



FEATURE

The significance of the policy on teaching Faroese as a second language for integration in the Faroe Islands

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The significance of the policy on teaching Faroese as a second language for integration in the Faroe Islands

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Abstract

The Faroe Islands are undergoing a pronounced change in demographic trends resulting in 10% of first and second-generation immigrants of 54,000 inhabitants. This feature illustrates the role of policy on teaching of Faroese as a second language (FSL) as the forerunner of the integration policy. FSL policy-making with emphasis on immigrants learning Faroese language and culture appear assimilative having implications for equitable access to education and integration. A political and educational infrastructure is in the pipeline, which may contribute to improving the vulnerable Faroese language learning environment.

Keywords: Faroese as a Second Language (FSL), policy status quo, implementation and enactment, equity, integration and inclusion

Introduction

The Faroe Islands, a part of the Kingdom of Denmark, are situated in the North Atlantic and have around 54,000 inhabitants (Hagstova, 2023) of which circa 10% are immigrants and second-generation immigrants. These immigrants represent 104 nationalities, and speak 89 languages (Census 2011; Útlendingastovan and Tórshavnar Kommuna, 2022; Hagstova Føroya, 2023). Faroese, the heritage language of the islands, is a north Germanic language, and it has about 70,000 users within the islands and abroad (Norðuratlantsbólkurin á Fólkatíngi, 2009). Faroese is the established and formal language of the Islands, but Danish is given parity with Faroese as an official language (Vijayarathan-R., 2023 p.96). Faroese society may be considered bilingual as Danish or English are present to some extent in specific contexts, for example, education.

The Islands with their small population create unique challenges for society, the language and its environment. One can view Faroese as a minoritized language from a socio-political and historical perspective given the membership of the Faroe Islands in the Kingdom of Denmark and the priority given to Danish in Faroese society (Holm, 2003). Consequently, the keenness to proactively support the Faroese language is given priority in government policy and can lead to a protectionist stance that

fails to acknowledge the right to mother tongue of all citizens and the reality of the nation as multilingual and multicultural.

With increasing immigration, the demands for teaching Faroese as a second language (FSL) become significant and crucial for education of migrant students and for integration. Those who have Faroese as a second language may be at risk of limited academic success in education and job opportunities if they cannot read and write it (August and Shanahan, 2006). So, the significance of having robust FSL teaching cannot be ignored or underestimated if FSL learners are to seek membership in the speech community.

This feature article describes the status quo, highlights critical perspectives on FSL policy and its de facto position as a foray into integration in the light of equity, social justice and inclusion in education. The reason for our focus on FSL is the fact that there is no other Faroese policy that deals with the portfolio of immigration and integration making a focus on FSL teaching crucial to any discussion on integration and inclusion as the Faroese law on integration is still in the pipeline. The relevance of our feature arises from its insight into a small Nordic country and its policy-determined educational approach for FSL as a starting point for integration.

Overview of policy on FSL teaching in the Faroe Islands

Faroese as a second language is a new and developing field with very little policy, documentation, FSL teacher training, FSL educational courses and materials. The development in the FSL field occur sporadically as the Islands are building the policy framework while simultaneously implementing and enacting it ad hoc to cope in a challenging environment (Vijayarathan-R and Óskarsdóttir, 2023).

Policy-making, implementation and enactment are complex. Coburn (2016) offers a definition of policy as “a set of rules, often supported by resources, that attempt to constrain or channel behavior in particular directions through regulative, normative or cognitive means” (p.466). Ball (1993) posits the view of policy as texts where:

“... we can see policies as representations which are encoded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actors' interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills, resources and context)” (p.11).

He further adds that policy texts usually involve multiple authors and processes of production and may well be incomplete and arise from compromises during the course of these processes as they are influenced by multiple stakeholders.

In order to glean policy from texts, we have accessed governmental policy documents regarding FSL teaching, which include the Executive order no. 144, 2020 (Kunngerð nr. 144 frá 6. oktober 2020 um undirvísing í føroyskum sum annaðmál og móðurmálsundirvísing) and The Education Act, 1997 (Løgtingslóg nr. 125 frá 20. juni 1997 um fólkaskúlan, sum seinast broytt við løgtingslóg nr. 85 frá 16. mai 2022). It is worth noting that educational policy in the Islands is designed and implemented top-down by the Faroese Ministry of Education. Table 1 presents the objectives of two governmental

documents that constitute national policy in the education field and their intentions to create an equitable and socially just model of inclusion in education. It is worth noting that only one of these is specific to FSL.

