

Teaching in Danish as a second language – an opportunity or a burden?

This is the first episode of the podcast *Sprogbrug på KU – Language use at UCPH* - with Katja Årosin, presenting various voices and perspectives on the linguistic realities at the University of Copenhagen. Katja works at the Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel Language use at UCPH. This episode focuses on the international lecturers teaching in Danish as their second language at the university. What does it mean for the students? And how do the lecturers feel about it? Do they see it as an opportunity or as a burden? Or possibly both?

In this episode, we are joined by three guests whose work is impacted by UCPH's language policy. The first guest is Alberte Ritchie Green, who has an MA in Danish and wrote her thesis on this topic. We are also joined by Ana Raquel Benetti, dentist and associate professor at the Department of Odontology. She is originally from Brazil and has lived in Denmark since 2011. The final guest is Steven Blurton, associate professor at the Department of Psychology. He is from Germany and has lived in Denmark for eight years.

In January 2021, the University of Copenhagen adopted a new language policy which states that, "it is expected that tenure-track assistant professors, associate professors and professors are able to contribute to teaching in Danish after 3-6 years". According to Alberte, most of the lecturers she interviewed for her master's thesis were negative about such a short timeframe. For Ana, it was listed in her contract as a requirement, but she also wanted to learn Danish as she found navigating daily life in Denmark to be tough without knowing the language. Steven raises the question of compensation for preparation time. For him, preparing for a class in Danish requires more time than it would for a Danish speaking colleague. At the moment, there is no compensation for the extra time needed to prepare a lecture in Danish, and preparing a lecture in English takes less time. How do we ensure that international lecturers are not unfairly disadvantaged?

Teaching in a new foreign language to native speakers can be intimidating. Alberte found that one strategy employed by the lecturers was to ask the students for help if they did not know a particular word in Danish or if they did not know how to pronounce a word correctly. When they were asked to do this, students appeared to be very willing to help. Ana describes how transitioning to teaching in Danish was not easy for her. Finding the courage to do it took time, but she found that the key to moving over to Danish was communication with her students. To be able to teach in Danish, Ana had to make the teaching material and her explanations simpler which also made it more comprehensible for the students. Making her teaching more visual by using pictures and giving everyday examples to illustrate complex concepts proved to be another helpful strategy for both her and the students. For Steven, the switch to Danish is an ongoing process. He teaches his classes in English, but the oral exams must be held in Danish. Initially, the students could decide whether they wanted to do the exam in Danish or English, but this did not work very well. Then, two years ago, he began to hold the exams in Danish only. This was better as conducting the exams in only one language required less administrative work.

Some international lecturers have received poor evaluations because of their Danish language skills. Some find that students are quick to say in evaluations that they cannot understand what is being taught, not due to a lack of disciplinary knowledge but rather because of linguistic difficulties. Steven describes how negative evaluations for some teachers can lead to them feeling less motivated to switch fully to Danish. More work and worse evaluations.

In her classes, Ana has found that students are very careful with what they say. While it is possible that they were frustrated with her Danish, this was not generally something they told her about.

Many people question whether knowing Danish is necessary to live in Denmark – and in Copenhagen in particular. When Ana was a guest lecturer at the university, she was told not to waste her time learning Danish, despite feeling uncomfortable living here without knowing the language. Alberte found this narrative to be prominent in some parts of UCPH but noted that many of the lecturers who were advised not to learn Danish decided to do so anyway, feeling that Danish was necessary in many everyday situations. For Ana, being able to teach in Danish brings her closer to her students. For Steven, teaching in Danish is motivating.

Alberte proposes a more active language policy where language use and language requirements are articulated more clearly, and where managers, departments and faculties actively support international employees in the process of learning and carrying out teaching responsibilities in Danish – so that employees are not left to handle such a big responsibility all on their own. This proposal also includes involving students more in discussions about language use and language policy at the university.

There is a lot at stake for both students and international lecturers when teaching takes place in Danish as a second language. There are many aspects and different points of view in this debate, and it is important that all voices are heard.