

# A STUDY ENGLISH TEACHER UNDERSTANDING IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL

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**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 Karnataka.

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.

**Keywords:** English as a school subject, core aims, teacher cognition, lower secondary school, Karnataka.

## 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).

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 Karnataka. 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 Karnataka. 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.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- 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.

## CONTEXT OF STUDY

As in many countries, the status of English in Karnataka 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).

Illustrating this dynamism, a special issue of *Acta Didacticala* 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. 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.

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.

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 Karen	<1 2.5	Social studies and foreign language (FL) Social studies and Norwegian
B	Low multilingualism “West”	Anja Sigrid	10 16	FL, Religion-Philosophies of Life-Ethics (RLE), and social studies Foreign language (FL)
C	Intermediate multilingualism “East”	Silje Caroline	2 5	Music Social studies and RLE
D	Intermediate multilingualism “East”	Hanne Kåre	27 31	RLE Social studies
E	High multilingualism “East”	Tove Mattias	28 11	Social studies Social studies and RLE
F	High multilingualism “East”	Mina Hans	2 5	RLE Social studies and Norwegian

## PROCEDURE

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).

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

## 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 Karnataka States. 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 Karnataka, and other countries. This knowledge was described as important for learning about the world, as well as understanding changes within Karnataka. 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 Karnataka is expected:

- You're expected to know (that) Karnataka 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 prerequisite 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 Karnataka states, "If you (are) not (able to use English), you can't follow the discussion." In exploring the role of language within this frame, 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.

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, Karnataka 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:

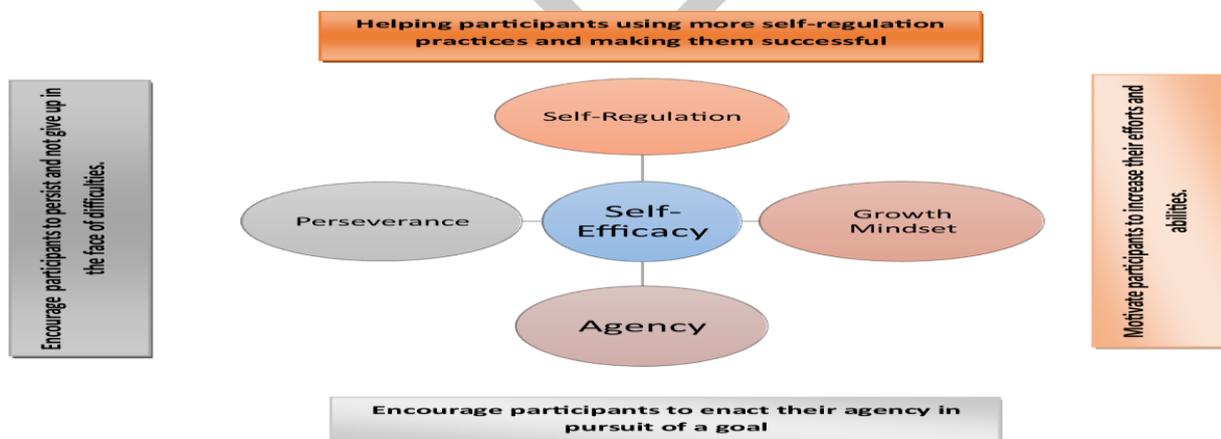
- Wants to achieve more, to be able to communicate in an almost philosophical manner with people from all over the world. They see the world as such as their audience. As someone that they need to speak to.

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”.

**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 fore grounded 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 backgrounder 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.

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 modeled 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).

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).

### 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, do 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.

"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.

### 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

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 21st 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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