Table 1: Overview of all policy documents

Type of document	Document	Objectives
Legal act	The Faroese Education Act of 1997- revised in 2005 and 2019 – referenced as (Løgtingslóg nr. 125 fólkaskúlan, 1997)	Provides policy framework for schools. No overt mention of the word ‘inclusion’ is found here (Poulsen, 2023). States that all children have a right to education (Poulsen, 2023).
Executive order	Executive order no.144 on Teaching Faroese as a second language and Heritage Teaching Oct 2020 – referenced as (Kunngerð no. 144, 2020)	Provides policy framework within teaching FSL. States students who have Faroese as a second language (L2) be taught to speak, read and write Faroese language. Emphasises teaching of Faroese culture and society. A single sentence states that they could be taught their first language (L1).

Integration and language learning are inextricably linked in societal discourse. There is asymmetry in the Discourse: defined as distinct ways of using discourse, where the four language skills are in conjunction with the way individuals conduct themselves, interact with others, their values, emotions, thoughts and beliefs (Gee, 2011) surrounding integration in the Faroes. When referring to competing Discourses, Gee (2012) termed these “tension” or “conflict” (p.175). For instance, he suggested that the values of many school-based Discourses treat certain students as “other,” which means students are sometimes treated differently because of their race, class, gender, or sexuality (Gee, 2012, p.4). This is referred to as Othering. MacGregor et al. (2024) view Othering as:

“...a discursive mechanism that attaches markers of inferiority (and worse) to difference in order to justify exclusion. Othering is a process that can involve treating heterogeneous groups as a homogenous category, affirming stereotypes, obscuring complex histories and cultures...” (MacGregor et al., 2024, p.4)

The Faroese government has chosen the Faroese language, culture and knowledge of Faroese society as their focus to promote inclusion and integration without taking into consideration the implications for the immigrants. The process is coloured by ‘othering’ and anchored in a deficit Discourse (Gee, 2012) leading to an asymmetrical view of the *demands* to be made of the immigrants, while showing far less concern for the government’s *obligations* towards them in creating infrastructures for teaching Faroese language and prioritising integration. This stance might be indicative of an assimilative rather than integrative attitude towards immigration. An issue to be highlighted is that FSL policy could become the basis for future residential status and integration of immigrants mirroring the current Danish policy. The proposed integration law in the Faroe Islands specifies language exams as the basis for decisions regarding visa and residential status.

In the sections below, we cast light on relevant issues to contextualise Faroese policy and FSL teaching to illustrate the current situation.

Policy and policy status quo in teaching FSL

When it comes to policy-making, a holistic understanding of policy design, implementation and enactment can ensure the best outcomes when underpinned by contextualised decision making. Importance given to policy enactment (Hardy and Melville, 2019) in creating shared meaning among the stakeholders becomes significant in taking the step from implementation to enactment. This ensures that the process can be managed and coordinated in the context of best practice as established in literature to achieve optimal results (Fullan et al., 2015).

Any discussion on languages and language policy and their management is fraught with challenges as it comprises a complexity of non-linguistic dynamics that are influential and contextually situated. These engender no simple cause-effect relationship or basis for a simplistic continuum of policy to implementation to enactment dialectic given the complexity involved (Spolsky, 2021). We acknowledge that a latent language policy exists implicitly even without legislation, and it is no simple linear progression from policy design to enactment as FSL teaching has been implemented and enacted in compulsory, evening and leisure schools to fill existing gaps left by the absence of policy.

Policy-making, implementation and enactment do not function in a vacuum as economic, political, historical and disciplinary forces influence teacher cognition and teacher action (Hardy and Melville, 2019; Melville and Bartley, 2013). The process of putting “policies into practice is a creative, sophisticated and complex but also constrained process” (Braun et al., 2011, p.586). Furthermore, policies create pressure in the educational system at various organisational levels (Grannäs and Frelin, 2021). According to Sikes (2013), micro-level policies for teaching usually fail because a realistic estimation is lacking from the policy makers. The short-term implementation of policy needs to take into account factors that affect teacher agency and the need for collaborative monitoring to ensure long term sustainability (Arnott, 2017).

Policy enactment has to be viewed in the light of the material factors such as infrastructure, resources and other material needs (Braun et al., 2011). Power dynamics influence the pressure that policy exerts, so having greater autonomy would mitigate the pressure that policy places on the educational field (Ball, Maguire, and Braun, 2012). When teachers engage with policy, their enactment of it is coloured by the kind of policy, their interpretation of it within the contextual environment and the practices that the policy brings into play (Ball et al., 2012).

