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## What are the core aims of English as a school subject? A study of teacher understanding in lower secondary school

### **Abstract**

*Teachers' interpretations of the core aims of a school subject open or constrain what can be taught and learned in the subject in school. The global spread of English and its changing status in the world have impacted how English as a school subject is understood and what it is meant to achieve. This article explores teachers' understandings of the core aims of English as a school subject at the end of basic English education in Norway.*

*Data consist of interviews with 12 teachers across six schools in a large school district. Qualitative analyses of the data identify four core aims: 1) acquiring content knowledge of English-speaking countries, 2) developing communicative language ability 3) developing linguistic knowledge of English and 4) developing the democratic citizen. While acquiring knowledge and learning to communicate in English are dominant in teacher understanding, linguistic knowledge of English and democratic participation are much less pronounced. These findings are discussed in light of future needs for English as a world language. Finally, suggestions are made for bridging the way English as a school subject is understood today and imagining an alternative for the future.*

*Key words: English as a school subject, core aims, teacher cognition, lower secondary school, Norway*

## Hva er kjernemålene i engelskfaget på ungdomstrinnet i skolen? En studie av lærers forståelse

### **Sammendrag**

*Lærernes tolkning av de sentrale målene for et skolefag er avgjørende for hva som kan undervises og læres i faget i skolen. Utbredelsen av engelsk og språkets endrede status i verden påvirker hvordan faget forstås og hva som oppleves som hensikten med faget. Denne artikkelen utforsker læreres oppfatninger av de sentrale målene for engelskfaget i grunnskolen i Norge.*

*Datamaterialet består av intervjuer med 12 lærere ved seks skoler i en stor kommune. Gjennom kvalitative analyser av intervjudata er fire sentrale mål identifisert: 1) Å tilegne seg kunnskap om engelsktalende land, 2) Å utvikle kommunikative ferdigheter, 3) Å utvikle engelsk språk- (lingvistisk-) kunnskap og 4) Å utvikle demokratiske medborgere. Mens kunnskapstilegnelse og utviklingen av kommunikative ferdigheter er dominerende i lærernes forståelse, er kunnskap om det engelske språkssystemet og opplæring i demokratisk deltagelse mindre tydelig i materialet. Funnene blir diskutert med tanke på fremtidige behov for engelsk som verdensspråk. Til slutt presenteres et forslag for hvordan man kan bygge broer mellom forståelsen av engelsk som skolefag i dag og et mulig alternativ til dette i fremtiden.*

*Nøkkelord: Engelsk som skolefag, kjernemål, formål, sosial praksis, lærerdiskurs, Norge*

## Introduction

The spread of English through globalization, technology, and migration - together with the rise in non-native users of English - is challenging previous definitions of what it means *to know* or *to be proficient* in English (Graddol, 2006; Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011). As English increasingly becomes a language of contact for diverse speakers, new understandings of English competence potentially conflict with the established understanding and practices of the English language classroom (Hult & King, 2011; Nauman, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011). Moreover, in many countries, changes in English education have often been top-down and rapidly implemented, assuming the benefits of early education and underestimating the teaching challenges involved in implementation (Hu, 2007).

In anticipating a new subject curriculum for deeper learning of central elements in English as a school subject (Kunnskapsdepartement, 2017), it is timely to investigate how teachers understand these elements and the relationships between them. While much research on English language teaching in Norway has focused on developing specific English language skills - such as reading (Bakken, 2017; Brevik, 2014; Charboneau, 2012), writing (Burner, 2016), speaking (Bøhn, 2015; Bøhn & Hansen, 2017), and vocabulary development (Hestetraet, 2012) - less research has focused on the overall aims of the subject and even less on teachers' understanding of these aims and how they expand or constrain what can be learned in the subject.

The aim of this article is to investigate teachers' interpretations of the central aims of English as a school subject at the end of lower secondary school. The final years of lower secondary represent the culmination of 10 years of mandatory English education for all students in Norway. While the goal is not to

suggest that the findings in this study represent the *only* understandings of the central aims for English in basic education, they shed light on the central goals of English education in school for the vast majority of the Norwegian population.

The article begins with a discussion of current international trends in English language teaching and how these trends can be seen in Norway. This is followed by a description of the research design and analytical process used to explore teachers' understandings. The patterns in teacher understanding of the core aims of the subject are then presented and discussed in light of these trends. Finally, the implications for policy makers, teacher educators, and teachers are discussed in anticipation of a new curriculum and a new direction for English education in the future.

## Literature Review

Within the fields of language education, multilingualism and English as a global language, established conceptions of “language” and “communicative language competence” are being expanded and challenged (Canagarajah, 2006, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2011; Kramsch, 2011; Otheguy, Garcia, & Reid, 2015). The rise in the use of English for international communication amongst non-native speakers has led to increasing discussion of *English as a lingua franca* (ELF) (Jenkins et al., 2011). These developments are seen to signal an end to the belief that English is owned by the nations who speak it and to traditional English foreign language (EFL) teaching as we know it (Graddol, 2006).

