a lingua franca to create a more balanced world (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 85). Risager and Svarstad also introduce important concepts namely *essential* and *non-essential* views on culture. The first one is seeing culture as static and identity as an explanation for inhabitants' or nations' actions, which can lead to national and cultural stereotypes (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 134). Whereas a *non-essential* view explores how people are a part of a nation as dynamic construction or imagined communities (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 87). The point is that a national identity is seen as fluid, diverse and changing over time and that problem arises when nations are reduced to a few aspects (BIG C) while others have diverse and multiple descriptions, named *landeskunde*, in teaching materials. The idea behind the term *landeskunde* is to give wide descriptions of a nation through texts, pictures and political and cultural history (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 89). In contrast concepts as national stereotypes, banal- and hot nationalism exists. Banal nationalism refers to simplified and innocent symbols and representations of a nation such as flags that quickly change into hot nationalism, where the same symbol can be used in battle or oppression of others and it is important to consider that it hampers our gaze on everything that goes on outside the national framework or across them (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 93).

Lastly the notion of representation and perspective awareness, which are somehow linked as a focus on these concepts can help us to *decenter* ourselves, which refers to the ability to see the world from different perspectives and create and notice more diverse representations rather than reproducing national stereotypes (Risager & Svarstad, 2020, p. 34). A Danish perspective on other nations can be a privileged one where our blind spots might thrive, therefore it is quite important to have this in mind when describing, teaching, or learning about other nations so that representations will be fulfilling for those being represented. Risager and Svarstad states that representations can never be neutral as they highlight something and then omit something else, consequently we must ask who, where, when, and what intended purpose does the representation have, for instance power relations (colonial and political) or people be positioned as an otherness (Risager & Svarstad, 2020, p. 124-125).

Presentation of Practice Element

As shortly introduced in our second outline the practice element consists of teaching materials on NZ produced for Alinea's online portal. The title is quite short and presented as "Culture - New Zealand" and created by Signe Holst Hansen. The material is intended for 5th and 6th graders with enough material for 7,5 lessons using a variety of pictures, videos, songs, and texts for learners to interact with. The material has four sections and covers four themes, namely "Introduction: New Zealand", "Original people and wildlife", "Modern Culture" and "Tourism in New Zealand". I encourage the reader to visit the screenshots of the online portal material in the appendix to get an overview of what I wish to analyse in the following section.

Analysis of Practice Element

Some issues and questions arise when glancing through the teaching plan and to deconstruct the practice element I will demonstrate Risager's and Svarstad's questions as an analytic framework because it brings the theoretical concepts into an analytic practice, meaning that by asking these questions I create awareness and reflective choices when evaluating teaching materials (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 95-96).

- **Which countries (nation/states) is referred to, directly or indirectly? Is Denmark being referred to?**

On several occasions Denmark is referred to as well as other countries or nations. For instance, as seen on screenshot number three where a comparison of the number of inhabitants as well as NZ compared to the size of Great Britain and Japan. The facts on NZ could serve as a means of Landeskunde, unfortunately these are left uncommented and therefore lose their potential of diverse and multiple descriptions, that otherwise could give learners a greater perspective on lived lives in the Pacific and the cultural history of NZ as well as its interesting future. Will learners know the importance and meaning of mentioning Queen Elisabeth the 2nd as the Monarch of NZ and influence on it as a state and nation? Probably not, especially if it is left unquestioned in the classroom as this fact implies the existing power relation between the two nations and transnational similarities or differences in the commonwealth as well as the colonial discourses. In an artefact on analysis of the same teaching material, my fellow student and I found that Denmark is indirectly referred to when listing these facts. This is because the material itself targets learners in the Danish school system and the purpose here is to build on their existing knowledge about neighbouring countries to create meaning (Ehmsen & Thams, 2021). We also argued that when using this Danish perspective, it can create a somewhat sense of differences or similarities that can serve to heighten

their self-awareness when mapping the world. But is this comparison beneficial and what do we gain or lose when teaching these facts? The diverse and multiple descriptions are left out when nations are reduced to a few aspects such as facts and short descriptions. Therefore, opportunities of strengthening learners' intercultural competence are challenged. Having this indirect Danish perspective is also of privilege where NZ is compared to our ways of living rather than on its own. The creator being Danish also strengthens this perspective as learners experience the nation through her curation of selected topics, whereas deselected ones are never published, and blind spots are left unaddressed. Lastly a topic such as NZ's breath-taking nature and mountains can also be decoded as a Danish perspective, as in comparison our landscape and biodiversity seem limited and scarce. A learner might find themselves asking that there must be more to NZ than this.

