



Category-Bound Rights and Obligations of Young EFL Learners in Denmark: The Case of (Extreme) Differentiation

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates if and how primary school teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) to young learners in Denmark interact in everyday classroom interaction with students who - according to a receptive vocabulary test - differ vastly in their English skills. Using Conversation Analysis, the study looks at how students present themselves in terms of claimed and demonstrated proficiency, epistemic displays, and willingness to participate, and at teachers' methods to engage in interactions with these children, for example when they select them as next speakers. The analysis focuses on how the categories "strong" and "weak student" are co-constructed by both the teacher, the student in question, and their classmates. It seems that membership in one of these groups is written in stone, as students are not given many opportunities to be reassessed, even though continuous assessment is a prerequisite for successful differentiation. The analysis of EFL teachers' practices of doing differentiation in teaching-in-interaction of Young Learners of EFL in Denmark contributes to our understanding of differentiation in language classrooms.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, differentiated instruction, Young Learners, EFL, Denmark

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, many European countries have started to lower the starting age for foreign language instruction (Enever, 2011). As part of the 2014 school reform, Denmark as well lowered the onset age for English classes from 3rd to 1st grade. The present study is part of the "The younger, the better?"-project that compares the learning trajectories of Danish students who were introduced to English in the 1st grade with students who were introduced to English in the 3rd grade (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2017). The children have been tested in terms of quantitatively measurable English proficiency and classroom interaction has been observed for two years now. The larger project (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2017) is interested in comparing the rate of learning and short-term L2 proficiency of the two groups of children, and data has been collected by the research team for research purposes. The proficiency test data has not been shared with the teachers. Prior to being tested for the first time using the receptive vocabulary test PPVT-4 (Dunn & Dunn, 2007), they had only had up to a few months of English as a foreign language (EFL) classes, and there were very large differences in receptive EFL proficiency scores between individual students in the same classrooms. While some of the explanations for this most likely derive from the children's use of English media at home (see also Hannibal Jensen 2017, forthc.), classroom observations generally reveal that teachers interact differently with different students. The purpose of this study is to describe these differences and to explore the extent to which this is related to the students' proficiency levels.

To achieve this, the study investigates how teachers interact in everyday classroom interaction with students who - according to a receptive vocabulary test - differ vastly in their English skills. The data come from 14 lessons from four focal classrooms, all four of which have a high number of students whose scores are among the highest or lowest out of all 264 students. These lessons are all set in the second semester of the first year of EFL lessons, i.e. at a time where teachers might already have noticed differences between individual students. Using multimodal conversation analysis, this study investigates how the high- and low-scoring students present

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themselves in terms of claimed and demonstrated knowledge, epistemic displays, and willingness to participate, and how their respective teachers orient to these. This study also looks at the teachers' methods to engage in interactions with these children, for example when they select them as next speakers.

I consider this co-construction of the categories “strong” and “weak” student as differentiation of teaching-in-interaction. Differentiated instruction is a way of teaching that acknowledges and caters to individual learner differences, such as “readiness, interest, and preferred approaches to learning” (Tomlinson, 2014, p. 5). Tomlinson and Moon (2013a) list four classroom factors through which teachers can do differentiation: differentiation of content, differentiation of process, differentiation of product, and differentiation of environment. While learning outcomes in differentiated classrooms are usually the same for all students - as they are defined by a standardized curriculum in many places - the ways individual students reach and demonstrate the achievement of these goals (i.e. content, process, product, and environment) can be individualized (Tomlinson & Moon, 2013b). While in practice this often means giving different tasks to different students, or allowing students more time to complete a test, this kind of differentiation is not found in the data.

1.1. Differentiated teaching in Denmark

The present paper is part of a larger project on early foreign language teaching and learning in Denmark (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2017). The project follows 264 students belonging to one of two groups, one with start of English lessons in 1st grade, the other in 3rd grade, in their respective first two years of learning English. These students in the project are from four public and two private schools. In Denmark, differences between public and private schools are not very large. For the purposes of the present paper, the only difference I would like to highlight is that while public schools are required to teach in accordance with the Fælles Mål (“Common Objectives”; UVM 2017a) that were revised as part of the 2014 educational reform, private schools can choose whether they want to follow the Fælles Mål or not, as long as the education is as good as at public schools (UVM, 2017b). The private schools in this project do voluntarily follow the Fælles Mål.

One of the key principles behind the Fælles Mål is that the focus is on what competences students should acquire through knowledge and skills. These competences, knowledge, and skills are defined for each subject, for each educational stage. These stages can vary by subject, for English there are objectives to be reached at the end of the 4th, 7th, 9th, and 10th grade (EMU, 2016). For English in primary school (1st to 4th grade), there are 3 competence objectives to be achieved, and 13 knowledge or skill objectives. These objectives are “normal objectives”, i.e. objectives that are to be achieved by the majority of students in a class, assuming their performance is normally distributed in a statistical sense, with only some students achieving less or more than the Fælles Mål (Rasmussen, 2015). There is methodological freedom in Denmark, which means that the government cannot ask teachers to teach in a certain way, but the school reform's focus on students achieving national objectives does suggest teachers plan, perform, and evaluate teaching and learning in a highly goal-oriented fashion.