*English as a lingua franca* (ELF), as opposed to *English as a foreign language* (EFL), reflects a global paradigm of language and language use based on theories of language contact and evolution and not on theories of first language acquisition (Jenkins et al., 2011). Instead, proponents of *English as a lingua franca* (ELF) define ELF as the use of linguistic and non-linguistic resources for communicative purposes within different settings, where communicative competence foregrounds situated language use “constructed in each specific context of interaction” (Canagarajah, 2007, p. 925). In ELF, interlocutors and contextual factors play a profound role in communication and are intertwined and inseparable from the use of English as a lingua franca (Jenkins et al., 2011, p. 296).

Global developments have also impacted the understanding of culture in English language teaching. Kramsch (2013), for example, suggests that learners in today's globalized world are cultural mediators, continually bridging their own and other cultures while acknowledging their own cultural influence in doing so. Kramsch argues that learning another language is not *gaining* a mode of communication *across cultures*, but instead “*acquiring* a symbolic mentality” (Kramsch, 2011, p. 365). This *symbolic competence* supplements

communicative competence to better reflect the realities of a modern, interconnected global world. Developing learners with symbolic competence, she argues, requires learner engagement with cultural, historical texts through reflection on linguistic and stylistic choices and the meanings they create (Kramsch, 2011).

Within European language education policy, there is growing attention to processes of mediation that reflect those of Kramsch. Mediation recognizes the learner as a social agent who culturally and linguistically adapts to perceived otherness, attempting to bridge the gap through language. Mediation, therefore, requires both metalinguistic and metacultural reflection and awareness (Coste & Cavalli, 2015, pp. 12-13). In the shift of *foreign language subjects* to *subjects of communication*, however, the role of linguistic knowledge has been significantly diminished while the need for a more fluid, situated, and dynamic linguistic knowledge has arisen (Larsen-Freeman & Freeman, 2008).

Some research has been conducted to capture differing views of language, culture and context as they are understood and realized in English language teaching. In Sweden, for example, Hult (2010, 2012) found that pre-service teachers and their instructor viewed the English classroom *not* as a space where language was used for functional communication influenced by social norms but instead as a space where these norms were suspended for the purpose of learning. Instead, participants in the study viewed situated and meaningful use of English as occurring in society and distinct from the use of English in school. In exploring classrooms practices for English certification in Australia and Hong Kong where the language is considered to be the object of teaching and learning, Davison (2005) revealed implicit norms and values which promoted an educated, English-speaking, democratic community. She argued that these norms and values need to be “challenged or explicitly taught” (Davison, 2005, p. 235), as many students are under the false assumption that the sole purpose of the subject is to learn the language. These findings reveal that English language teaching is influenced by local beliefs and that teaching is neither straightforward nor neutral. They also reveal the importance of these beliefs in opening or constraining the type of English language learning that can happen in the classroom.

Current discussions of English language teaching raise complex questions about the relationship among language, communication, context, culture and identity in conceptualizing teaching and learning aims in the subject. Borg refers to the process of interpreting these relationships for appropriation in the classroom as “the unobservable dimension of teachers’ lives” (Borg, 2012, p. 12). As Kelly, Luke and Green (2008) emphasize, while a curriculum provides stakeholders, including teachers, with targeted aims, the understanding of these aims actually resides in the interaction of stakeholders that determine *what* can count as knowledge, *who* has access to it, and *whose* knowledge counts. The understanding of curricular aims held by teachers as key stakeholders is

important for the learning that may or may not happen. In introducing a new curriculum, Orland-Barak et al. (2004) researched teachers' interpretive process and illustrated the importance of engaging educational stakeholders in a dialogue between former and new practices. Through interaction and dialogue, teachers – among others - can develop a “new” pedagogical content knowledge better aligned with new thinking and approaches to teaching English as a school subject. As these findings illustrate, paradigmatic shifts in English language teaching may require the re-thinking of commonly held views. This process, however, will require interaction and dialogue between established and newer practices. Sifakis' (2017) proposes a model for this process that would both raise teachers' ELF awareness while supporting them in reflecting on their deeper beliefs about language, communication and the role of the teacher in their specific educational context. To facilitate this dialogue, however, more research is needed which explores teachers' beliefs within the sociolinguistic context of school. The purpose of this study is to add the voice of teachers to the discussion of the central educational aims for English in basic education for the general Norwegian population.

## Context of Study

As in many countries, the status of English in Norway has changed rapidly since the turn of the century. These changes have had a significant impact on English education in school. While English has a long tradition as a foreign language subject in Norwegian schools (Simensen, 1999), the subject was distinguished from the other foreign language subjects in 2003 (Simensen, 2003). By 2005, English was referred to as “the big brother” of foreign language education, reflecting a policy discourse positioning English language learning more closely to first language (L1) learning (Simensen, 2005, pp. 59-60). English gained further prominence in 2008, when it was designated a prioritized subject with higher qualifications to teach it (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2008; 2009, pp. 18-19). These developments, however, have not been without their tensions. In an investigation of attitudes towards English in Norwegian media from 2008 to 2012, Graedler (2014) found frequent references to English as an invading force and as a threat to the national language and not to English as a global language to be appropriated locally.

Within this climate, the focus of research on English language teaching (ELT) in Norway has fluctuated as well. For example, research on learners' preparedness for higher education and on academic reading skills called for the consideration of *content-integrated language* (CLIL) instruction in school (Hellekjær, 2008). On the other hand, Rødnes, Hellekjær and Vold (2014) called for a more situated language focus to meet the needs of current English language classrooms as identified by recently qualified teachers of English. The need for

greater contextual awareness was also raised in a study of teacher-written oral exam tasks in Chvala (2012). These findings suggest a shifting focus in ELT between content-focused learning reflective of first or second language literacy development and the more situated, context-bound use of English as a lingua franca.