Policy diffusion is defined as one government’s policy choices being influenced by the choices made by another government (Volckmar, 2019). Volckmar (2019) identifies “silent borrowing” as “non-explicit borrowing processes in Faroese educational policy-making” (p.124) that influence decision-making as an instance of policy diffusion. This approach characterises Faroese policy-making, heavily influenced as it is by borrowing Danish policy, in this instance, the Danish policy on integration, which is seen as promoting assimilation (Jensen et al., 2009). “To be equal in Danish society, thus tends to imply to be similar” (Ibid, p.5). The authors highlight that the goal of Danish immigration policy is ‘individual

inclusion' and 'cultural transformation' with immigrants having to accept Danish values (ibid). Policy borrowing then may engender uninformed policy-making, implementation and enactment as the reality of the Faroese context has not been considered as a significant factor and fit-for-purpose policy-making cannot be designed devoid of context.

The framework for teaching FSL is anchored in the Executive order (no.144, 2020), but it is still in its nascent phase (Vijayarathan-R, 2023). After this order, there was no subsequent policy development until spring 2023, when a draft for a possible curriculum for supplementary teaching in FSL for adults was sent for hearing without detailing a policy framework for FSL as a subject. The lack of a formal framework for FSL teaching has created ad hoc solutions, for example, private tuition, FSL in evening and leisure schools, which could be seen as policy forming (Adams, 2016) arising as they do from grassroots engagement with policy enactment. This can become problematic and challenging if one is looking for equity of opportunity and quality for teaching and learning Faroese.

Perspectives on second language acquisition

Research identifies certain factors as instrumental in second language acquisition (SLA). Ortega (2014) expresses the importance of a focused educational policy that promotes language learning for bilinguals, which immigrant students nearly always are. Knowing that young students may have a slow start when acquiring an L2 can be an important research-based argument against harmful attempts to promote so-called sink-or-swim educational policies that attempt to reduce or even completely withdraw the first and second language support that is to be provided to language minority children (p.28). The proposed 20 hours of FSL per student (Info Norden, 2024) seems unrealistic given that it takes about 5-8 years to learn a language to be able to communicate in it (Ortega, 2008).

Three important factors highlighted by Hoff et al. (2011) are: 1) bilinguals will be slower to acquire languages than monolinguals, 2) they do not learn both languages at the same pace as the difference between them is influenced by the amount of exposure to L2, and 3) the dual language input does impact the progress of the bilingual student. Therefore, any approach to FSL should be grounded in the goal that all immigrants are or will become bilingual learners.

Another important factor regarding the Faroese language environment worth noting is the significant presence of Danish in the Faroese society, for example, education, learning materials and legal texts. This may require that immigrants need to acquire knowledge of Danish as a foreign language posing yet another challenge for immigrants.

Importance of equity in education

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016) equity framework identifies two key objectives for education: inclusion – to ensure that all students, immigrants included, are given the opportunity to garner fundamental skills, and fairness – to allow equity of access by removing barriers (like an immigrant background, which they cannot change) to student achievement.

As education is not just a key to integration but is essential to shaping democratic rights and building community (Ball, 2016), the onus is on schools to be “concerned with literacies for active local and

global citizenship” (ibid, p.26). This suggests that education must embrace social justice through being inclusive. If the negative impact of students’ immigrant background on their educational outcomes is minimised, equity, social cohesion, sense of belonging and positive economic outcomes can be achieved (OECD, 2018). Identifying factors that indicate “the presence, participation and achievement with an emphasis placed on those groups of learners regarded to be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement” (Ainscow, 2020, p.80) is an important consideration.

A fair policy ensures the rights of all whom the policy might impact where Bianco (2010) argues that “social cohesion and common citizenship” (p.39) in a multicultural society cannot be aided by monolingualism. He does not view multilingualism as a hindrance to communication among various groups in society and presents language as the variable of cultural diversity which supports individual development. Bianco argues that given the incontrovertible role that language plays in creating meaning and identity, multilingualism must be the fulcrum for cultural pluralism and diversity (Vijayarathan-R, 2023). Within the ethos of cultural diversity, Bianco (2010) advocates shared, accessible equitable communication while concurrently retaining and strengthening diverse languages that shape cultural diversity. Given the vital role that languages play in learning contexts, the Faroe Islands as a multicultural society must aim for multilingualism in its policy to promote social justice and equity in education and integration.