This goal-oriented teaching is also referred to as proactive teaching, where the focus is on teaching proactively regarding each individual student's needs and their progress with regards to achieving the current and long-term objectives (Rasmussen & Rasch-Christensen, 2015). This way of teaching is to be based on an iterative 5-step process (Rasmussen & Rasch-Christensen, 2015). The first step is planning, i.e. the teacher decides which competences/knowledge/skills students should learn (in accordance with the Common Objectives), and designs a curriculum and

individual lessons based on these objectives. The second step is a pre-evaluation. Here, the teacher evaluates not only where each individual student is and what prior knowledge they have, but also evaluates the “average” knowledge of the class (Rasmussen & Rasch-Christensen, 2015; Helmke, 2013). The third step is developing signs of learning, i.e. visible success criteria that make the students’ learning visible. The fourth step is the actual teaching in the classroom, and differentiation is considered a prerequisite for teaching (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2011; Rasmussen & Rasch-Christensen, 2015). That is, in Danish public schools, differentiation is to be considered “a principle, not a method [...] practiced alongside or as a supplement to teaching” (my translation; Rasmussen and Rasch-Christensen 2015, p. 126). The fifth step of the iterative process is an evaluation (by the teacher or the students themselves) of where the class as a whole/average and each individual student is with regards to the objectives, using the “signs” developed in step 2. This evaluation is also referred to as evaluation for learning, highlighting that the focus should not be on the measurement of learning, but on evaluating with the purpose of supporting learning (Dobson & Engh, 2010; Kousholt, 2015; Slemmen, 2012). Evaluations of each individual public-school student’s status with regards to their personal objectives are required by law (UVM, 2017c), but only from 3rd to 8th grade for the subject English. This requirement highlights the importance the Danish government ascribes to evaluation and thus to differentiation, but how and if this is done requires empirical research.

1.2. Prerequisites for differentiated teaching

As differentiation is based on individual learners’ needs, abilities, and preferences, a prerequisite for successful differentiation is that teachers not only know these individual differences, but also know where each individual student stands with regards to the lesson’s, unit’s, or year’s goals. As summative assessment, such as a test at the end of a unit, is not a part of early EFL in Denmark (it is not required by law, and I have not observed it in any of the project’s classrooms), the focus here will be on formative assessment, i.e. the formal or informal ongoing assessment that is part of the instruction (Black & Wiliam, 1998, 2009; Tomlinson & Moon, 2013b, 2013a; M. Heritage, 2013). Examples of ongoing assessment are worksheets and quizzes, but also interactions between the teacher and the students such as pedagogic questioning (M. Heritage & Heritage, 2013), as well as “assessment conversations” (Duschl & Gitomer, 1997; Furtak, Ruiz-Primo, & Bakeman, 2017; Ruiz-Primo & Furtak, 2006, 2007; Ruiz-Primo, 2011). The ubiquitous IRF/IRE structure in classroom discourse (Mehan, 1979; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) makes obvious that assessments do happen in regular classroom discourse, and conversation analytic research shows that teachers have an institutional right and obligation to do so (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Hellermann, 2003; Macbeth, 2004; Koole, 2012; Walsh, 2006). Koole (2012) proposes three dimensions of teacher assessment: the positive-negative dimension, the value dimension, and the object dimension, and further states that teachers assess what students do, what they know, and what they understand. Teachers can do this, because these processes of knowing and understanding are observable as participants in the classroom interact with each other. Students display or demonstrate knowing and understanding for instance through interrogatives or assertions (Solem, 2016a, 2016b) in student initiatives (Waring, 2011), but these are often treated as problematic (Heller, 2017). Likewise, students can claim or demonstrate insufficient knowledge (Sert, 2011, 2015; Sert & Walsh, 2013), and teachers may orient to this for instance by performing epistemic status checks (Sert, 2013a, 2015), doing embodied vocabulary explanations (Sert & Walsh, 2013), and through designedly incomplete utterances (Koshik, 2002; Sert & Walsh, 2013; Sert, 2015). On a similar note, students have also been found to have various resources to show their willingness or unwillingness to participate (Evnitskaya & Berger, 2017; Mortensen, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Sert, 2013b, 2015). Willingness to participate is defined as a “social, public demonstration of one’s interest (i.e. willingness) to engage in the ongoing pedagogical activity” (Evnitskaya & Berger, 2017, p. 88). Unwillingness to participate can be displayed for instance by

withdrawing gaze from the teacher (Mortensen, 2008a), smiling (Sert & Jacknick, 2015; Sert, 2015), or claiming insufficient knowledge (Sert, 2015). Likewise, willingness to participate can be displayed in various ways, such as hand-raising (Sahlström, 2002), some of which may be so subtle that they remain unnoticed (Evnitskaya & Berger, 2017). This poses a challenge for teachers, as they on the one hand need to continuously analyze what students do, know, and understand, but on the other hand, evidence of this – while observable – can be very subtle and requires an online analysis. In the analysis section, I will show that teachers do not exclusively rely on the abovementioned signs. Rather, it seems that interactions with students are based more on previous assessments and fixed roles than on in-the-moment displays and demonstrations of knowing or understanding.