Illustrating this dynamism, a special issue of *Acta Didactica* was published in 2014 which addressed the English and foreign language education of the future. In this issue, Rindal (2014) asked “What is English?” and found that, while the curriculum suggests that *language* and *language use* are the central domains of the subject, the English language practices and choices of young learners were socially influenced and personally negotiated. Her findings led her to predict a growing prominence for social constructivist perspectives in English language teaching and research to capture the local beliefs and practices which impact teacher and learner intentions for the subject. This article, therefore, focuses on local beliefs, practices and intentions and explores the research question:

How do teachers understand the central or core aims of the first 10 years of basic, mandatory English education in school?

Findings shed light on teachers’ deeper beliefs about language, communication and the role of the teacher in Norwegian schooling and how these impact the pedagogical intentions of the subject. Findings also reveal the need to reconsider and to bridge current beliefs with new realities and a new curriculum in the future.

## Method

As the aim was to investigate teacher understanding, the study adopted a qualitative orientation to data collection. The teachers in the cohort were purposively sampled from lower secondary schools within the same district. Maximum variation across variables of linguistic culture and socioeconomic status for schools and teaching experience for teachers were targeted (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Patton, 2002). Schools were selected considering: a) the degree of multilingualism in the school environment, as a possible factor influencing heightened language focus in the subject and b) the socioeconomic status of the local area as related to English as a means of educational and economic gain (*Evaluering av ressursfordelingsmodellen for grunnskolen*, 2014; Ljunggren, Toft, & Flemmen, 2017). The distribution of schools in the study reflected the general distribution in socioeconomic status from affluent (“West”) to average or below average (“East”) and in high, intermediate or low levels of multilingualism in the district as a whole.

Once schools were selected, two teachers from each school were chosen using English-teaching experience as a selection criterion. In the final cohort, experience ranged from a few months' to over 30 years' experience. Though gender was not a selection criterion, the final cohort consisted of nine females and three males. All participant data were anonymized using pseudonyms. The final total of 12 participants was within the 5-25 range generally practiced in phenomenological studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 150). For an overview of schools and participants see Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Overview of schools and teachers in the cohort

School	Description	Teacher pseudonym	Teaching experience	Teaching subjects in addition to English
A	Low multilingualism "West"	Unni	<1	Social studies and foreign language (FL)
		Karen	2.5	Social studies and Norwegian
B	Low multilingualism "West"	Anja	10	FL, Religion-Philosophies of Life-Ethics (RLE), and social studies
		Sigrid	16	Foreign language (FL)
C	Intermediate multilingualism "East"	Silje	7	Music
		Caroline	5	Social studies and RLE
D	Intermediate multilingualism "East"	Hanne	27	RLE
		Kåre	31	Social studies
E	High multilingualism "East"	Tove	28	Social studies
		Mattias	11	Social studies and RLE
F	High multilingualism "East"	Mina	7	RLE
		Hans	5	Social studies and Norwegian

### Interview Guide and Procedure

A general interview guide consisting of open-ended questions addressing topics in the general objectives of the English subject curriculum was provided to teachers prior to the interviews (see Appendix 1). The general objectives of the subject were chosen as they bridge Core Curricular aims which provide the pedagogical coherence for all the subject curricula (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013, Core Curriculum) with subject-specific aims. The Core Curriculum targets the creation of independent individuals with a sense of national heritage, creativity, and a moral outlook. It also includes democratic ideals, international responsibility, and environmental awareness as a means of ensuring Norway's active membership in the global community. The specific English curriculum, on the other hand, is structured into four main areas (*Language learning, Oral communication, Written communication, Culture-*

*Society-Literature*) with individual competence aims for the different stages of schooling. The interview guide was piloted and minor adjustments made to highlight the themes of the interview and to operationalize certain theoretical terms (i.e., “recipients” and “audience” replaced “interlocutor”).

Each teacher participated in three on-site semi-structured interviews over a three week period, with each interview lasting on average 50 minutes. Data were analyzed between interviews in order to member-check, clarify and expand on responses throughout. Initial meetings established rapport, briefed teachers on the topic of investigation, provided the interview guide, obtained consent and gathered background information. Norwegian was used in all initial meetings, and English or Norwegian was chosen by participants thereafter. Data were transcribed and analyzed in the original language and extracts translated only for the reporting of findings. Minimal modifications were made to original citations to improve readability.

### **Analysis**

Teachers’ interpretations were conceptualized as *frames* understood as the boundaries of meaning employed by a social group when talking about a given object (Fairclough, 2015). A *frame* refers to the mental contours of the topic under discussion or, in this case, the core aims of a school subject. Though *frames* are dynamic and always open to question, critique and change, they provide a glimpse into the contours of teacher thinking (Borg, 2012).