Discussion and recommendations

Recent research in the Faroes has highlighted that the challenges to FSL lie within the areas of uninformed policy-making and enactment (Vijayarathan-R and Óskarsdóttir, 2023). Lack of teaching competences is a tremendous challenge that has to be addressed systematically to facilitate the teachers to be able to serve their students’ needs. Literature reveals the importance of teacher qualification and competences to be able to deliver fit-for-purpose teaching (Goddard, Hoy and Woolfolk Hoy, 2000). Until recently, teachers had not been trained (the first master’s diploma course has just concluded in 2024), and teacher education does not prepare students for FSL teaching. In fact, it appears that the Ministry of Education has not had a clear strategy when announcing in the executive order (2020) that teachers teaching FSL must be formally qualified. This has resulted in schools enacting policy without the necessary formal scaffolding for teachers and teaching. The urgency to establish FSL in the educational system has been complex as it required balancing the teaching of FSL students and giving teachers opportunity for training concurrently and offering guidelines based on policy. At present, these challenges make it difficult to fully fulfil the demands of the executive order. Furthermore, the current enactment of policy is inequitable as the hours of teaching are dependent on which part of the country one lives in and local decision-making as to which student should be taught FSL and how many hours are to be allocated.

The policy outlined in the executive order (no.144, 2020) appears to be caught between language teaching and the integration policy. It mirrors Danish policy-making, implementation and the way it is being enacted in this field. All indications appear to highlight that ad hoc decision-making was necessary. ‘Silent policy borrowing’ (Volckmar, 2019) has its impact on Faroese FSL policy because

the educational system has not been prepared to implement FSL. Importing a readymade framework that is not necessarily fit-for-purpose for the Faroese context has created difficulties at various levels, for example, teacher competences, teaching materials and sufficient funding.

Given the status quo, it appears that recommendations for improvement in FSL can be classified as follows: designing of relevant and enabling policy, implementation and enactment of policy in the Faroese context by providing a framework to empower schools to respond proactively and in an informed manner to student diversity. Implementation and enactment of policy should empower praxis to achieve constructive alignment with learning outcomes. More teaching hours and time must be allocated for FSL taking into account the Faroese environment, which has a complex diversity influenced by a variety of factors as already mentioned, for example, small nation, small language and competition from Danish and English. Teacher preparation and building teacher competence must already begin in teacher education with the pre-service teachers and become part of continued professional development for in-service teachers.

Concluding remarks

This feature illustrates the complex context where language skills may well prove to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the skills may be a barrier for immigration, but on the other hand, they are important factors to ensure equitable access to education and integration.

As mentioned earlier, the executive order on teaching Faroese as a second language (FSL) becomes pivotal as the sole Faroese formal document regarding immigration and integration. Therefore, language becomes the starting point for the integration journey of the immigrant, where obligation trumps the rights of this demographic. This lack of policy for immigration and integration has placed the onus on FSL to pave the way for immigrants to claim membership and be active participants in Faroese society.

Our discussions underline that the teaching of Faroese as a second language has been practised in an ad hoc manner while, and even before, any policy was being designed. The status quo regarding FSL implementation and enactment of policy appears to be heavily influenced by policy borrowing and not clearly informed policy. It affects the FSL environment and has implications both at the micro and macro levels. What might be of concern is the fact that FSL policy is being used as a basis for integration and will be playing a key role in the integration policy.

Analysis of policy texts underlines the lack of government commitment to constructing policy for a sound structure for FSL to the advantage of immigrants. The perspective on teaching FSL should not be one of a deficit position, where individual differences are categorised as problems to be solved, but as opportunities for learning-in-action. Looking at the status quo of FSL in the light of every child having the right to personal development, which is intended in the Education Act of 1997, it is questionable whether the system is geared to provide all children equitable access to education in the current situation (Vijayarathan-R, 2023).

In the Faroe Islands, the drive to implement L2-teaching has begun within the context of integration with a simplistic view that language can in some way guarantee integration. It appears that policy makers have underestimated the complexity of FSL within the Faroese context and overlooked the crucial aspects of teacher preparation, teaching hours, diversity of students, and the role of Danish in Faroese education. Teaching competence is a powerful tool in creating an optimal and inclusive environment for learning and becomes doubly significant in a milieu where the infrastructure of the FSL teaching-learning environment is not an enabling factor in providing inclusion through social justice and equity in education. When policy is not rooted in sound planning and understanding of an L2 teaching environment, it is highly problematic to ensure a fit-for-purpose policy.

It is evident that the Faroes with its Nordic identity may well benefit from entering into a dialogue that can raise the levels of education on par with education in the north. This may enable us to be seen as equal players in the field of education both at the macro and micro levels to engender meaningful development through adopting a proactive approach to seeking inspiration that the North can provide a small nation and society.

The formal policy environment should enable FSL development to strengthen school agency and ensure that solid support is provided for teaching to adopt necessary changes that schools choose to make for the individual student. In this way, the aim of education for all, with no child left behind (OECD, 2016), can be fulfilled in a manner that could be socially just and inclusive.

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