2. METHOD

The present study draws on two kinds of empirical data collected from the same set of Danish young learners: formal proficiency tests and video-recordings of classroom interaction.

2.1. Participants

The participants are 264 Danish Young Learners of English as a Foreign Language (161 with start in 1st grade, 101 with start in 3rd grade).

2.2. Data

One type of data is obtained via the PPVT-4 receptive vocabulary test (Dunn & Dunn, 2007). The results from this test were used to identify students who score much higher or lower than most other children in their age group, and to identify from which classrooms these “extreme” students are. The second type of data, which is going to be the main focus of the present paper, are video-recordings from those classrooms that have the most “extreme” students, i.e. classrooms in which one can expect to find instances of differentiation. This classroom data was analyzed using conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), as this approach is well-suited to analyze how students present themselves in terms of claimed and demonstrated knowledge or understanding, epistemic displays, and willingness to participate, and how their respective teachers orient to this.

2.3. Identifying focal students and classrooms

At the beginning of each school year for three consecutive years, all students participating in the larger project were given a receptive vocabulary test, the PPVT-4 (Dunn & Dunn, 2007). To identify focal students, I used the following criteria:

- The student must have participated in the first (“pretest”) and the last test (“posttest 2”)
- The student’s pretest score must be either lower or equal to the 10th percentile, or higher or equal to the 90th percentile of the scores of their grade level.

This resulted in 35 “early start” and 31 “late start” students to choose from. Each classroom has 3-6 students that belong to the most “extreme” students out of the entire sample. Table 1 below shows the distribution of these highest- and lowest-scoring students in the four selected classrooms.

From each grade level, I selected those two classrooms that have the highest number of “extreme” students. The reason why these classrooms were selected is because – in theory – the different proficiency levels of the students should invite opportunities for differentiation.

Table 1: Focal students – by starting grade and proficiency level

Starting grade and anonymized name of classroom	Focal students			
	Highest 10%	Lowest 10%	Total	
1 st grade “early start”	f2-1	2	4	6
	p1b-1	5	1	6
3 rd grade “late start”	f1-3	3	3	6
	p2a-3	2	4	6

2.4. Procedure for analysis

The procedure was then as follows:

1. Verbatim transcripts of a total of 14 lessons from the first year of EFL classes of four focal classrooms were made.
2. A collection of all instances of differentiation was built. By differentiation I mean that at least one participant, the teacher or a student, orient to some student being a high or low achiever. In practice, this means that any instances of claimed and demonstrated proficiency, epistemic displays, and willingness to participate were collected. These interactions were transcribed to finer detail, using the Jefferson (2004) transcription system.
3. 9 representative cases from this collection were selected for a CA analysis, these are presented as Extracts in the analysis section.

I did not identify the names of the “extreme” students (as found by the vocabulary test) prior to building the collection. That is, when I went through the video-recordings, I did so without knowing which students have high and low scores. This was done to ensure that I approach the data without any preconceptions of the students’ language skills, rather, I used a bottom-up, emic approach to identify high- and low-scoring students in terms of claimed and demonstrated proficiency, epistemic displays, and willingness to participate, and how their respective teachers orient to this.

3. FINDINGS

This section is separated into two parts. I will first present my analyses of interactions with the strongest students, and then do a comparative analysis of interactions with the strongest and weakest students, in which the differential treatment of these two kinds of students becomes clear. These students are not necessarily the same students that the proficiency test identified as strong or weak. Instead, I focus on the students that members of the classroom orient to as being highly or not proficient, regardless of what their quantitatively measured proficiency score is. Neither the students themselves nor their teachers know how the students scored in the proficiency test, and teachers have not conducted any summative assessment themselves, so any orientations to proficiency that can be seen in the data must come from classroom interaction.

3.1. Category-bound rights and obligations of the strongest students

In this section I will show that a “strong student” is a category co-constructed by both the teacher, the student in question, and their classmates. This categorization comes with category-bound rights. Teachers can challenge the strongest students, and these students will often seek these challenges themselves. Lastly, strong students are more often than not ignored by the teacher, both when volunteering, and when making uninvited contributions.

Both teachers and students orient – through different practices that will be detailed below – to some students being the strongest of the group.

3.1.1. Category-bound rights of strong students

In Extract 1 below, the teacher introduces the next task and a student asks her for a special right in relation to this next task.