Analysis of interview data proceeded deductively and inductively (see Figure 1 below) and used Nvivo software for most of the analysis. Data was first reduced to data referring only to English as a school subject and the competence to be developed in the subject. Working up from the remaining data, teachers’ descriptions were reformulated into narratives capturing the essence of the core aims and competence to be developed in the subject. The essence of these narratives resulted in the roughly-grained codes: *Learning historical, cultural and societal content knowledge*, *Learning to communicate*, and *Learning the English language*. The raw data was then recoded according to these categories and resulted in the finely-grained categories: *Acquiring knowledge of English-speaking countries*, *Developing communicative ability in English*, *Developing linguistic knowledge of English*, and *Developing the democratic citizen*, with the final category emerging as a distinct category. Modelling of the salience and positioning of the different frames was used to visualize the relationships between them as they emerged in the analysis. The final model was tested against the entire data set (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 196; Maxwell, 2010; Richards, 2009, p. 173). An overview of the analytical process is presented in Figure 1 and the resulting model in Figure 2 in the Discussion section below (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 188).

1. <i>Topical coding</i>	<i>Deductive</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General descriptions of English as a subject</li> <li>• Descriptions of the English competence (oral and written) to be developed in the subject</li> </ul>
2. <i>Teacher narratives to identify the essence of interpretations</i>	<i>Inductive</i>	
3. <i>Analytical coding 1 (roughly-grained categories)</i>	<i>Inductive</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning historical, cultural, and societal content knowledge</li> <li>• Learning to communicate</li> <li>• Learning about the English language</li> </ul>
4. <i>Analytical coding 2 (finely-grained categories)</i>	<i>Inductive</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acquiring knowledge of English-speaking countries</li> <li>• Developing communicative ability in English</li> <li>• Developing linguistic knowledge of English</li> <li>• Developing the democratic citizen</li> </ul>

**Figure 1** Overview of the analytical process

## Findings

The analysis of data provided rich insight into teachers' understandings of the central aims for the subject. The following section reports on patterns in these interpretations, referred to as *frames* (Fairclough, 2015) .

### **Frame 1: Acquiring Knowledge of English-Speaking Countries**

This frame centered upon the cultural and historical content knowledge of English-speaking countries, primarily of the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). All teachers included the acquisition of this type of knowledge as a main aim of the subject and more often listed it as the first of two main aims. One teacher, Anja, described English as “a culture subject,” focusing on American and British “cultural knowledge in a wide [sense]” and what characterizes the UK, the US, and other countries. This knowledge was described as important for learning about the world, as well as understanding changes within Norway. For example, Mina described learning about the legacy of English in the world, where:

We show them how spread English is [and] what a great influence [the British Empire] has had for every continent in the world...that England has had “a part in the game” in many countries and that the legacy is still there. (my translation)

Mattias, on the other hand, connected the knowledge of English-speaking countries to national heritage, where knowledge about the UK and the US is expected:

You're expected to know [that] Norway has been closely linked to first Britain and then America and why. These are cultural facts, cultural knowledge, common knowledge that you are expected to know.

He also described the importance of studying these countries in order to recognize the Americanization of many aspects of Norwegian culture.

This knowledge was described as central for high-stakes examination, where top marks weighed content knowledge heavily. Teachers described pressure in ensuring that students “know a lot of social science” and have plenty of “background” information to be able to perform well on written exams. For Hanne, this knowledge was relevant for oral examinations as well, where she struggled “to assess how much knowledge the student possesses” and to ensure that each student “show[ed] the most reflection” on this subject matter knowledge.

The ability to learn and express societal, cultural and historical knowledge in and through the English language was seen as a pre-requisite for classroom participation. Sigrid described the classroom as a place where “we only speak English to each other,” a practice described as “completely natural” and what distinguished English from the foreign language classroom. As Unni states, “If you [are] not [able to use English], you can't follow the discussion.” In exploring the role of *language* within this frame, Unni emphasized the history of the English language as it related to the history of England.

## **Frame 2: Developing Communicative Ability in English**

The second frame centered on developing students' ability to understand and communicate in English. This frame, together with Frame 1, was present in all interviews but was slightly less often listed as the first aim of the subject. English was described as a “common” world language and a tool for communication with the world across a range of topics. Here as well, classroom communication in English was expected and considered natural. For Anja, the natural use of English in lessons meant that interaction was less visible and there was “less focus on interaction.” When interaction was emphasized, she explained that language use needed to extend beyond the use of “everyday words.”

Teachers were specifically questioned about *situational context*, as communication presupposes interaction in context. Though teachers talked extensively about communicative language use, *context* was vaguely conceptualized and most often connected to a need to behave formally and use topic-specific vocabulary when talking to teachers or examiners. While teachers described some inclusion of context in task descriptions, these were mostly confined to a description of interlocutors and a need to use formal and correct language. For Silje, however, situated communication consisted of more than just accuracy or formality. She tied it to “cultural competence” and “the layers

between the languages.” She attributed shortcomings in addressing context in teaching to a wider lack of attention to contextual language use in education in general. While she emphasized the importance of adapting language to the situation, she said there was no tradition for approaching Norwegian language use in this way and, as a result, teachers “lack[ed] examples in our mother tongue” to illustrate this in English. Hanne also connected “difference in language use and interacting” to a larger cultural challenge but related these differences to the need to raise awareness of a more informal Norwegian interactive style.

