

# Vocational teachers as policy actors: “Multilingualism as a resource” in Norwegian vocational education

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*Linguistic diversity has become a focus in the Norwegian National Curriculum (LK20), which establishes students experiencing “multilingualism as a resource” as a policy intention. This study explores if and how this policy intention corresponds with teachers’ experiences and practices in mainstream vocational education and training (VET). Using the concept of policy enactment developed by Ball et al. (2012) as a theoretical and analytical framework, I analyze the curricular aims set by the LK20 Core Curriculum and a subject-specific VET curriculum, comparing them to the teaching practices reflected in interview data gathered through linguistic ethnographic fieldwork in mainstream Norwegian VET programs in 2020 and 2021. My findings show that (a) the National Curriculum positions vocational teachers as subject-specific, mainly Norwegian-oriented language teachers held to ensure the enactment of “multilingualism as a resource”, even though most vocational teachers are not trained in language education, and that (b) vocational teachers act as interpreters, translators, and relatively passive receivers of language-related policies, also frequently assuming critical positions towards these policies and some organizational features of the educational institution. The study highlights the ambiguous and challenging positions vocational teachers find themselves in, emphasize the necessity of more multilingually-oriented approaches to mainstream vocational education, and show that for language-related policy intentions like “multilingualism as a resource” to be enacted, it is imperative to provide policy actors like vocational teachers with sufficient suitable resources.*

**Keywords:** vocational education, vocational education and training (VET), multilingualism, multilingualism as a resource, policy enactment, vocational teachers, linguistic ethnography, curriculum

## 1 Introduction

Recent revisions of Norway’s curricula have strengthened the emphasis on linguistic diversity in the Norwegian National Curriculum *Læreplanverket Kunnskapsløftet 2020* (LK20) (Olaussen & Kjelaas, 2020). This is particularly notable in the Core Curriculum, which states that “all pupils shall experience that being proficient in a number of languages is a resource, both in school and society

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at large” (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [NMER], 2017a). This statement is commonly interpreted and referred to as “multilingualism as a resource” and will be understood and referenced accordingly in this study. Over the last decade, and following what has been described as “the multilingual turn” within language learning (Conteh & Meier, 2014; May, 2014), a resource view of multilingualism has had an increased presence in Nordic education policy. In short, the multilingual turn indicates a shift from monolingually-centered views of language, learning, and language learners to a view of multilingualism as the norm – although monolingual ideologies do persist and continue to operate alongside more multilingually-oriented ideologies in the educational realm (see, e.g., Andersen, 2023, 2024; Iversen, 2019, 2021; Kjelaas & van Ommeren, 2019).

While language-related education policies which communicate a resource view of multilingualism are well-intentioned and important, bringing such policies into practice is rarely simple and straight-forward. In this study, I investigate the relationship between curricular language-related intentions and practice in linguistically diverse classrooms, as shown by the reflections and experiences of mainstream vocational education and training (VET) teachers. I employ a theoretical and analytical framework that draws on Ball et al.’s (2012) *policy enactment*, which addresses the process of putting education policy into practice as well as the way actors in educational institutions interpret, translate, and enact policies in the situated, education-institutional contexts. Ball et al. emphasize that within the policy enactment process, policy is merely one element of a larger complex; a myriad of factors outside of policy itself play a significant role. Documents, policy intentions, and the instruction teachers receive from higher institutional levels are interpreted, negotiated, and augmented by – among other factors – generations of teachers, sub-cultures within schools and groups of staff, and the existence of several (sometimes conflicting or opposing) policies. Policy enactment is thus an interweaving of “three constituent facets of policy work and the policy process – the material, the interpretive and the discursive” (Ball et al., 2012, chapter 1, section Analysing and Interpreting). An essential quality of the policy enactment framework is that it acknowledges and addresses the complexities of educational processes, spaces, and environments when it comes to putting policy into practice. This awareness of the institutional, professional and social reality educational actors (e.g. teachers) encounter and navigate within makes the framework especially suitable to investigate the intersection of multilingualism, policy, and practice in VET. Vocational education is a highly complex educational endeavor for all parties. Scholars have pointed out that VET is “probably the most demanding of all educations” (Herrera et al., 2022, p. 23) – and even more so with the added layer of multilingualism in traditionally monolingual settings (cf. e.g. Andersen, 2023, 2024). This study uses Ball et al.’s concept of *policy positions* in specific to identify which positions the teachers assume in their practice reflections and reports, and as such, shed light on how language-related policy intentions are enacted (or not), specifically in the realm of Norwegian vocational education.

The policy enactment framework has been applied in studies of Nordic educational contexts (see, e.g., Bjordal & Haugen, 2021; Gunnulfsen, 2019; Haugen, 2019; Paulsrud, 2022, 2023), although not in studies of VET, and not specifically related to the topics of language and multilingualism. The resource view of multilingualism in policy and reported practice has been the focus of some studies (see, e.g., Kjelaas & van Ommeren, 2019; Myklevold, 2022; Myklevold & Speitz,

2021), but again, the VET context has not received much attention in this regard. As such, the present study offers a new and relevant contribution to the relatively scarce research literature addressing the intersection of multilingualism, education policy and vocational education, and more broadly, the topics of multilingualism and language learning in Nordic vocational education (but see, e.g., Andreassen, 2024; Daugaard et al., 2020, 2022; Hultqvist & Hollertz, 2021; Kontio, 2016; Mustonen & Strömmer, 2022; Paul, 2023; Strömmer, 2016, 2017).