Extract 1

01 **TEA:** i think we should sing the song with the eyes and the ears
 02 (0.5)
 03 **TEA:** before [we
 04 **AMA:** ((singing)) [head shoulders knees [and toes knees and toes
 05 **TEA:**]before we go to the
 06 classroom again to find our e things
 07 **FRE:** jeg har øre med
 I have ears with me
 08 **TEA:** so [get up please]
 09 **AMA:** [må jeg syng for]
 may I lead the song
 10 (0.3)
 11 **TEA:** [ja
 yes
 12 **AMA:** [må jeg syng for
 may I lead the song
 13 **AMA:** **ye::a jeg synger for**
 yea I am leading the song

The teacher introduces the next task, namely to “**sing the song with the eyes and the ears**” (line 01). Already while the teacher is giving this instruction, Amalie demonstrates both that she knows what the “**song with the eyes and the ears**” is, and that she can sing it by herself (line 04). As the teacher is finishing giving the instruction (line 08), Amalie asks if she can be lead singer (line 09). This receives a confirmation after 0.3 seconds (line 11). Already as the teacher produced the confirmation token, Amalie asks a second time (line 12), and then expresses her joy over being allowed this special role (line 13). What is presumably meant by “lead singer” is the one person in a choir who is the model to be followed and imitated. I have only seen this role being assigned to a student in this particular classroom, in all other classrooms the teacher is the “lead singer” by default. Being the lead singer requires knowing the lyrics by heart and makes the lead singer accountable for failing to sing the song in an expectable manner, as some participants in the classroom may rely on having a model to imitate. The very fact that there is a lead singer creates epistemic asymmetry (Drew, 1991), in this case making Amalie the epistemic authority.

The teacher in Extract 2 (split into Extract 2A, 2B, and 2C for readability), is a substitute teacher in the same classroom, who knows the names of the individual students in the class, but only replaces the actual English teacher on this day because the English teacher could not be there. From the discussion in class before Extract 2 it seems that the substitute teacher has been informed that they have learned a song called “how do you do” in the previous lesson. The substitute teacher apparently did not know the song, but the class managed just fine as Amalie voluntarily led the song. While it seems that the substitute teacher had only planned to have the class sing the “how do you do” song and then watch a movie, several students have expressed their wish to also sing

a song called “ten green bottles”, which the substitute teacher did not know, but nevertheless allowed the students to sing it. There was a rather lengthy preparation phase prior to Extract 2 as the students insisted on drawing a brick wall and ten bottles on the blackboard which required the drawing skills of three students. As they have finished the illustration, the teacher asks “are you ready then” in line 01.

Extract 2A

- 01 **TEA:** **er i klare så**
 are you ready then
- 02 **NIC:** **ja amalie synger for**
 yes amalie is leading the song
- 03 (0.7)
- 04 **PAR:** **a[ma]lie synger for**
 amalie is leading the song
- 05 **TEA:** [**ja**]
 yes
- 06 (0.5)
- 07 **TEA:** **hvem synger for**
 who is leading the song
- 08 (0.4)
- 09 **PAR:** **amalie**
- 10 **WIL:** [**mig**]
 me
- 11 **FRE:** [**må j]eg [os og jeg]**
 may I as well and me
- 12 **TEA:** [**amalie**]
- 13 (1.3)

Nicklas responds to the teacher’s question in line 01 affirmatively, and adds that Amalie is the lead singer (line 02). After 0.7 seconds, Parina repeats what Nicklas said (line 04). The teacher’s “**ja/yes**” seems to refer to something else, as she 0.5 seconds later asks who is going to be the lead singer (line 07). Parina informs her that it will be Amalie (line 09). Now William and Frederikke orient to the teacher’s question as an invitation to volunteer, as they both volunteer to be the lead singer (lines 10-11). In overlap with Frederikke’s turn, the teacher confirms that it will be Amalie (line 12). Extract 2B below is a continuation of Extract 2A.

Extract 2B

- 13 (1.3)
- 14 **NIC:** **fre [derikke]**
- 15 **TEA:** [**eller (.)**] **vil du gern william**
 or do you want to william
- 16 (0.5)
- 17 **WIL:** **ja**
 yes
- 18 (0.5)
- 19 **TEA:** **s[å må william gern prøv]**
 then william is allowed to try
- 20 **NIC:** [**de kan ikke den**] [**kan den ik**]
 they don’t know it don’t know it
- 21 **WIL:** [**en to**] [**tre**]
- one two three
- 22 **FRE:** ((to the camera)) [**((kisses)) kys og kram**]

- kiss and hug
- 23 (0.2)
- 24 FRE: **kys** [((kisses))]
kiss
- 25 TEA: [en] to tre [nu]
one two three now
- 26 NIC: [amalie] du synger bare højere
amalie you just sing louder
- 27 (2.0)

Nicklas then starts saying something to or about Frederikke (line 14). In overlap, the teacher now despite already having selected Amalie orients to William's volunteering, as she asks him if he wants to try (line 15). He confirms, and the teacher says "then william is allowed to try" (line 19). This formulation is quite interesting, the "then" indicates something like "now that I know that William wants to try", but two other students have also expressed that they want to be the lead singer, so just a student wanting to try cannot possibly be the only condition the teacher based her decision on. It seems then that the teacher, albeit not being the actual English teacher, bases this decision on some kind of shared knowledge or experiences of this group. There might be a rule that if two or more students volunteer, the student who has contributed the least so far gets the right, or – alternatively – that for whichever reason every time *William* (or someone like William) volunteers and specifies that he actually wants to do what he volunteered to do, he is allowed to do so. I do not know what the reason for the teacher's selection is other than that some condition has been met (as indicated by her use of "then"). Nicklas however, in overlap with the teacher's turn, contests this decision by claiming that "they" do not know "it" (line 20), i.e. that Frederikke and William do not know the song well enough to be the lead singer, indicating both that he has knowledge that the substitute teacher does not have, namely about individual students' abilities, and that he is able and possibly entitled to assess his classmates. William and Frederikke do not acknowledge this entitlement, instead, Frederikke minds her own business talking to the camera which is in the classroom for data collection purposes (lines 22 and 24), and William actually starts the ritualized countdown "one two three" (line 21). However, nobody starts singing, and the teacher counts down again in line 25. This would have been Williams cue to start singing as the lead singer, but he does not. In the meantime, Nicklas has already asked Amalie to "just sing louder", but Amalie does not start singing (line 27).

