Teaching in the Norwegian 'Dialect Paradise'

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Norway is known to have a particular sociolinguistic 'climate' that makes it stand out from most other European language communities. To put it short, this situation is the outcome of socio-historical processes that date back to the early 19th century when Norway broke out of the long-lasting political union with Denmark (in 1814). In the newborn – or reborn – nation of Norway, the language issue was an essential part of the political discourse for quite some time, a central question being: What is to be considered 'Norwegian'? The written language of Norway had been Danish – with Copenhagen as its norm center – for centuries, and most of the cultural and political elites did not really strive to change this. They just avoided calling it 'Danish', instead it was subtly called 'our mother tongue', 'the normal book language', 'this country's common language', and so on.

However, there were proponents of a more radical change, especially from the 1830s onwards: Norway should have a genuine Norwegian language, and Danish was to be expelled. In the 1840s and 1850s, the autodidact linguist Ivar Aasen (1813–1896) developed a written norm based on a wide selection of spoken varieties of Norwegian, and in 1885 – after much political debate – his 'Landsmaal' ("The language of the country") was made an official written standard alongside the 'Riksmaal' ("The language of the nation/realm" [Dutch translation 'Rijkstaal'?]) which was the direct descendant (or rather continuation) of Danish. From that point, two written standards of Norwegian have coexisted as legally equal, juxtaposed written representations of Norwegian, which all Norwegians are required to learn in school. In 1929 the two standards changed name to respectively 'Nynorsk' ("New Norwegian") and 'Bokmål' ("Book language"). Notwithstanding, 'Landsmaal'/'Nynorsk' has since the very beginning had a minority status – both in terms of users, power and prestige. Even though Ivar Aasen's norm had considerable support as a national project, the two standards had very different connotations: 'Landsmaal' was commonly associated with rural areas, the working classes, Western Norway, and Denmark-skeptics, whereas 'Riksmaal' was associated with urban areas, the social elite, Eastern Norway (i.e. the capital region), and the furtherance of the Dano-Norwegian legacy. This made the language issue a glowing hot political topic for decades to come.

Around the same time, in 1878, the Norwegian Parliament decided that no particular spoken standard should be taught in elementary and secondary schools. The famous decree from 1878 goes like this: "The teaching in the public school should – as far as possible – be given in the children's own dialect". This policy without doubt has been of paramount importance for the sociolinguistic development in Norway in general, and for the maintenance of intra-linguistic variation in particular. It is worth mentioning, however, that the policy based on the 1878 law was opposed at several occasions. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, several teachers and headmasters defied these regulations for the benefit of a spoken 'Riksmaal' norm. And there actually were municipalities where the education committee actively boycotted the law from 1878, but then the authorities intervened and consequently reinforced this overarching official language policy. One example is the resolution from 1924, where the Norwegian parliament restates the provision of classrooms without a spoken standard: "Parliament requests that the Ministry of Education and Church Affairs ensure that the provisions of the National School Act concerning the right of pupils to use their own domestic vernacular at school and, as far as possible, to receive their instruction in this dialect, be complied with faithfully and without restrictions or interference by the school authorities."

This principle is still valid today. In the current *Law on primary and secondary education* (from 1998), §2-5 states: "In the oral instruction the pupils and teaching staff themselves decide which spoken variety to use. Nevertheless, the staff and the school management should to the greatest possible extent take the pupils' speech into account when choosing words and modes of expression."

This decree is essential to the continued used of local varieties of Norwegian – not only in school, but also in all other social domains. The dialects in Norway differ considerably at all linguistic levels, but they are in general comprehensible to all speakers of Norwegian and might therefore be used in all contexts, formal as well as informal. Although some people might occasionally normalize to some degree, diglossia is rare, and with increasing inter- and intra-regional migration, this means that communications between Norwegians very often is 'polylectal', also in the classroom.

Thus, the average Norwegian classroom comprises a rather complex linguistic order: In all oral exercises, pupils are entitled to use their local variety – except when reading aloud from a text in 'Bokmål' or 'Nynorsk'. The teacher might speak a different dialect but is free to use this as long as he/she "takes the pupils' speech into account when choosing words and modes of expression" (cf. the law quoted above). No doubt, some teachers correct or comment on the pupils' wording on some occasions, even though a spoken standard is non-existent. The extent of such oral prescriptivism is most likely highly individual, and it has not been studied very thoroughly.

In the early 1980s, some pedagogical experiments were done basing the primary literacy training on the pupils' dialect (cf. the works of Tove Bull). This method presumably still has some advocates among Norwegian teachers, but in general no pupils are instructed to write in their local dialect. All written exercises aim to learn one of the two written standards, 'Bokmål' or 'Nynorsk'. Each school has one main standard, based on local political decisions, although parents are in principle free to choose the other written standard for their child.

The 'Bokmål' norm is used as the main standard by 85–90 % of all pupils and it is therefore generally regarded as 'the neutral Norwegian', even though the two norms have the same legal status as national norms. Structurally 'Bokmål' has much in common with the dialects of the Oslo region, and a vast majority of the schools in the Eastern Norway area have 'Bokmål' as the main standard. Many of these pupils experience an far-reaching concurrence between their own speech and the 'Bokmål' written norm both morphologically and syntactically. The 'Nynorsk' norm, however, which they are also expected to master to some degree, is commonly held to be somewhat "alien" because it corresponds less with their own dialect. Instead, it connotes a certain "westernness" (or even "ruralness") – primarily because it structurally has more in common with dialects in the western parts of Norway. In some of these areas the pupils will actually find that their speech concurs significantly with 'Nynorsk', but a characteristic of this written norm, since Ivar Aasen's days (cf. above), is that it is a kind of "least common multiple" of a wide range of Norwegian dialects, and that it does not (and should not) accurately reflect the variety of any one group. Most Norwegian pupils will therefore experience that there is a degree of discrepancy between the spoken norm(s) and the written norm(s) in the classroom. This also means that all Norwegians are exposed to a plurality of (interintelligible) norms from a very early stage, which is generally thought to stimulate the linguistic awareness.

In general, one could say that there has been little discussion about the language (or variety) of instruction in Norwegian schools since the 1970s. The unmarked conduct is that the teacher uses his or her variety, and the pupils use theirs. During the last decades, however, there has been a debate going on concerning which variety of Norwegian should be used in the instruction of Norwegian as a L2. Some have encouraged the use of "spoken

Bokmål" to ease the learning process, whereas others have claimed that it would be necessary to embrace larger parts of the norm plurality even for a student of Norwegian as L2, and that the local variety should be employed in the oral training from an early stage. The proponents of this view point to the importance of being included in the local society and being able to understand oral media, where the dialect multitude is highly present.