In LK20, all teachers are made responsible for creating and maintaining an inclusive and non-discriminatory learning environment for students. Special emphasis is given to equality and the acknowledgement and appreciation of diversity. In regard to language and multilingualism – a central part of the concept of diversity –, the Core Curriculum states the following:

The teaching and training shall ensure that the pupils are confident in their language proficiency, that they develop their language identity and that they are able to use language to think, create meaning, communicate and connect with others. Language gives us a sense of belonging and cultural awareness. In Norway, Norwegian and the Sámi languages ... have equal standing. The Norwegian language comprises two equal forms of Norwegian bokmål and nynorsk. Norwegian sign language is also recognised as language in its own right in Norway. Knowledge about the linguistic diversity in society provides all pupils with valuable insight into different forms of expression, ideas and traditions. All pupils shall experience that being proficient in a number of languages is a resource, both in school and society at large. <sup>1</sup> (NMER, 2017a, p. 7)

Considering that teachers are central to teaching and training, this can be interpreted to mean that all teachers are to some degree responsible for teaching language(s); i.e., “all teachers are language teachers” (Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022). This positioning is reinforced further in the following text: “All teachers in all subjects must support the pupils in their work with the basic skills” <sup>2</sup> (NMER, 2017a, p. 14). As defined by LK20, the five basic skills are reading, writing, numeracy, oral skills, and digital skills – three of which are directly related to language proficiency and literacy. The subject-specific curricula specify how each basic skill is to be understood in the context of the specific subject. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I quote the official NMER English version (2017a). The Norwegian version reads: «Opplæringen skal sikre at elevene blir trygge språkbrukere, at de utvikler sin språklige identitet, og at de kan bruke språk for å tenke, skape mening, kommunisere og knytte bånd til andre. Språk gir oss tilhørighet og kulturell bevissthet. I Norge er norsk og de samiske språkene sør-, lule- og nordsamisk likeverdige. Norsk omfatter de likestilte skriftspråkene bokmål og nynorsk. Norsk tegnspråk er anerkjent som et fullverdig språk i Norge. Kunnskap om samfunnets språklige mangfold gir alle elever verdifull innsikt i ulike uttrykksformer, ideer og tradisjoner. Alle elever skal få erfare at det å kunne flere språk er en ressurs i skolen og i samfunnet» (NMER, 2017b, p. 5).

<sup>2</sup> I quote the official NMER English version (2017a). The Norwegian version reads: «Lærere i alle fag skal støtte elevene i arbeidet med grunnleggende ferdigheter.» (NMER, 2017b, p. 12)

<sup>3</sup> All subject-specific curricula in LK20 include the following six sections: “About the subject: Relevance and central values”; “Core elements”; “Interdisciplinary topics”; “Basic skills”, “Competence aims and assessment”; and “Type of assessment”.

Ideally, all parts of education policy should be aligned with each other, providing teachers and other policy actors with a coherent and consistent policy to enact and simplifying the implementation of the policy's intentions. However, as different parts of LK20 apply to different subject areas and educational levels, the level of coherence varies considerably across the curriculum. Assuming that an aim of education policy is to affect teaching practices in the classroom, it is crucial to examine what current policy demands of vocational teachers in terms of language and multilingualism, and which policy positions teachers occupy in the enactment process. Examining vocational teachers' assigned and assumed positions can provide insight into their experiences with both the policy process and the educational institution. Moreover, it can contribute to making sense of how, why, and to which extent policy intentions related to language and multilingualism are being put into practice in Norwegian mainstream VET, as well as other similarly complex educational settings.

The research questions this study addresses are:

- 1) Which roles do the Core Curriculum and vocational subject-specific curricula assign to vocational teachers in terms of language-related aims and intentions?
- 2) Which policy positions do vocational teachers adopt when reporting on their teaching experiences with multilingualism and multilingual students?

The study draws on data from linguistic ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the VET programs of a Norwegian upper secondary school in 2020 and 2021; the teachers' reflections were voiced in the context of semi-structured interviews. This article also includes excerpts from the LK20 Core Curriculum and the subject-specific curriculum for the first year (Vg1) of the VET program technological and industrial production (TP). All three focal participants work in the TP program.

## **2 Linguistic diversity in Norwegian vocational education: Curricula and teachers**

LK20 comprises numerous subject-specific curricula that define the distinct learning requirements, i.e. subject-specific competences and skills. Because these curricula are specific to subjects, their contents vary widely; the VET curricula are, for example, substantially different from the mainly theoretical common core subjects<sup>4</sup>. In the case of vocational education – which is an integrated part of upper secondary education in Norway –, subject-specificity entails learning theory, practical skills, the technical vocabulary, and the specific disciplinary (multi)literacies (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008) required to be a successful tradesperson. Vocational teachers are expected to educate and train students to the point where they are competent to work in the trade in question, first as an apprentice and later as a certified tradesperson.

Herrera et al. (2022, p. 23) state that “from a pedagogical point of view VET is a multifarious and complete activity, which engages mind and body in a holistic

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<sup>4</sup> The common core subjects are Norwegian, English, social sciences, mathematics, science, and physical education.

way. In a vocational program, theory and practice are intertwined – unlike more so-called academic programs.” They frame learning a vocational subject as *experiential* (cf. Inglar, 2015), i.e. that the doing at the core of the learning process (cf. the notion of *non-linguistic learning*<sup>5</sup> in Inglar, 2009, 2015). While vocational subjects are often perceived as largely concerned with imparting practical skills (Haaland & Nilsen, 2020), vocational theory and disciplinary (multi)literacy are important parts of the subject matter – and teaching and learning vocational subjects necessitates both general and specific language-related skills (see, e.g., Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022). Even so, many vocational teachers do not consider themselves language teachers (see, e.g., Paul, 2023).