Extract 2C

- 27 (2)
- 28 TEA: **ik alligevel** ((to William))
(you do) not (want do it) anyway
- 29 (1.2)
- 30 WIL: j[o:::]
yes
- 31 NIC: [amalie] [hun (gør det) bedre]
amalie she (does it) better
- 32 TEA: [amalie] ja
amalie yes
- 33 TEA: en to tre nu
one two three now
- 34 (0.5)
- 35 AMA: ten [green bottles((singing "ten green bottles"))
- 36 SsS: [green bottles((singing "ten green bottles"))

The teacher then asks William to reconfirm that he wants to be the lead singer (line 28), and he does (line 30). Nevertheless, Nicklas states that Amalie can do it better (line 31) and in overlap with this the teacher agrees that Amalie should be the lead singer (line 32). As I have established in Extract 2, the lead singer is the epistemic authority for the duration of the song. Nicklas (and Parina) made suggestions regarding who should and should not be the lead singer, and based these suggestions on the respective classmates' (Amalie's, Frederikke's, and William's) abilities. Nicklas (and Parina) show that they understand how to select a lead singer, i.e. by first assessing the potential lead singer's ability to be the lead singer, and that they have some knowledge that the substitute teacher does not have, since she has not been in the class the last time they sang the song and Amalie, Frederikke and William demonstrated their ability to sing the song. However, it is ultimately the teacher who is allowed to assign this status, which Amalie acknowledges by not singing when she had the chance to do so, and first taking the lead singer role after she has officially been assigned this role.

Extracts 1 and 2 have shown that being a strong student is a category which young learners orient to in terms of which rights come with this category, and that students may explicitly ask to take on a special role, but that it is ultimately the teacher who grants these rights. These extracts are from different lessons, so it might be that the classmates in Extract 2 suggested Amalie should be the lead singer because of prior classroom history, i.e. that Amalie routinely is the lead singer in the class. However, knowing L2 songs well enough to be the lead singer – a role usually filled by teachers – is a quality of a strong student, a demonstration of proficiency. Amalie is oriented to as a strong student in other ways as well, as Extract 3 will exemplify. There are more examples of students seeking challenges themselves in the database, which I cannot show here for reasons of space. These challenges may include delivering more than the task requires (e.g. listing two or more vocabulary items when only one was asked for), or having a private conversation in English with the teacher while the rest of the class is finishing a task, or even self-selecting to initiate (and complete) repair of a teacher's utterance. In Extract 3 below, Amalie initiates repair when the teacher uses a wrong word.

Extract 3

01 **TEA:** **and tristan**
 02 **(2.2)**
 03 **TEA:** **what color is your dress today**
 04 **(.)**
 05 **AMA:** **☺d- ress☺**
 06 **TEA:** **your suit**
 07 **your track suit**
 08 **(0.7)**
 09 **TEA:** **din trainingsdragt**
 your track suit

The teacher asks Tristan what color his dress is today (lines 01-03). The class is sitting in a circle, which means that everyone can see that Tristan is not wearing a dress, but a track suit. Amalie orients to this by saying “☺d- ress☺” with a smiley voice (line 05). The teacher completes the repair by saying “**your suit**” and then “**your track suit**” (lines 06-07).

3.1.2. Category-bound obligations of strong students

In Extracts 1-3, Amalie or her classmates on her behalf, self-selected or asked for a special task, a task that requires relatively high L2 proficiency, thereby at the very least claiming, if not demonstrating, epistemic authority. Teachers can also assign tasks that go beyond the curriculum

to read a previously unknown story aloud, and from the teacher's formulation it seems that this class has either not tried reading aloud before, or does not do it habitually.