Two different teachers also connected situational and cultural context but placed both outside the scope of the subject. For Tove, adapting language to context is “when you manage to behave adequately [and] do what is expected of you in a given situation”. This ability, however, is described as “not necessarily” requiring much schooling and was placed outside of teaching and learning in the subject. In exploring the global use of English, Anja states:

When I think of “culture” outside of English as a school subject, it is perhaps more about adapting to the context, where you are, or who you are talking to. As English has now become a global language, it is definitely not certain that the same codes apply everywhere. (my translation)

While she recognizes the importance of context and glimpses the importance of cultural mediation in global contexts, she also places this mediation outside of the scope of the subject as well.

Within the subject, *interaction* was described, on the one hand, as the practical communication required “to figure out what to do” (Unni) and, on the other hand, as communication free from and beyond these immediate demands. There was variation in what teachers meant, however. Anja, for example, questioned “everyday interaction”, suggesting it may actually be far more complex and, thus, too “narrow(ly)” conceptualized in school settings. For Karen, interaction “beyond” the everyday meant “to really connect with someone in English,” “to really know that person,” and “to allow someone to trust you,” where cultural knowledge provides the topic for discussion to achieve this. She described classroom interaction as providing the practice necessary for building these trusting relationships, where students get to know each other through sharing opinions in English. For Mattias, however, a different type of interaction was reserved for a special type of student, who:

... wants to achieve more, to be able to communicate in an almost philosophical manner with people from all over the world. They see the world as such as their audience. As someone that they need to speak to.

Finally, for some teachers, the discussion of communicative *roles* of speakers was problematic. Caroline, for example, described occasionally using role play

in class, but that it always felt “so fake,” as “it’s still me listening.” For her, authentic communicative situations in English were “so far away.” Similarly, Mina describes students assuming roles in writing and adapting their English to these roles, but, like Caroline, she refers to these processes as less genuine and “acting in a way.” Hanne, on the other hand, described including speaker/writer roles in task descriptions and student performance in the classroom as positive, challenging a tradition in the subject of “speaking and writing into a great void”.

### **Frame 3: Developing Linguistic Knowledge of English**

The third frame centered upon developing and applying linguistic knowledge of the system of English. Many teachers referred to the linguistic knowledge of English as “the basics” or as instrumental skills and the “technical part of language learning.” Linguistic work was often described as tedious, repetitive and “logical grunt work.” Conversely, a discussion of the awareness of language form and meaning was not present in the data. In exploring this awareness, Hans - who had spoken at length about cause-and-effect relationships in understanding historical content - said the following:

No, I haven’t focused on that [*the effect of linguistic choices on meaning*]. But that is really interesting. I haven’t thought of it.....to equip the students to make independent choices, that is a part of the game and a part of what they should learn. And I see that the strong students, to a much greater degree, are better at these linguistic choices, because they have a more nuanced language. You see they choose a more correct word, so [strong students] separate themselves clearly from [less proficient students] in that they use more correct words in the context. (my translation)

Working with linguistic knowledge of the language - where it was discussed - inspired feelings of frustration or guilt. Silje described work with language as having evolved little since she was in school. She said “anyone can do it.” You “just pick up a book, make copies, [give] instructions and get started.” She found this approach highly unsatisfactory and described her struggles in explaining quality in student texts, especially in cases of high levels of accuracy. She discussed recognizing problems in “the way you phrase things” but felt she lacked examples illustrating how to improve. Karen described struggling with texts that “look Google-translated” and knowing that something “just isn’t right” but being unable to explain it. In considering linguistic knowledge, Mina initially considered this knowing “the rules” but reported discovering later that it was “much more nuanced” than that, though she struggled to formulate the nuance.

The position of linguistic knowledge in the subject was contested. While for Anja language teaching “drip[s] down” or is interspersed in the lessons after the teaching of culture, for Hanne language study was central and required being occasionally “impulsive” in teaching formal aspects of language. Another teacher, Mattias, reported having “a bad conscience about not teaching language

enough,” as students had unacceptable “technical abilities” and continued to produce “systematic mistakes.” He also speculated on changing attitudes towards linguistic knowledge. He suggested that, while in the past theoretical knowledge of language was cultivated in primary school, today it is neither common nor well-developed when students reach lower secondary. He also described a marginalization of language study in the subject, resulting from a belief that “everyone knows English,” that learning it “is straightforward”, and that students are “learning English from everywhere.” He reports on “a sort of [school] philosophy” advocating that students would rather just speak English and “get on with it.” He found that when he made time for language study, however, students enjoyed it. For him, developing linguistic knowledge was important, and perhaps “more useful” for many students than knowing about “the development of nation states.”

#### **Frame 4: Developing the Democratic Citizen**

This frame centered upon a larger, societal concern to develop democratic engagement and the democratic citizen among students. This frame was rarely explicitly formulated and often led to an acknowledgment of developing the democratic citizen as an implicit subject aim. Teachers described subject content as the impetus for the discussion of globally and locally relevant issues. Kjetil described “moral themes” arising from, for example, narratives of racism from English-speaking countries as a means of illustrating “racism in practice”. Anja described the study of events in English-speaking countries as a means to “lift [students’] gaze” and “engage” with larger issues in the world. Unni described the process as:

...to move between the local here in Norway and the local in a specific English-speaking country and the global context. We move back and forth between these three spheres...