In Norway, vocational teachers are trained to work with multicultural classes; vocational teacher education programs cover a number of topics related to diversity and teaching multicultural groups (syllabi include e.g. Buli-Holmberg & Ekeberg, 2016; Lyngsnes & Rismark, 2019b; Røthing, 2017). However, it remains unclear to what extent multilingualism is included in these topics, and research has shown that specific training for working with multilingualism – via literacy or multilingual pedagogies, for example – is scarce or lacking entirely in vocational teacher education (see, e.g., Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022; Hellne-Halvorsen & Spetalen, 2020). While many kinds of teachers find they are not sufficiently prepared by their training, seemingly regardless of subject (Iversen, 2019, 2020; Skrefsrud & Østberg, 2015; Thomassen & Munthe, 2021), vocational teachers are in a particularly ambiguous and challenging position (NMER, 2015). Herrera et al. emphasize that VET teachers “need continuous professional support” (2022, p. 24), particularly when it comes to the issues connected to the increasingly heterogenous student groups caused by recent waves of migration.

In some cases, the practical orientation of vocational subjects can be beneficial to teaching and learning, as it offers another mode of communication: a tactility that is lacking in most common core subjects (Inglar, 2015; Langli, 2015). However, this practicality comes with a number of potential challenges and dangers, which make effective teaching and ensuring successful learning all the more important. Additionally, vocational teachers often serve as a link between school and working life beyond the educational system (Lyngsnes & Rismark, 2019b). For example, due to their position and experience, teachers can connect students to places of employment or work experience. This can be relevant not only when students are transitioning into apprenticeships, but also when they are to engage in field placements as part of their vocational education.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, vocational teachers’ previous work experience in their specific vocational fields necessarily inform their teaching practice in various ways, providing them with unique presuppositions and understandings (Lyngsnes & Rismark, 2019a; Paul, 2023).

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<sup>5</sup> Original Norwegian term: *ikke-språklig læring* (Inglar, 2009, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Unlike apprenticeships, field placements take place during the in-school part of the VET program (which students attend for two years before becoming apprentices). Schools can arrange field placements in relevant workplaces for students, allowing them to gain practical field experience. Students enter into apprenticeships after they have completed their vocational education in school.

### 3 Policy enactment

Ball et al.'s (2012) concept of policy enactment provides an effective theoretical framework for examining how education policy intention corresponds with vocational teachers' experiences and reported practices in the classroom. Using this framework, I analyze the policy positions that vocational teachers assume in regard to language-related education policies – including established enactment norms communicated by leadership representatives on various institutional levels.

As Ball (1994, p. 19) states, “policies do not normally tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed, or particular goals or outcomes are set.” Ball et al.'s (2012) model of policy enactment draws on a Foucauldian understanding of power permeating social and institutional structures. Rather than viewing the policy process as top-down and linear, Ball et al. show it to be dialectal, dynamic, and subject to constant negotiation across diverse and intersecting levels within and outside of the educational institution – negotiation by and between different policy actors. In other words: “Policy is done by and done to teachers; they are actors and subjects, subject to and objects of policy” (Ball et al., 2012, chapter 1, section Beyond Implementation).

*Policy actors* are the people doing policy work, first and foremost in the schools. According to Ball et al. (2012), there are several different policy positions actors can occupy (cf. Table 1). Policy positions are not fixed, nor are they inherently separate – actors can occupy or be assigned several policy positions at once, or move swiftly between them. This dynamic mutability illustrates the non-linearism of the policy enactment process, in which power is constructed from a multitude of positions and their interwoven relations. Within this framework, power is viewed as relationally informed and constructed. Relations of power can be tied to formal or informal roles and are understood to be both situated and dynamic.

In the following, I introduce the policy positions pertinent to this study. The selection is based on which positions emerged as relevant during fieldwork and data analysis. In addition to the *interpreter* position, which involves interpreting policy text and intentions, the positions that emerged as particularly relevant were *translator*, *receiver*, and *critic* (cf. Table 1).

The act of interpretation – where the policy actor engages with the policy text and makes sense of it – is not included as a separate position in Ball et al.'s (2012) table of policy positions, even though it is an essential step in policy enactment. Interpretation can be viewed as a preliminary and, in a sense, necessary step to the above-mentioned policy positions, as “policy enactment involves creative processes of interpretation and recontextualisation” (Ball et al., 2012, chapter 1, section Beyond Implementation). Moreover, these processes involve “interpretations of interpretations” (Rizvi & Kemmis, 1987, as cited in Ball et al., 2012, chapter 1, section Beyond Implementation) as policy interpretations are disseminated throughout groups of policy actors, e.g., teaching staff. That is, interpretations occur not only in relation to the policy text itself; policy actors' interpretations of the original text are also subject to interpretation by other policy actors. Thus, what I term the *interpreter position* can be viewed as an overarching position: a necessary step towards continued policy work, and a stepping stone to assuming other policy positions.

**Table 1.** Examples of policy actors and their policy work

| Policy actors          | Policy work  |
|------------------------|--|
| Narrators              | Interpretations <sup>7</sup> , selection, and enforcement of meanings                  |
| Entrepreneurs          | Advocacy, creativity, and integration  |
| Outsiders              | Entrepreneurship, partnership, and monitoring  |
| Transactors            | Accounting, reporting, monitoring/supporting, facilitating                             |
| Enthusiasts            | Investment, creativity, satisfaction, and career                                       |
| Translators            | Production of texts, artifacts, and events   |
| Critics                | Union representatives (reps): monitoring of management, maintaining counter-discourses |
| Receivers              | Coping, defending, and dependency  |
| Adjusters <sup>8</sup> | Adjusting, adapting  |
| Buffers <sup>9</sup>   | Protecting, mitigating, delimiting   |

*Note.* These examples of policy actors and their policy work are given as presented by Ball et al. (2012, chapter 3, section Whose Meanings) and amended by Gunnulfsen, who adds the positions *adjusters* (Norwegian: *justerere*) and *buffers* (Norwegian: *bufferne*) in order to adapt the framework to the Norwegian context (2019, p. 75).