Extract 5

- 01 **TEA:** **vi ku også prøv at lade jer læse skal vi prøve det i dag**
 we could also try to have you read should we try this today
- 02 **MAR:** **yay**
- 03 **TEA:** **do you wanna read**
- 04 (4.3) ((5 lines omitted))
- 05 **TEA:** **ah oh oh oh det fortryder jeg allerede**
 i already regret this
- 06 **TEA:** **ehm (.) nesrin would you like to read**
- 07 **NES:** **(jeg kan ik)**
 (I can't)
- 08 **TEA:** **try try i wont eat you i promise**
- 09 so
- 10 **NES:** **jeg kan ik læse (den her historie)**
 I can't read (this story here)
- 11 **TEA:** **nej det jo derfor vi prøver at øve det**
 no and that's why we try to practice it
- 12 **TEA:** **lucy,**
- 13 **NES:** **pointed to a**
- 14 **TEA:** **picture**
- 15 **NES:** **picture of the mo monkey house on the sane**
- 16 **TEA:** **sign hvad er sign skiltet ja**
 'sign' what is 'sign' the sign yes

In lines 01-05, the students reading a story aloud themselves is co-constructed as something new, and something that most of the students (except for Marcus, line 02), do not want to try. The teacher nominates Nesrin as the first student to read aloud (line 06). In lines 07-11, Nesrin insists that she is not able to read this story, and the teacher insists on her having to practice reading. Next, the teacher reads the first word of the story (line 12), after which Nesrin begins to read, i.e. the teacher has successfully handled Nesrin's claim of insufficient knowledge (Sert, 2015). She is reading quite well apart from one long word (**picture**) and a possibly previously unknown word (**sign**). Note that this is a third grade EFL classroom in Denmark. According to the Danish Common Objectives (EMU, 2016), after the second grade, in the subject Danish, students are only expected to read words with two syllables. Having noted this, reading this text in a foreign language seems like a challenge, and further investigation of the data reveals that Nesrin performed much better than most of the others who were selected to read. This points to the teacher having had an idea of that Nesrin is one of the strongest students, and that as such, she should take on more challenging tasks.

In this section, I have shown that rather than relying exclusively on in-the-moment displays or demonstrations of knowledge or understanding, teachers and students orient to certain students as being more proficient than others, presumably based on previous classroom interaction. This orientation becomes evident in two ways. One the one hand, in the rights students ask for themselves (Extract 1) or on behalf of others (Extract 2), often challenging the teacher's epistemic authority (Extract 3). On the other hand, the category "strong student" comes with certain category-bound expectations or obligations, such as being asked to translate something in front of the whole class (Extract 4) or being the very first student to read an L2 text aloud, a text that exceeds the reading level expectation the Danish national curriculum has specified for L1 texts for this age group (Extract 5). In the next section, I aim to further underline that these rights

and obligations are bound to specific students, i.e. strong students as established through classroom history, by directly comparing interactions with strong and weak students.

3.2. Differential treatment of the strongest and weakest students

Unlike the strongest students, who have various means to demonstrate their proficiency and willingness to participate (such as hand-raising, self-selecting, or gaze; Mortensen, 2008a; Sahlström, 2002; Sert, 2015), the weaker students are difficult to spot in the classroom. Their practices may include showing unwillingness to participate and claims of insufficient knowledge (Sert, 2015), but since these are not practices that are exclusively limited to weak students, they cannot be treated as signs of low competence per se.

3.2.1. Student-specific language policies

Some teachers try to follow a L2-only policy, which includes that they speak English most of the time, and do language policing when students respond to an English question in Danish. However, throughout the database, I found that teachers decide on different language policies not because the specific situation makes them relevant, but systematically use different languages with specific students. I found two interesting practices on the part of the teachers regarding the classroom language policy, namely:

- asking questions and giving instructions to some students in the L1, when following a L2-only policy with other students
- accepting contributions in L1 from some students, but not allowing others to contribute in L1

I will exemplify this student-specific language policy, by comparatively analyzing three extracts. These extracts have in common that they each display how the teacher shifts between language policies, even though there is no change in pedagogical goal (such as, e.g. in Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005).

In Extract 6, the class is moving from one part of the classroom to another, where they are expected to sit down on the floor. Not all of the students in this first grade are equally good at sitting still and the teacher asks them to come back to the circle.

Extract 6

01 **TEA:** **william where are you going (.) come on over here**
 02 **((7.4 seconds of classroom management in English omitted))**
 03 **TEA:** **frederikke kom her**
 frederikke come here

In this extract, both William and Frederikke are not where they are supposed to be. While the teacher addresses William in English (line 01), she addresses Frederikke in Danish. This is interesting, because the teacher's use of English in lines 01 and 02 shows that students in this classroom are expected to be able to understand the instruction "come here" in English, but the teacher nevertheless gives this exact same simple instruction in Danish when talking to Frederikke, indicating that she might not expect Frederikke to be able to understand this instruction in English. The pedagogical focus – classroom management – remains the same, the only difference is that the teacher now addresses Frederikke. Frederikke has in another lesson been labeled as a weak student (Extract 2B, line 20) by one of her classmates, the teacher treats her differently in Extract 6, and later in Extract 9, I will also show that the teacher treats her differently than other students.

Extracts 7A and 7B are from a third grade. These extracts are from the same lesson and the same task, even though there is some time between them. The current task is to retell a story that the class has read in the previous lesson.

