

COMPULSORY WRITING EDUCATION

A study on the relation between young people's writing competencies and metalinguistic knowledge in the context of first language education

Aim and relevance

The need for developing strong writing competencies already in the middle school years (age 10-12) has intensified since the turn of the century and is of utmost importance for young people's educational success and life trajectories (Brandt, 2015). However, in Denmark, almost one in five students leave compulsory schooling with inadequate results in the high-stakes written composition examination in the first language subject Danish. This points to the necessity of novel research both within and beyond the national context that contributes to writing education, and not least to improving how it takes place in the crucial middle and lower secondary school years. This project aims to develop much needed theoretically based and empirically informed new knowledge about the relations between the writing competencies and metalinguistic knowledge of young people, the latter being understood as ways of thinking and talking about written texts and using language to do so (Camps et al., 2000). Exploring metalinguistic knowledge has recently been identified as the promising way forward for educational writing research (Fontich, 2016), and hypothesised as *the missing link* in understanding the successful writing classroom. Through a study of what characterises the more specific relations between young people's writing competencies and metalinguistic knowledge (RQ), the project addresses pivotal societal concerns about key components for supporting all students in becoming competent writers as a core part of compulsory schooling. Hereby, the project will contribute insights that are vital to first language education, which remains a privileged context for literacy instruction and for conversations about different ways of communicating through texts. Furthermore, it will contribute significantly to further theorisation of the field of knowledge and fill gaps in the international literature.

Background

The middle school years form a crucial stage in compulsory writing education because students - after they have learned to write in the lower primary years (age 6-9) - must be able to write to learn in increasingly academic ways (Jeffery et al., 2019). Current Danish research has focused on either student writing in the lower primary school years¹ or student writers in general upper secondary school (Krogh & Jacobsen, 2019), revealing a considerable knowledge gap in the middle and lower secondary school years. In international literature, a growing number of empirical studies suggest that highly rated student writing is linked to an expanded repertoire of ways to talk about written texts. However, different concepts of metalinguistic knowledge prevail in the literature, relating to, for example, verbalised knowledge about written language choices in others' written texts (Myhill et al., 2020) and metalinguistic activity during collaborative writing activities in schools and in text talks about own written texts (e.g. Camps et al., 2000, Liberg et al., 2011). The same studies reveal that much territory is yet uncharted in educational writing research, e.g. how to examine and understand the more specific relations between young people's writing competencies and metalinguistic knowledge, and they point to a lack of conceptual clarity in the field. In this project, we propose that the metalinguistic knowledge of students in compulsory education entails both everyday and formal expressions about written language choices, but also affective expressions (Dielemans & Coppen, 2021) and ways of making meaning for example through associating the written content with one's own life. It is our hypothesis that conceptualising young people's repertoire of affective and associative engagement as one dimension of metalinguistic knowledge will contribute to a better understanding of the role and nature of such knowledge in compulsory writing education. Moreover, we expect that this conceptualisation – in combination with a contextual approach in this project to writing quality that takes into account the writer and social aspects of writing – provide a novel and coherent theoretical framework for exploring the empirical relations between middle and lower secondary students' writing competencies and verbalised reasoning about written texts.

¹ E.g. the large-scale project *Automated Tracking of Early Stage Literacy Skills* (ATEL, 2018-2022), in which I participate. The project builds on a multidimensional textual approach to student writing; and thereby calls for more knowledge about writing after the first years of schooling and for more profound contextual approaches.

Research design

The project group will work on three broader work packages (WP) that rely on data from four Year 5 (age 11) and four Year 8 (age 14) classes to concentrate on decisive stages of writing development.

- a. investigating aspects of quality in the composition of students in the light of the teaching context, and approached as a result of practices, written language choices
- b. mapping the same students' metalinguistic knowledge as it manifests itself in classroom dialogues, collaborative writing tasks and interviews about one's own and others' writing
- c. studying the specific relations between young people's writing competencies and metalinguistic knowledge as they take form in middle and lower secondary school.

WPa will collect compositions written in the format of 1) an argumentative piece and 2) an aesthetic fictional piece, and recognised as typical assignments at the relevant stage of school. The types of text cater to different forms of personal engagement and meaning making and will be selected for in-depth analysis in order to see variation. Focused ethnographic classroom observations – including interview data (see WPb) – from the units of work provide insights into teaching context, practices and written language choices.

WPb will rely on the same focused ethnographic observations, examined with a focus on students' verbalised metalinguistic knowledge and their opportunities for participating in class conversations. Two student groups in each class – with both weak and strong writing competencies, according to teachers – will be followed and interviewed.

WPC will study the more specific relations between writing competencies and metalinguistic knowledge based on new insights into quality in written compositions in compulsory schooling that take into account contextual aspects of writing and on a theoretical and empirically informed concept of metalinguistic knowledge.

Dissemination

The project aims at publishing at least four articles in leading journals on educational writing research and first language education (e.g. *Writing & Pedagogy*, *Nordic Journal of Literacy Research*, and *Research Papers in Education*). One article will focus on approaches to examining the role and nature of metalinguistic knowledge in first language education, written together with advisory board members. Early findings will be presented at relevant conferences (e.g. the International Association for Research in L1 Education Conferences, *Writing Research Across Borders*) and at two seminars bringing together excellent international researchers (on advisory board) with national researchers.

Main activities	A2022	S2023	A2023	S2024	A2024	S2025
Field work		Year 5/8x2		Year 5/8x2		
Research seminars	Research group	Int. & nat. network	Research group	Research group	Research group	Int.& nat. network
Research stay			PI & PhD student		Postdoc	
Dissemination			X (article network)	X	X	X (closing seminar)

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