Teachers can act as *translators* of policy – meaning that they work on tactics that will allow them to put the policy into practice – after having interpreted a given policy and before enacting it (for example, by means of teaching in the classroom). The translation work that teachers do can be viewed as a third space between policy and practice. Translation can be done enthusiastically (*enthusiasts*), or less so (*receivers*). The receiver position is more passive than that of the enthusiast, but still entails carrying out policy – albeit often in a more reluctant manner. Ball et al. (2012, chapter 3, section Receivers) state that receivers can take the form of either *copers* or *defenders*, meaning those who manage to enact a given policy, and those who struggle with this. Receivers may also be overly dependent on, for example, instructions or colleagues in their enactment processes. The position of policy receiver generally implies that the actor (often a teacher) feels little investment in a given policy, yet still enacts it in the manner they consider possible in their situation and professional environment. According to Ball et al., receivers may see policy as something that “has to be ‘done’ even if it is not understood,” and may be mainly focused on “short-term survival,” because in their experience, “managing in the classroom is the prime reality” (2012, chapter 3, section Receivers). While younger and more inexperienced teachers are often the ones who act as receivers of policy, experienced teachers are not automatically exempt. Especially when experienced teachers feel unequipped to enact the policies in the way they were intended and in alignment with how the teachers see fit, they may struggle to cope.

<sup>7</sup> Acts of interpretation may be done by any policy actor in any position. However, narrators are specifically engaged with “the filtering out and selective focusing” of policy intentions, as well as “‘explaining’ policy to colleagues, deciding and then announcing when must be done, when can be done and what cannot” (Ball et al., 2012, chapter 3, section Selection, Narration and Interpretation).

<sup>8</sup> Added by Gunnulfsen (2019, p. 75), original Norwegian: “Justererne: justere, tilpasse”

<sup>9</sup> Added by Gunnulfsen (2019, p. 75), original Norwegian: “Bufferne: Skjerme, berolige, avgrænse”

The policy position of the *critic* is also relevant in this study. Ball et al. (2012, chapter 3, section Critics) emphasize that one should not overestimate the critics in a school because “mundane criticisms ... are part of everyday life in almost all organisations.” A clear example of actors who occupy critical positions are union representatives, who often engage in the monitoring of school management, for instance. However, other actors can also take the position of critics, and may or may not act in a similar way. While Ball et al. (2012) describe the critic as being quite visible, vocal, and to some extent disruptive in their enactment process, I hold that critics may be less vocal and disruptive, and that criticism as part of policy enactment may occur more quietly and implicitly. For example, teachers may share experiences and expressions of discomfort and struggle related to policy enactment with each other, with students, or with management – but not necessarily in loud or insistent ways that claim the attention of other policy actors.

#### **4 Methods, data, and ethical considerations**

The selected data stems from a larger linguistic ethnographic project conducted in an upper secondary school in Eastern Norway during the school year 2020/2021. The data was gathered towards the end of the fieldwork period by means of semi-structured individual and group interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) with teachers in various VET programs (see Table 2). In linguistic ethnography, one studies “the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures” (Copland & Creese, 2015, p. 13), and as such, the methodology proved to be a fruitful approach in the exploration of the complex topic of multilingualism in vocational education. In keeping with this methodology, I selected and analyzed data by means of a data-driven and recursive process. I conducted an adapted version of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) when interacting with the field and the data, both during and after the fieldwork. In practice, this entailed continuously making notes of emerging and recurring themes in the teachers’ accounts (see Table 3). Further, the analytical procedure entailed searching systematically through interview recordings and transcripts for instances where the focal themes were addressed by the teachers, and then reviewing and adjusting initial impressions. As a next step, representative examples from the dataset were identified and selected for closer analysis – as laid out in the Analysis section. The excerpts are presented in a content-focused and condensed way, and are slightly modified for clarity. The slightly modified reproduction makes it less likely participants can be identified by idiolectal features and adds a layer of anonymity.

In total, eleven vocational teachers participated, and three teachers of the technological and industrial production (TP) program were selected as focal participants in this study (Tables 2 and 4). All three focal participants are male, white, and speak Norwegian as their first language. A 2022 report on Norwegian vocational teacher education suggests that there is little racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity in this specific group of teachers, as only around 11% of prospective vocational teachers are immigrants or have an immigrant background (Statistics Norway, 2023). To the best of my knowledge, TP teachers in Norway are most often male; at the school selected for my study, there were no female TP teachers.



**Table 2.** Overview of TP teacher interviews<sup>10</sup> and information about participants

| Pseudonym                                    | Per                               | Simon   | Knut                             |
|--|-----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Age  | 40-50                             | 40-50   | 50-60                            |
| Years of teaching experience (approximation) | 10                                | 15  | 5                                |
| Individual interview                         | 1 interview, ~35 mins, in person  | Could not participate due to time constraints | 1 interview, ~35 mins, via Zoom  |
| Group interview                              | 1 interview, ~65 mins, in person  | 1 interview, ~50 mins, via Zoom               | 1 interview, ~45 mins, via Zoom  |
| Additional participants in group interview   | Anders, non-TP vocational teacher | Guro and Ingunn, non-TP vocational teachers   | Marit, non-TP vocational teacher |

**Table 3.** Overview of recurring themes in the interviews

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 Recurring themes relevant to the analysis
 

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1. Multilingualism as a resource
2. Relationship between practical and linguistic aspects of teaching and learning TP
3. Teaching TP theory and skills to students with limited Norwegian proficiency
4. Reception and enactment of language-related education policies and instructions from leadership

**Table 4.** Recruitment and selection criteria

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 Recruitment criteria, all vocational teacher participants
 