- **How would you describe the different ways of representing the countries?**

Overall, the material from Alinea takes on an essential and fact-based approach, rather static and simplified view of culture. We experience this when visiting the first screenshot, where an overview of the content and themes are presented along with a colourful photo of a heavy tattooed person sticking his tongue out without any description of the photo or questions for learners to reflect on. We are left without any specific information, and this can lead to confusion and potential of (re)producing national and visual stereotypes. In addition to this the text briefly lists expected content while contradicting itself by framing it as everything NZ has to offer along with potential learning outcomes that can seem a bit irrelevant, belittling their existing knowledge on NZ as well as unmotivating for learners even though the creators intentionally meant it to be the opposite. Banal and hot nationalism also exist as a way of representing NZ, for instance on the third screenshot where learners are invited to talk like a Kiwi, perform the Haka dance and get to know the kiwi bird. These serve as banal national symbols to form a sense of national belonging as well as differences. Inhabitants are seen as being exotic and therefore banal symbols and visualization foster a position of otherness of the Samoan community. This means that the same symbols can be used as oppressing stereotypes and challenges our intercultural learning and understanding.

- **How wide and varied are the representations and are there any examples of national stereotypes?**

The teaching material lacks wide and varied representations though one segment is dedicated to the so-called "original people". The representation is challenged though the material brings the native community, Māori forward as a means of showing different ways of living and expressing

oneself in NZ. I find it challenging due to *how* the community is represented. Notably are the pictures on the first and second screenshot and the added titles such as “Original People and Wildlife”. Instead of two different themes it is framed as one which sparks the question of why the creator has chosen this perspective that might lead to misrepresentations such as stereotypical connotations and unnecessary reproduction and positions the Māori as related to wildlife being uncivilized and exotic (Ehmsen & Thams, 2021). In relation to this, when taking on this national approach another problematic and colonial title occurs, namely “Modern culture” as in contrast to “Original People and Wildlife”. These choices of dissemination have unwanted consequences and highlights Risager’s points on cultural content as unreflective and thus ideological character and not the result of systematic professional considerations.

One could also argue that an essential and touristic views of culture learning reside here. For instance, when the cultural aspect of NZ is framed like a brochure in a tourist office it cultivates the superficial aspects of the nation. Predictabilities occupies the material when highlighting these themes and affirms national and cultural stereotypes and understanding of culture and identity as explanation for inhabitants’ or nations’ actions such as “Talking like a Kiwi” or “dancing like a Māori”. On the fifth screenshot a large segment is dedicated to tourism in NZ describing a whole country as a popular destination of travel and reducing the potential diversity to places of sightseeing and simultaneously reducing multiple co-existing cultures to “interesting people”. A photo of green hills known from the film Lord of the Rings, serves as a confirming factor of beautiful landscapes.

- **Are (parts of) the countries national (and maybe international) history represented?**

The national idea is strong and influences many peoples’ views on the world as well as their actions (Risager and Svarstad, 2020, p. 93) and these national ideas thrive in the material, for example when the Samoan community is represented with a short text on their arrival 1300BC and “developed their unique culture” later being one nation performing cultural rituals or performance to create this sense of belonging and coherence. Though today there might be several ways of living out one’s “culture”. An imagined national coherence is exemplified by rugby teams incorporating the Haka dance before a match.

Discussion and Perspectivation

This paragraph aims to discuss the overall learning process and answer what the students should do to develop their knowledge and critical cultural awareness.

I argue that taking a national approach when analysing teaching materials can help decode underlying assumptions and a static view on culture. As mentioned above, consequently we must ask who, where, when, and what intended purpose does the representation have? One suggestion could be a form of teacher's transparency and shared reflections on the matter of qualifying teaching materials. For instance, letting learners work on the material and detect, decode, and deconstruct it themselves by working on some of the same questions used in the analysis. This could be challenging but using different ways of scaffolding the learners becomes comfortable in asking critical questions and in exploring different ways of representation to create a more diverse perspective on NZ or other nations for that matter. Another tool for qualifying the material, besides using a national approach, is the cycle model of intercultural learning also introduced by Risager and Svarstad (2020) because the four stages can foster learners' development of critical cultural awareness as they are scaffolded in meaningful interactions when noticing, comparing, reflecting, and interacting with cultural topics such as lived lives in NZ. While visiting the four stages the learners will decentre themselves and target blind spots, gain new perspectives and experience the diversity that NZ has and challenge exiting colonial views and the positioning and othering of people. For instance, they could strengthen their perspective awareness and critical cultural awareness by comparing different teaching materials on culture. The different approaches to expressing cultural aspects of different countries as shown in the online portal material named African Voices is significant, wherein Malawi is introduced as one of the poorest countries in the world and electricity being for the privileged (Ehmsen and Thams, 2021). Another idea is to find challenging topics such as post-colonial issues, declining biodiversity, the fatal events at two mosques in Christchurch in 2019 or the consequences of tourism in NZ. The opportunity to challenge existing national and cultural stereotypes arises and would otherwise be reproduced if not discussed and unquestioned.