Extract 7A

01 **TEA:** **what are the names**
 02 **WIL:** **R K five**
 03 **TEA:** **R K five who is R K five**
 04 **WIL:** **ehm this is a robot**
 05 **TEA:** **that's a robot very good**
 06 **TEA:** **who else is in the story**
 07 **NES:** **eh en abe**
 uh a monkey
 08 **TEA:** **in Eng[lish]**
 09 **NES:** [monkey
 10 **TEA:** **a monkey very good there is a monkey also**

In this Extract, the teacher asks for some names of the characters in the story. William gives a name and answers a follow-up question in English (lines 01-05). Next, the teacher asks for more characters (line 06). Nesrin says “a monkey” in Danish, which the teacher orients to as a breach of the language policy (line 08). In overlap with the micro level language-policing (as investigated in previous studies, including Amir & Musk, 2013), Nesrin reformulates her answer in English (line 09), which is accepted by the teacher in line 10. This overlap, after just a small increment of the teacher’s utterance in line 08, might point to the teacher habitually doing language policing.

Interestingly, in the same lesson, still in the same task, the teacher not only allows other students to contribute in Danish, but even addresses them in Danish, as in Extract 7B.

Extract 7B

01 **TEA:** **hvad hvor er det bongo han bor henne**
 what where is it bongo lives
 02 (1.6)
 03 **TEA:** **hvor bor han henne hannah**
 where does he live hannah
 04 (1.0)
 05 **HAN:** **i:: et træ ude i en park**
 on a tree in a park
 06 **TEA:** **ude i (.) park og hvad laver andy der hver dag**
 in park and what does andy do there every day
 07 **HAN:** **ehm:::**
 08 (1.9)
 09 **HAN:** **ja han går rundt o:::g**
 well he walks around and
 10 (1.6)
 11 **HAN:** **hygger sig**
 has a good time
 12 (0.2)
 13 **TEA:** **ja det gør han sikkert også men hvad er det han kommer med**
 yes he probably does but what is it he brings

This Extract is part of the same task as Extract 7A, the goal is still to retell the story. The questions that Hannah is asked here have already been answered by Nesrin in English just prior to this

extract. The teacher nominates Hannah, who has not displayed willingness to participate, to respond to the question she has asked in Danish in lines 01 and 03. After 1 second Hannah, with a bit of hesitation in the turn-beginning, responds in Danish. The teacher repeats part of her answer in Danish and asks a follow-up question (line 06). Hannah responds with a hesitation marker (line 07), followed by 1.9 seconds silence. She then answers, “well he walks around”, followed by an elongated “o::g/and“, indicating that more will follow. After 1.6 seconds she produces “**hygger sig**/ has a good time” (line 11). The teacher tentatively accepts this answer or judges the adequacy of Hannah’s turn, i.e. that Hannah provides a relevant second pair-part, which does not mean that the teacher assesses the content of Hannah’s response to be correct (Macbeth, 2003), and then reformulates her question (line 13). This exchange continues in Danish for a few more turns. As the same teacher had just moments ago language policed Nesrin and other students (Extract 7A), and continued to do so with other students after this Extract, the teacher’s language choice and acceptance of Hannah’s use of L1 is an indication of the teacher assessing Hannah to be one of the weaker students.

I have more examples of selective disregarding of the language policy in this lesson and from other classrooms in our database. A rather curious example is presented in Extract 8. In preparation for the lesson, each student had to bring one or more items that start with the letter E in English, possibly to bring some words from outside of the curriculum to the classroom. It would make sense then, that these items are presented in English, like in Extract 8A below. Classroom observations and interviews with teachers show that this was the 5th time this homework has been given, the class has started with the letter A and has arrived at E in this lesson, which means that the class might have established rules for this task, especially in relation to language policy by now.

Extract 8A

01 **TEA:** **Amalie did you bring**
 02 (0.2)
 03 **TEA:** **did you bring anything**
 04 (0.9)
 05 **AMA:** **ye:s**
 06 **I have an uh eagle with me**
 07 **TEA:** **eagle**

In this extract, the teacher asks Amalie whether she has brought anything. This is followed by 0.9 of silence, which might be due to the teacher using “**anything**” even though Amalie has already listed two or three items that she has brought to class prior to this extract, i.e. Amalie might have waited for the missing “else”. Amalie then confirms “ye:s”, and adds that she has an eagle with her (lines 05-06). The teacher accepts this by repeating part of Amalie’s response (line 07). Note that Amalie produces more than is expected in this task by producing a complete sentence; all other students only named the object they brought. Some of the other students are not even responding in English (as in Extract 8B), even though the task is specifically designed to say English words that start with the letter E.

Extract 8B

01 **TEA:** **what did you bring rosa**
 02 **ROS:** **en kuvert**
 an envelope
 03 (0.6)
 04 **TEA:** **an envelope**

In Extract 8B, the teacher addresses Rosa in English, and asks what she brought to class (line 01). Rosa responds in Danish “**en kuvert**” which translates to “an envelope”. After 0.6 seconds, the teacher accepts this by translating Rosa’s response to English (line 04). The task was to bring to class and name an object that starts with the letter E in English, but the teacher accepts Rosa’s contribution in Danish. In order to ensure that language use and pedagogical goal are aligned (Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005), she could have done language policing like the teacher in Extract 7B, or asked Rosa or the whole class to say “envelope” after line 04, but she did not. By accepting Rosa’s contribution in Danish, she effectively changed the pedagogical goal to something less demanding, in line with Rosa’s apparent low proficiency. This practice of accepting a Danish contribution by translating it to English and moving on to something else is quite common in the database, both in the first and the third grades.