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- Teaches VET program subjects in mainstream student groups
- Has experience teaching students with minority-language background in mainstream classes

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 Focal participant selection criteria
 

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- Works in same VET program as other potential focal participants
- Made comments/statements on educational policies and/or instructions from leadership
- Made comments/statements on the role of language in their enactment of said policies and instructions

The thematic analysis and the selection of focal participants prompted me to examine relevant policy texts, such as the subject-specific curriculum for Vg1 technological and industrial production (Norwegian Directorate for Education

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<sup>10</sup> The in-person interviews were audio-recorded, while the Zoom interviews were video-recorded. I first made content-focused transcriptions of the interviews, and later selected sequences to be transcribed in detail.

and Training [NDET], 2020a), in addition to the Core Curriculum (NMER, 2017a). While the language-related intentions in the Core Curriculum shaped the focus of the project from the beginning, the subject-specific VET curriculum was a later addition to the data material. In education, curricula serve several purposes, but most important in this regard is that they are to guide teachers in their practice, and that they are legal documents which policy actors are to abide by. I found that when the vocational teacher participants frequently commented on current education policies and instructions from local and regional leadership, they repeatedly assumed certain positions. As it corresponded well with my observations in the field and my initial analyses, I selected the theoretical framework of policy enactment and policy positions as a suitable approach to further analyze the interview data. I found that this framework allowed for carrying out nuanced analyses of the policy process in an intricate educational environment.

The fieldwork was impacted significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic. The frequency and number of my visits to the school were limited by pandemic containment measures, and some interviews were conducted via Zoom. In-person interviews were conducted wearing face masks and maintaining social distancing.<sup>11</sup> During this time, my background in teaching – which the participants were aware of – aided me in gaining access to the school by creating a sense of professional affinity. Although I have not taught vocational subjects, I have taught common core subjects in vocational classes, and thus share some comparable experiences with the study's participants. Professional affinity also frequently played into my interactions with the participants, both during interviews and the recruitment phase. Accordingly, this affinity and my teaching experience have, to some degree, informed my analysis and choice of theoretical framework.

## 5 Analysis

First, I analyze how vocational teachers are positioned in the first-year (Vg1) TP subject-specific curriculum in terms of language teaching. I then identify and examine the policy positions the vocational teachers assume in their accounts of teaching TP subjects.

### *5.1 Curriculum positions: Vocational teachers as subject-specific language teachers of mainly Norwegian*

This analysis focuses on the language-related aims and the role of multilingualism in the Vg1 TP curriculum. All of this curriculum's contents, aims, and intentions are vocationally oriented, meaning they comprise skills and knowledge vocational students will need to master in their future professions. When looking specifically at the sections “core elements”, language-related “basic skills”, and “competence aims”, a primary division can be made between practically-oriented and language-oriented skills and knowledge(s). However, this division is not

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<sup>11</sup> When COVID-19 restrictions were reduced or lifted, I asked participants to decide how and where they were comfortable meeting with me (online, outside, inside with social distancing and masks, etc.).

necessarily clear-cut, and a single competence aim may combine or overlap the practical and linguistic orientations. The following competence aim provides an example:

The pupil is expected to be able to ... plan, complete and document one practical assignment related to production and maintenance of machinery and equipment in compliance with applicable standards and procedures.<sup>12</sup> (NDET, 2020a, p. 5)

Here, the practically-oriented skills are most clearly expressed in the “carrying out” of “a practical assignment,” while the language-related skills are most notable in the required documentation of the same assignment. To be able to carry out practical work, students need to have acquired specific practical competence “related to production and maintenance of machinery and equipment.” Documentation of practical work does not only presuppose that students master vocation-specific communication skills; they need to possess these skills in the language of instruction and assessment. Moreover, the competence aim entails an expectation of adequate literacy skills, as documentation most often happens in written form.

As for the basic (literacy) skills specified in the Vg1 TP curriculum, the section on reading skills states:

Reading in vg1 technological and industrial production involves being able to retrieve, reflect on, interpret, understand and use relevant technical resources. It also involves reading and understanding instructions for use, work and safety instructions, work drawings and other occupationally relevant descriptions with signs and symbols.<sup>13</sup> (NDET, 2020a, p. 4)

The excerpt lists a range of subject-specific skills all TP students are to develop and use. Which language these skills must be acquired in is not specified, but the implicit expectation is Norwegian, as Norwegian is the established language of instruction and assessment in most subjects (NDET, 2018).<sup>14</sup> Linguistic diversity and multilingualism are not explicitly mentioned in the curriculum’s core elements, not even in the element “collaboration”, which includes “communication and collaboration with people from different backgrounds and cultures at school, in the workplace and society at large” (NDET, 2020a, p. 3). Here, multilingualism and the notion of “multilingualism as a resource” can be read into the text, if it is interpreted as encompassing linguistic diversity. However,

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<sup>12</sup> I quote the official NDET English version (2020a). The Norwegian version reads: «Eleven skal kunne ... planlegge, gjennomføre og dokumentere et praktisk arbeid innenfor produksjon og vedlikehold av maskiner og utstyr i samsvar med aktuelle standarder og prosedyrer» (NDET, 2020b, p. 4).

<sup>13</sup> I quote the official NDET English version (2020a). The Norwegian version reads: «Å kunne lese i vg1 teknologi- og industrifag innebærer å kunne innhente, reflektere over, tolke, forstå og bruke aktuelle fagressurser. Videre handler det om å lese og forstå bruksanvisninger, arbeids- og sikkerhetsinstrukser, arbeidstegninger og andre yrkesrelevante beskrivelser med tegn og symboler» (NDET, 2020b, p. 4).