Unlike many teachers, Hans was especially concerned with fostering democratic awareness in the subject. He described students’ application of cultural and ethical knowledge to topics of local and global concern. For him, the capacity to reflect and become democratic citizens was the “social responsibility” of all education, including English education. He explained that when students understood what was happening in the English-speaking world, they could reflect on these events and would “conclude that democracy is the best way to organize a society.” For him, this was a “tacit knowledge” and was *not* an aim teachers discussed among themselves or with the students. When two very experienced teachers were asked about democratic awareness, however, both refuted the idea. The first stated that democratic awareness was *not* something she thought about in teaching English, and the second placed democratic awareness far from her sphere of practice. A more recently trained teacher

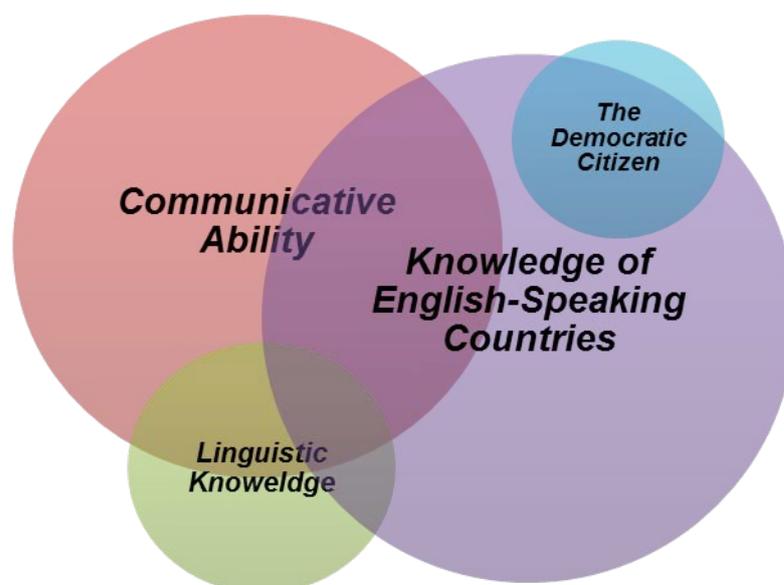
referred to democratic citizenship as “vague” and “political” and not directly applicable or apparent for her teaching in the classroom.

## Discussion

The aim of this article was to investigate teachers’ understandings of the central aims of English as a school subject in basic education. Figure 2 presents a conceptual model of the salience and relationships between the different frames of teachers’ understandings based on the analysis. The acquisition of knowledge of English-speaking countries and the development of communicative ability are the most common, and thus largest, frames in the model. Knowledge of English-speaking countries is foregrounded and slightly larger than communicative ability as this was more often listed as the first of these two aims. The ability to communicate was also seen as prerequisite for acquisition of this knowledge, which explains its overlap and slightly backgrounded position related to knowledge acquisition. Developing the democratic citizen was less often articulated by teachers and thus is small in size. Societal and historical knowledge and not language use was seen as the foundation for developing the democratic citizen in the subject and, therefore, only overlaps this frame.

Developing linguistic knowledge of English was both less frequently described and constructed as a subset of larger primarily communicative aims. For example, when asked to describe targeted competence at the end of lower secondary, one teacher asked “Linguistically or in general – the way it is taught now?” The distinction of linguistic knowledge as less prominent than a general competence is reflected in both the size and backgrounded position of this frame.

Overall, the two most dominant frames targeted students’ natural use of English to learn and communicate cultural knowledge of others and to promote moral responsibility. Developing the democratic citizen was connected to this knowledge but was *not* connected to English as a language of contact and communication with a diversity of world speakers. Instead, contact involved either a) the building of trusting relationships with others as modelled on classroom interaction, or b) philosophical communication with the academic world.



**Figure 2** Conceptual model of teacher understandings of core aims in the subject

### **Strong cultural but weak linguistic orientation**

While teachers' core aims for the subject have a strong cultural orientation focusing on cultural and historical knowledge, linguistic orientation seems neither to be equally important in lower secondary nor well established in primary education. The natural use of English that teachers describe as distinguishing English from other foreign language subjects suggests, as Hult (2012) found in Sweden, that teachers imagine the English classroom as a space to learn more about content and less about language use as influenced by social norms. While metacultural awareness through reflection on cultural and historical knowledge is evident in what teachers describe, this awareness seems influenced by Norwegian history and the belief that English is owned by the nations who speak it. Interestingly, this emphasis cannot be explained by curricular aims, as only three of 30 individual aims relate directly or indirectly to these nations. Instead, findings suggest that these aims are viewed as central for examination and thus drive teachers towards knowledge acquisition. Furthermore, more than half of the teachers in the cohort taught social studies as an additional subject, and some reported that the overlap in content matter between the two subjects was what motivated them to obtain teaching qualifications in English (see Table 1).

Developing linguistic knowledge of English, on the other hand, is described as traditional, unchanged, and marginalized reflecting the changing role of linguistic knowledge in the shift from *foreign language subjects* to *subjects of communication* (Larsen-Freeman & Freeman, 2008). Teachers, however, seemed frustrated by classroom practice related to developing linguistic knowledge but were unable to conceptualize the more situated linguistic knowledge required to meet new demands (Larsen-Freeman & Freeman, 2008; Rødnes et al., 2014). This is perhaps not surprising, as teachers also generally

struggled to conceptualize contexts of interaction beyond the authentic communication of classroom interaction. Some expressed strong frustration regarding a lack of contextual awareness in using English, while for others, the natural use of English rendered the context invisible. Almost half the teachers in the study found the development of linguistic knowledge or language study inadequate for addressing students' challenges in using English. Therefore, there seems to be a pressing need for a more responsive, situated and pedagogically appropriate linguistic knowledge in teachers' professional understanding. Teachers will require this to be better suited to meet the evolving needs of increasingly diverse contexts of English use and for the use of English as a world language.