Creators of teaching materials might take learners' existing knowledge and new perspectives about a nation into account when formulating new texts or task descriptions, but still, that might not be enough to overcome and target stereotypes and misrepresentations. Avoiding national stereotypes is difficult and what to do when they occur? One example is language awareness as a means of avoiding essentialism and stereotypical behaviour whereas the diversity and a non-essential take on culture happens if we use sentence starters such as "some people think that" or "they could describe

themselves as” or “they are probably just as different as us” to challenge static and fixed ideas of culture (Risager & Svarstad, 2020, p. 92). When teachers instigate a safe learning environment for critical analytic approach on teaching materials, inspired by a critical discourse analysis, we aim to analyse ideological mechanisms to see how they legitimize existing power relations and, in a way, create awareness and we notice how we deal with conflicts and inequalities in societies which create an unbalanced world (Risager, 2014, p. 78).

Conclusion

When focusing on the intercultural competence the cultural aspects of language teaching is of course a major if not the main topic and focus. Teaching languages without the cultural aspect might even be impossible, therefore we as future teachers must be educated and reflect on *how* we teach culture to qualify teaching materials. Meaning that we must check ourselves on *how* we teach and contributes to the construction of culture, by discussing and addressing learners' preconceived ideas about a country as well as decentering ourselves, address blind spots and a privileged view on the world. When we take on critical analytic and national approaches on teaching materials and invite learners to join this analytic adventure, teachers show transparency, provides tools for decoding and deconstructing misconceptions and representations. In other words, learners are empowered to create a more balanced world by challenging colonial discourses using analytic concepts/questions and engaging in more dynamic views on culture and diversity. When they notice multi-layered differences, compare different teaching materials and challenge underlying issues, reflect, and interact with meaningful and authentic representations/cultural aspects of language learning we foster their critical cultural awareness.

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Appendix

Appendix no. 1 - Screen Shots of Online Portal Material

Hansen, Signe Holst (2021). Alinea, *Culture – New Zealand*. Located the 6th of December 2021 on:
<https://engelsk.alinea.dk/course/AAx2-culture-new-zealand?portalclick=coursessection>

Screenshot 1:



Redaktionen · Signe Holst Hansen

Culture - New Zealand

[Indhold](#) [Kapitler](#)

You will experience everything New Zealand has to offer, from its buzzing cities, to its beautiful nature and brilliant culture. Get ready to talk like a Kiwi, dance like a Māori and enjoy the nature of New Zealand!

When you are done with this topic, you:

- know what the 'haka' is - maybe you can even perform it!
- can talk like a Kiwi and know New Zealand slang
- can write two different kinds of texts: A fact file and a postcard

Fag Engelsk Klassetrin 5. kl. - 6. kl. Varighed Ca. 7,5 lektioner

Screenshot 2:



Kapitel 1 Introducing: New Zealand

In this chapter, you will meet the Kiwis and even learn to talk like them. Welcome to New Zealand!



Kapitel 2 Original People and Wildlife

In this chapter, you will meet the original people of New Zealand, learn to do the haka and get to know the kiwi bird.



Kapitel 3 Modern Culture

New Zealand may be most famous for its beautiful nature and interesting history, but did you know that there are also some very famous people from New Zealand, like Lorde for example? Get to know them in this chapter.



Kapitel 4 Tourism in New Zealand

Each year, millions of people go to New Zealand to discover the beautiful landscape and the interesting people. In this final chapter, you will get to discover some of the most popular tourist spots in New Zealand.

Screenshot 3:

Welcome to New Zealand



New Zealand is a small country in the Pacific Ocean. It is similar in size to Great Britain or Japan, but its population is only four million people, which is fewer than in Denmark. New Zealand consists of two main islands and a number of smaller outlying islands. The climate in New Zealand ranges from tropical to arctic, which means it can be up to 20 - 30°C in the summer, and anywhere from -10°C and up during the winter.

Facts about New Zealand

- Monarch: Queen Elizabeth II
- Total area: 268,680 square km
- Population: 4,401,916 (as of 2014)
- Capital: Wellington, 410,000
- Largest city: Auckland, 1.452 million

Screenshot 4:

Redaktionen

Original People

The Māori

Like Australia, New Zealand also has an indigenous people. They are called the Māori. They arrived in New Zealand at some time between 1250 and 1300 CE. Over several centuries in isolation they developed a unique culture that became known as the 'Māori', with their own language, a rich mythology and performing arts, like the dance 'Kapa haka'. The Kapa haka is often just called a Haka. You can read more facts about the Māori people by clicking on this [link](#).

The Haka

A haka performance involves singing, dancing, and movements that look like they could be used in a fight. Actually, the haka is so popular it is done by the New Zealand rugby team before every match. The haka is performed for many reasons, such as to welcome guests, to celebrate important events, and even at funerals. It is mainly performed by men, but you can perform a haka even if you are not Māori.

Screenshot 5:



Kapitel 4 · Ca. 3 lektioner

Tourism in New Zealand

Each year, millions of people go to New Zealand to discover the beautiful landscape and the interesting people. In this final chapter, you will get to discover some of the most popular tourist spots in New Zealand.