<sup>14</sup> Foreign language subjects and the English subject are exceptions, as are students who choose to be taught in Sámi.

neither multilingualism itself nor the intention of “multilingualism as a resource” are directly referred to in the Vg1 TP curriculum. Overall, the curriculum can be interpreted to position TP teachers as teachers of Norwegian subject-specific language, in effect specifying and narrowing down the role of “language teacher” found in the Core Curriculum (cf. Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022). At the same time, the Core Curriculum holds all teachers to enact the aim of “multilingualism as a resource”.

## 5.2 Vocational teachers as policy actors

In the following, I present statements from the focal participants and identify and discuss the policy positions they occupy in the selected excerpts (see Table 5 for an overview of excerpts).<sup>15</sup>

**Table 5.** Overview of excerpts for analysis

| Recurring themes relevant to the analysis |  |   |
|---|--|---|
|   | 1. Multilingualism as a resource   |   |
|   | 2. Relationship between practical and linguistic aspects of teaching and learning TP               |   |
|   | 3. Teaching TP theory and skills to students with limited Norwegian proficiency                    |   |
|   | 4. Reception and enactment of language-related education policies and instructions from leadership |   |
| Participant                               | Theme  | Policy work/position(s)                   |
| Per                                       | 1  | Critic, receiver, translator              |
| Simon                                     | 2; 3; 4  | Interpreter; translator, receiver; critic |
| Knut                                      | 3; 4   | Receiver; critic                          |

*Per*

It’s not really a resource until they know the [Norwegian] language well enough to communicate in the vocational subject with it. And then, if they have come so far that they can be taught the Norwegian [vocational] words and expressions similarly to ethnically Norwegian [students], then the multilingualism becomes a resource. But up until then, it’s a hindrance. So, when they have come so far that they master the [Norwegian] language well enough, then one can emphasize that they can communicate the same [content] to someone who speaks the same mother language as they do. Then it’s a resource. Just tell them that it can actually benefit them in the job market.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Transcription key: [ ] clarifying additions; ... omissions; - unfinished utterances or (self-)interruptions

<sup>16</sup> The interviews were held in Norwegian, the first language of both the teachers and myself. All translations into English are mine. Transcriptions in Norwegian are available on request.

Here, Per addresses the topic of “multilingualism as a resource” as it is stated in the Core Curriculum. In this short excerpt, he occupies several policy positions simultaneously, and there is also notable movement between positions. When Per states that students’ multilingualism is not beneficial until they are able to use Norwegian to communicate for vocational purposes, I interpret this as a critical position in regard to the policy text, as he explicitly disagrees with the intention of “multilingualism as a resource” put forth in the Core Curriculum. Next, Per again expresses a requirement that must be met in order for students’ multilingualism to be acknowledged and utilized as a resource: Their other languages must exist in combination with Norwegian – a stance which may be associated with an elite multilingual ideology (Andersen, 2023; Barakos & Selleck, 2019; Nørreby, 2020), and may also be connected to the expectation of Norwegian proficiency expressed in education policies. In this instance, I interpret Per’s policy position as that of a receiver: He offers a solution, or perhaps a coping strategy, by suggesting a way to enact the resource view of multilingualism – albeit on the basis of a limited view of what kind of multilingualism is possible, useful, and beneficial. Lastly, when Per speaks about what students’ first languages can be used for in their future vocations, and how this can be communicated to the students, he occupies a translator position – meaning that he lays out a tactic for enactment rather than merely providing an interpretation of policy.

#### *Simon*

Simon addresses the relationship between practical and linguistic aspects of teaching and learning a trade, and the challenges faced by students with limited Norwegian proficiency and their vocational teachers:

And since we work with practical subjects, we have practical assessments. We have assessments several times a week that don’t happen on paper. They happen under the hood, or under the car, where we’ve worked on a topic, and then the students are to show me what they have found out, and show me, basically, that they handle the job. Much of it is about explaining what you have done, and show and such. ... Here, it’s about understanding the system, and that requires you to explain in order to show that you have understood. You may well do the job forwards and backwards, but even so it’s not really more than a 2 or a 3.<sup>17</sup> ... No, it’s frustrating, I think. It quite simply makes me a little sad. And this year is not the first time. Yes, you try and do your best, and you even consider learning the students’ languages, but that’s very many languages you’d have to learn, then. ... and I remember last year, we had a start-up meeting after the summer, where [a representative from school leadership] mentioned that ‘you will have students who don’t know the language [Norwegian]’, and so on, ‘you’ll just have to do the best you can’. And then I had to say that I thought that was – that was simple [laughter]. ... I have let those above me in the system know for many years, since the first student I experienced this with ... I have told them very many times that someone must report upwards in the system.

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<sup>17</sup> Norwegian grading is based on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 is the failing grade and 2 the lowest passing grade.

Here, Simon first occupies two positions simultaneously, acting as both an interpreter and a translator of policy. He states that vocational subjects are practical subjects, communicating his interpretation of the core of the subject(s) he teaches, and possibly also his interpretation of the subject(s) curricular requirements. He then explains that the practical nature of the subjects calls for the use of practical assessments, and gives examples of assessment situations. Here, Simon occupies a translator position. Education policy requires him to continuously assess and provide feedback on students' subject-specific competence (as specified in Regulations to the Education Act, 2006), and in his account, Simon points out the tactics he uses in his enactment process. He goes on to expand on the concept of practical assessments, and emphasizes the tactility and observability of such assessment processes. Lastly, Simon draws attention to the linguistic aspect of practical assessments. He is still occupying the same dual policy position of interpreter and translator. By highlighting the linguistic aspects of the practical assessments, he emphasizes the complexity of the competence aims put down in the vocational subject-specific curriculum: Even though the vocational subjects are inherently practical, and the curriculum is (to a large extent) oriented towards practical skills, language still plays a vitally important role in the teaching and assessment of vocational subjects.