However, teachers describe a pervasive ideology that assumes that learning English is unproblematic and requires only extensive exposure to English. This belief resonates with the policy discourse described in Simensen (2005) which equated the process of English language acquisition more closely with that of first language acquisition. It is not my intention to suggest that exposure is not important nor beneficial for learning a first or an additional language. Instead, I would argue that an over-reliance on implicit learning limits students' awareness of English use as the nexus of language, culture, and context in an increasingly complex world, with increasingly complex contexts of interaction. As such, this ideology constrains the instructional space necessary to develop the metalinguistic awareness and mediation skills necessary for international contexts ("Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment Companion Volume with New Descriptors", 2017; Coste & Cavalli, 2015). In moving forward, this ideology needs to be challenged if we are truly to imagine and address a more complex future for the use of English in the world. Without metalinguistic awareness *in addition to* metacultural awareness, communicative competence cannot fully extend to encompass the *symbolic competence* needed to become cultural mediators in an interconnected and global world (Kramsch, 2011).

It is perhaps *symbolic competence* and the integration of metacultural *and* metalinguistic awareness which could potentially further align the aims of the subject with the aims of the Core Curriculum to ensure the active membership of Norway in a highly diverse and interconnected global community (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013). For most of the teachers in this study, these aims were weakly conceptualized, tacit or considered far from the sphere of classroom practice. While teachers refer to encouraging a sense of morality and ethics, there is less evidence of encouraging the necessary cultural *and* linguistic awareness to mediate tension on highly sensitive topics. There is room, therefore, for more contextual awareness and mediation of diversity in Norwegian English classrooms, mediation which is both resonant of European language policy and characteristic of the use of English as a lingua franca (Canagarajah, 2007, 2014; Coste & Cavalli, 2015).

## Institutional practices

Institutional practices in the use of curricular documents do seem to play a role in how teachers process the aims of the subject. For example, while language and the development of a linguistic repertoire *are* included in the description of the main areas of the subject, language and language learning are infrequently mentioned in the individual aims. Within *Language Learning*, for example, individual aims refer to skills, strategies and awareness of contrastive language differences. Moreover, “language” is not specifically used in the individual aims under *Written* or *Oral Communication*. Additionally, individual aims under *Culture, Society and Literature* refer to English-speaking countries and English literature without specific reference to how the language is used (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013). To complicate matters, teachers in this study did not readily refer to either the main areas of the subject curriculum nor to the general objectives. Instead, teachers seem driven by the need to match individual aims with textbook content and to document work with individual aims as part of district policy:

you...have to pick [individual aims]...[and think] “Well, this [textbook] text can that go with that [individual aim] ...So you...mitch-mix and match. (Karen)  
[it all] goes back to the whole documentation demands...they only...seem ...[to be] looking for the [individual] aims you do (Caroline)

Teachers are also driven by the requirements of the exam. As Caroline says above, teachers feel pressured to ensure that students have acquired enough information to do well on the exams. As Anja says, “we shouldn’t hide the fact that it is the exam which determines much of what we do.” Despite exam pressures and the institutional practices described above, teachers *do* seem to strive for a higher understanding of subject aims and for *what* can and should count as knowledge in English as a school subject. For example, two teachers state:

...we all feel that we want ...more time to talk about ... what is *really* important to you when you teach English. What is your *main* focus...but...when we have time to sit down, it’s always something else that needs to be done. We ... need to change our own culture and shar[e] thoughts about learning (Sigrid)

We don’t use [the general objectives of the subject] ...If you had time to discuss the [general objectives], it would be easier to know where you want to go (Caroline)

## The way forward

As Davison (2005) and Rindal (2014) suggest, the subject is more than just learning a language. Instead, teachers’ pedagogical intentions for the subject are infused with the uptake of certain curricular aims in interaction with local norms, values and beliefs of what is important and what is possible. The majority of teachers interviewed in this study seemed interested and motivated

to explore the central aims for the subject, as well as to engage in a dialogue with different institutional stakeholders and different levels of curriculum. Teachers of English are not just teachers of language but are involved in the complex and dynamic interplay of language, culture, identity and context of a world language within their local context. To better support them and to better align teacher understanding and policy intentions, more research is needed which will capture teacher beliefs and how these may or may not dialogue with modern realities, documented policy intentions and classroom practice.

## Conclusion

These findings are based on an in-depth study of teacher understanding of the central goals of English as a school subject in a large school district in Norway. While the findings represent an account of the subject aims for these teachers, they offer neither the *only* nor a *conclusive* account of the understanding for *all* teachers. Instead, they raise important questions for the field of English language education about what it means to teach English as a world language within the local context of schooling. In Norway, the findings of this study are useful for other teachers in similar situations in exploring their own curricular interpretations and how they meet the needs of English as a world language in basic education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2013, English subject curriculum, Purpose; Sandelowski, 2004).