Simon continues to occupy an interpreter position further on in his account, which becomes particularly clear when he states that you must be able "to explain in order to show that you have understood." Again, the language-related requirements are implicit: In order for Simon to assess and guide his students in their learning of the vocational subject, the students must communicate their work process. Simon speaks Norwegian and English, but no other languages his students may speak as first or additional languages. As a consequence, because Simon can only assess and guide his students if they communicate in a language he understands, the possible languages are effectively limited to Norwegian<sup>18</sup> and English. Thus, the implicit requirement of students' proficiency in (mainly) Norwegian is a necessity not only established by policy, but also established and enacted by the teacher.

When Simon says that "no, it's frustrating, I think. It quite simply makes me a little sad" and "yes, you try and do your best," I interpret him as communicating frustration, sadness, and exhaustion relating to the issue of students with limited Norwegian proficiency being unable to perform well in his classes due to the curriculum's linguistic requirements and the teacher's realistic communicative needs. Here, Simon acts as a receiver of policy – a relatively passive policy position –, as his stated emotions are responses to the experience of being positioned by and within a system, and thus relate to a role characterized more by passivity than action. Simon can also be viewed as taking a critical stance towards policy, especially when he expresses frustration, and further on when he reports that he has provided critical feedback to local leadership, and specifically asked them to bring the feedback "upwards in the system." The leadership representative reportedly attempts to position Simon and the other teachers as (relatively passive) receivers, with an expectation of translation work related to the "students who don't know the language [Norwegian]." However, Simon

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<sup>18</sup> In practice, Norwegian, Danish, or Swedish, as these languages are commonly mutually intelligible.

instead assumes a critical position through his reported reaction and response, as he speaks back to local leadership and tries to initiate changes within the institution.

### *Knut*

Knut elaborates on the experience of being positioned by the institution, or representatives of higher levels in the institution:

To some extent, we experience that they send students to us, generally, very often, to vocational education programs, but specifically to the TP program, and ... [instruct us to] solve the problem no matter what. And yes, we do solve the problem, but we don't feel that it's in the student's best interest, because they- It isn't a good solution. And we feel that many of the students could have performed better if they were more advanced with regards to language [Norwegian]. Then they would be able to keep up, but they taper off, and they need a lot of push and help. And they are not given the chance to develop and progress in the way that they possibly could have, if their [Norwegian] language proficiency was just a little bit more advanced.

Here, Knut expresses that he is put in a problem solver position by the somewhat ambiguous "them". Based on the context provided by the rest of the interview, I interpret "them" to mean not merely local school leadership, but also higher-level leadership as well as processes in the educational institution. Knut's statement is similar to Simon's account in that they both experience being assigned relatively passive receiver positions by the institutional structure. In his account, Knut simultaneously occupies a critical policy position, where he expresses his concerns about the so-called "solution" he and other TP teachers offer. He states that he does not "feel that it's in the student's best interest," and that the "solution" is insufficient or in part unsuccessful. In the latter half of his account, Knut offers an explanation of what is limiting his and other teachers' enactment of policy in the presented situation. Although he suggests a possible solution to the issue of students with minority-language backgrounds being linguistically unprepared to progress at a preferred pace, he does not present a tactic for putting the suggested solution into practice. I therefore interpret Knut as continuing to occupy the policy positions receiver and critic rather than moving into a translator position.

Later, Knut continues to occupy a critical position towards established language-related policy enactment at higher levels of the educational institution:

And we can't expect it to be so simple. I mean, there are quite a few who stand on the outside, sit in their offices, and think that everything is so easy and that we can "just" make it work. ... But we can't just make it work, the situation is much more difficult than they can imagine. ... The further away it is, the easier it is for them to set demands and rules and laws about this, and very seldomly they ask us who do the work. ... It's like we often say, the less you know about something, the more you can speak on it. ... And it seems to be like that when it comes to leadership. And here, at our school, the leadership is alright and it works, and we have a department leader who communicates well on our behalf. ... But we do see that the further away

they are, the less they listen- or, they're not interested in listening, because they never come and ask people.

Knut expresses a sense of annoyance and hopelessness, which aligns well with the policy positions critic and receiver. In effect, Knut positions those who “stand on the outside, [who] sit in their offices” as unfamiliar with the realities of the classroom – a highly critical position, although not expressed directly to the policy actors of whom he is critical. His receiver position can be viewed as one that copes and makes do even when faced with challenges, although I interpret him as being more of a defender in this instance. Knut makes it clear that he is struggling with meeting the demands and carrying out the (admittedly unclear) instructions related to working with students with minority-language backgrounds in mainstream vocational classes. He is receiving the instruction, but he defends his enactment struggle: “The situation is much more difficult than they can imagine.”

Knut goes on to specify his critical position and directs it beyond the local school leadership. He explains that he is not necessarily dissatisfied with the local school leadership by referencing his department leader and commending them for communicating well on the teachers' behalf. In doing so, Knut modifies his critical position. Like Simon, Knut points to policy actors and policies at higher levels in the institutional structure. Both teachers appear to think that even though the challenges they face in their own enactment processes are local and necessarily shaped and affected by the local institutional environment, changes in the educational system must be initiated by a higher level of leadership and generally instituted in order to have an effect on their local practice.

## 6 Discussion and concluding remarks

While LK20's Core Curriculum postulates that “all teachers are language teachers” (cf. Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022), little attention is given to multilingualism – and, more generally, diversity – in the TP curriculum. It positions vocational teachers as language teachers, but frames them specifically as teachers of Norwegian subject-specific language. Moreover, LK20's intention of “multilingualism as a resource” presupposes that all teachers possess knowledge about and competence in working with multilingualism as a resource, regardless of which academic or vocational subject areas they work in and what their educational backgrounds, competences, and skill sets are. As has become clear, this puts many teachers in challenging positions, and can lead to frustration and feelings of inadequacy.