Teacher educators together with policy makers and educational stakeholders need to be sensitive to changing paradigms of language and language use instigated by the spread of English globally. If we are to equip teachers – and as a result 21<sup>st</sup> century learners – with the competence they will require in the future, we must address sociolinguistic perceptions, aspects of English as a lingua franca, and a discussion of what is possible in school settings. To meet future challenges, all educational stakeholders may need to challenge and profoundly rethink commonly-held views of English and English language teaching. As both Orland-Barack et al. (2004) and Sifakis (2017) suggest, only through a dialogue exploring deeper beliefs about language, communication, and the role of the teacher and English as a lingua franca can a new pedagogical content knowledge arise and a transformation of attitudes occur. Without the support and engagement of all stakeholders in bridging these complex realities, teachers may flounder among shifting paradigms, traditions and diverse policy intentions. The process is delicate and requires sensitivity to current practices, as well as to underlying beliefs. To manage meaningful dialogue, however, more research is needed which explores local beliefs and the mediation of traditions of the past with the opportunities of the future.

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## Appendix 1

### General interview guide

#### Formålet med faget / Purpose of the subject:

For deg, hva er hensikten med engelsk språk i det norske samfunnet? Hva skal det brukes til?

For you, what is English in Norwegian society for? What purpose(s) does it serve?

Er engelsk det samme eller forskjellig fra andre språk i Norge (f.eks., norsk, samisk, de andre fremmedspråkene, osv.)?

Is it the same or different from other languages in Norway (i.e., Norwegian, Sami, other foreign languages, etc.)?

Utfra din egen erfaring, hvordan ville du beskrive engelsk *som fag i skolen*?

Based on your own experience, how would you describe English *as a subject in school*?

Hvordan ville du si at engelsk som skolefag møter noen av målene du beskriver for engelsk i det norske samfunnet?

How would you say English as a school subject meets some of the aims you describe for English in Norwegian society?

Kan du si litt om hva slags muntlig kompetanse i engelsk du tror at elevene dine kommer til å ha behov for – både nå og i fremtiden?

Can you say a bit about what type of spoken English competence you think that your pupils will need – both now and in the future?

Kan du si litt om hva slags skriftlig kompetanse i engelsk du tror at elevene dine kommer til å ha behov for – både nå og i fremtiden?

Can you say a bit about what type of written English competence you think that your pupils will need – both now and in the future?

Engelsk som skolefag er ofte referert til som både redskapsfag og dannelsesfag.

English as a school subject is often referred to as both a subject to develop instrumental language skills and as a subject for the personal development or growth of the pupil.

- Hvordan forstår du faget i lys av disse begrepene?
- Hvordan balanserer du eller integrerer du disse begrepene i undervisningen din?

- How do you understand the subject in light of both of these two?
- How do you balance or integrate these in your teaching?

#### Global-internasjonalt-local / Global-international-local:

Kan du beskrive noen situasjoner hvor engelsk er brukt aktivt i klasserommet ditt?

Can you describe some of the situations in which English is used actively in your classroom?

Kan du beskrive noen temaer du tar inn i engelsk undervisningen din?

Can you describe some themes you take up in your teaching?

«Internasjonalt» og «global» er ord som ofte brukes i sammenheng med engelskfaget i skolen. Kan du si noe om hvordan «det internasjonale» eller «det globale» er brukt i undervisningen din?

“International” and “global” are words which are often used in connection with English in school. Can you say how “international” or “global” is used in your teaching?

Hvem ville du si er mottagere av dine elevers

Who would you say are the recipients/audiences

skriftlig og muntlig engelsk?

- Ville du ha sagt at dette gjelder spesielt for dine elever, eller er det felles for all engelskundervisning på din skole?
- I din erfaring med andre lærere i (navn) kommune, ville du ha sagt at det er felles for engelskundervisning i kommunen?

for your pupils' spoken and written English?

- Would you say that this is unique for your pupils or similar/same for English lessons at your school?
- In your experience with other teachers in (district name), would you say that this is similar/the same?

### **Identitet / identity:**

Kan du beskrive din rolle som engelsklærer?

Can you describe your role as a teacher of English?

I din erfaring, kan undervisning i engelsk faget bidra til å styrke demokratisk engasjement?

In your experience, can teaching in English as a school subject contribute to strengthening democratic engagement?

- Til medborgerskap?
- Til en slags «co-citizenship”?

- Strengthening citizenship?
- To developing a “co-citizenship”?

### **Vurdering / Assessment:**

Kan du si noe om det som er viktig for deg i vurderingen av elevenes engelskkompetanse?

Can you say something about what for you is important in assessing your pupils' competence in English?

Kan du si litt om hva slags utfordringer du opplever i vurderingsarbeidet i engelsk?

Can you say a bit about what type of challenges you experience in your work with assessment in English?

### **Lokal situasjon // Local situation:**

Kan du si litt om du opplever at andre engelsklærere på din skole har en tilnærmet oppfatning og forståelse av faget som du har?

Can you say a bit about whether other teachers at your school have a similar understanding of the subject as you do?

- Hva med i (navn) kommune generelt?

- What about in (name) municipality in general?

Kan du beskrive hva som hjelper deg eller hindre deg i å nå dine mål som engelsklærer?

Can you describe what helps you or works against you in reaching your aims as an English teacher?