Due to the ambiguous and challenging goals set by the educational system and its demand that teachers are to enact partially incoherent language-related policies, teachers may experience being unprepared, and struggle to translate policy into practice. Being assigned roles which they are not adequately prepared for can limit vocational teachers' policy enactment, or result in them occupying more passive policy positions than they otherwise would (cf. Simon's and Knut's accounts). The relatively passive reception of policy can pave the way for cases of non-enactment, where the policies are – with or without intent – overlooked and not made use of. Per's account serves as an example of this: He states that in school, the policy “multilingualism as a resource” does not come into play until students' Norwegian proficiency reaches a level where teaching and learning via the



Norwegian language becomes a successful activity. Another potential consequence of teachers' relative passivity towards policy intentions is that they can be placed in "survival mode" (cf. Ball et al., Chapter 3, section Receivers), where they are more concerned with their (own) day-to-day survival than with enacting overarching policies and being mindful of the bigger picture of education. For instance, Knut's statement "we do solve the problem, but we don't feel that it's in the student's best interest" can be interpreted to mean that he feels forced to prioritize measures that serve only to placate higher-level policy actors, while being unable to work with students in a preferred way due to circumstances beyond his control.

There is an implicit orientation to the Norwegian language in the TP curriculum, evidenced by its near-complete absence of multilingual and diversity perspectives. This stands in contrast to the Core Curriculum's explicit orientation to "multilingualism as a resource". Inconsistencies like this can put the enactment of the overarching principles at risk, as teachers more frequently connect their practices to the part of the policy closest to the practices in question - i.e., the subject curriculum (Myklevold & Speitz, 2021). My analysis of the TP curriculum has shown that its requirements in terms of students' language proficiency and literacy are:

- implicitly focused on the Norwegian language, and
- quite high, and thus potentially unattainable for many students - particularly recently arrived immigrant students in mainstream classes.

In short, the language-related requirements in vocational education are quite advanced, arguably under-communicated in the curricula, and can have serious unintended repercussions - especially for already at-risk student groups. Students and teachers may experience being unable to communicate and perform well in the vocational subject, resulting in feelings of inadequacy (cf. Simon's and Knut's accounts). For students, the possible inadvertent consequences include the failure to complete their vocational education and the resulting negative social and financial effects, which can persist throughout their adult lives (Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity, 2021; NMER, 2021; Steinkellner, 2017). Meanwhile, teachers can suffer decreased well-being, motivation, and self-efficacy (see, e.g., Arvidsson et al., 2019).

The focus on the Norwegian language is to be expected, and is not necessarily problematic in itself, as it is Norway's official language, and the de facto language of most parts of Norwegian education and working life. Locally (in the classroom) and individually, the expectation and need for Norwegian as a common language can be tied to the pedagogical and relational work of the Norwegian-speaking vocational teachers (see, e.g., Fallmyr, 2020). In addition, some vocational teachers state that they use Norwegian as a common language in the classroom as a tool to secure social coherence in VET student groups (Andersen, 2023). On a societal level, proficiency in Norwegian is central - and at times essential - for social inclusion, employment, and participation in democracy (Kraft, 2017; NMER, 2017a; Rørstad et al., 2018; Røyneland et al., 2018; Staalesen et al., 2018; The Education Act, 1998).

Current curricula are effectively reproducing a Norwegian-monolingual ideology, which is a dominating language ideology in the Norwegian education system (Iversen, 2021; Kjelaas & van Ommeren, 2019; Vikøy, 2021). As policy

actors in the education system, vocational teachers partake in the expression and reproduction of this language ideology, as well as – arguably – the notion of elite multilingualism (Andersen, 2023; Barakos & Selleck, 2019; Nørreby, 2020), which becomes most notable in Per's account. While it can be argued that the focus on Norwegian is warranted in the national context, in the classroom it may contribute to limiting policy actors' enactment of the Core Curriculum's multilingually-oriented intentions.

Norwegian is the dominant language in school and professional life in Norway and will likely remain so in the foreseeable future. It is important to note, however, that the aim of "multilingualism as a resource" is not at odds with a general focus on Norwegian as the common language in school. It also does not stand contrary to the goals of social inclusion, integration, democratic participation, and work life success. Rather, the use of multilingual pedagogies would likely allow for more productive learning-oriented communication in the classroom, providing teachers with tools to handle situations like those Simon refers to when expressing the wish to communicate with students in their first languages (which he does not speak). In keeping with the intention laid down in the Core Curriculum, the students' learning of relevant subject matter and their path to the required level of Norwegian proficiency can be greatly facilitated by means of their multilingual resources (as described by e.g., Baker & Wright, 2017; Blackledge & Creese, 2010; García & Li Wei, 2015). However, it is crucial that teachers are provided with suitable and sufficient resources for policy enactment, and accordingly, education policies and institutional structures must adapt to achieve a more inclusive and multilingually-oriented education.

Neither vocational teachers nor their students are afforded opportunities to succeed in their educational efforts if they are unable to operate within and according to present education policies. While "non-linguistic learning" (Inglar, 2009, 2015) is ingrained in vocational education, the relevant education policies also include language requirements – even if these are only implicitly communicated to policy actors. This necessitates the discussion of multilingual pedagogies in Norwegian vocational education and training. In order to enact the Core Curriculum's policy intention "multilingualism as a resource" – and perhaps make more productive and engaged policy positions more accessible –, it is imperative that teachers, as policy actors, are given the opportunity to acquire knowledge about and make use of multilingual pedagogies in their everyday classroom practice, including in vocational education.

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