In Extracts 6-8, I have shown how teachers differentiate by using different language policies, not for different pedagogical goals, but with different students. In the next section I will show another way teachers differentiate in their interaction with weak and strong students.

3.2.2. Differential ratification of student contributions

In the previous section I have focused on language policing as a method for differentiation, in this section I would like to describe another practice, namely differential ratification of student contributions. In my analysis of Extract 2B I have briefly touched upon the observation that teachers might take the category students belong to, i.e. weak or strong student, into consideration when determining how to select a student as next speaker. In Extract 2B, even though the teacher had taken up the students’ suggestion that Amalie (a strong student) should be the lead singer, when another student, William (an allegedly weak student), volunteered, the teacher stated that if he wants to be lead singer, then he should be allowed to do so.

Extract 9 below is from the same task as Extract 8, i.e. the task where students have to report which object starting with the letter E they have brought to class.

Extract 9

```

01    TEA: yea what did you bring
02          (0.2)
03    ROS: eyeliner
04          (0.4)
05    TEA: eyeliner [o::h          ]
06    AMA:          [den har jeg faktisk også] taget
                I actually brought this too
07    TEA: thats for big girls
08          do you use eyeliner
09          (0.3)
10    ROS: no
11    TEA: no
12    FRE: eyes
13          (0.3)
14    AMA: my mo[m
15    TEA: [eyes
16    FRE: [ø ring
                ear ring
17    AMA: my mom [uses          ] [eyeliner]
```

- 18 S???: [eyes det betyder]
eyes it means
- 19 TEA: [earrings]
- 20 yea earrings
- 21 i think we should sing the song with the eyes and the ears

In line 01 the teacher selects Rosa as the next student to present her object. After 0.2 seconds, Rosa states that she has brought eyeliner, which the teacher repeats before expressing surprise “**eyeliner o:h**” (lines 03-04). Amalie states that she has brought eyeliner as well (line 06), but the teacher does not orient to this. Instead, the teacher states that eyeliner is “**for big girls**” (line 07), possibly to account for her surprise or to help the rest of the class understand what eyeliner possibly means. She goes on to ask Rosa whether she uses eyeliner, she does not, and the teacher accepts this (lines 08-11). Next, Frederikke self-selects to state an “E thing” she has brought, “**eyes**”. At first the teacher does not orient to this. Amalie then says “**my mom**” (line 14), contributing something relevant to the ongoing discourse, in that the teacher has framed eyeliner as something “**for big girls**” and Amalie knows a big girl who uses eyeliner. She goes beyond the task that only consists of a student naming an “E thing” and the teacher assessing the contribution, as she demonstrates that she follows the current discourse and is able to contribute with her real-world knowledge, in English. However, Amalie does not get the teacher’s attention, as the teacher is now orienting to Frederikke’s “**eyes**” (line 15). In overlap with this, Frederikke already lists the next thing she has brought, albeit in Danish (line 16). Amalie states “**my mom uses eyeliner**”, but the teacher does not ratify this, as she instead translates Frederikke’s item from line 16 to English (lines 19-20), and then begins the next task (line 21). Both Amalie and Frederikke have shown their willingness to participate by self-selecting and contributing to the ongoing interaction. However, only Frederikke’s contributions are ratified. Her first contribution “eyes” (line 12) is not adding anything new to the collection, as eyes have already been mentioned before (not shown in the Extract), and “earring” (line 16) was not even produced in English, but ratified through the teacher’s translation anyway. Amalie’s contribution however is not ratified, as it is only content wise related to the task and to the teacher’s question in line 08, but exceeds the task at hand and contests the teacher’s epistemic authority (Heller, 2017). In terms of differentiation, the teacher not orienting visibly to Amalie’s contribution is a missed opportunity for teaching and learning.

My analysis started out by describing the category-bound rights and obligations of strong students, and later showed the differences between teachers’ interactions with weaker and stronger students. I found that these categories must have been established based on classroom history, rather than on a moment-to-moment assessment of students’ knowledge and understanding. I will discuss these findings in the next section.

4. DISCUSSION

In the analysis section I have focused on three issues: category-bound rights of strong students, category-bound obligations of strong students, and differential treatment of strong and weak students, exemplified by language policy and ratification of student contributions.

As for category-bound rights, I showed that students claim for themselves or on behalf of others’ certain epistemic rights, including taking on a special role (Extracts 1-2) and initiating repair of their teacher’s utterances (Extract 3). I found that it is the teacher who ultimately grants these rights, however, not without giving up their own rights, e.g. the right to self-correct (Extract 3; Schegloff et al., 1977) and to assess the correctness of student translations (Extract 4). In terms of category-bound obligations, I showed that students do

difficult tasks assigned by the teacher, i.e. tasks that the student did not volunteer for. These include, for instance, translating for the whole class (Extract 4) and being the first to read aloud an L2 text that would be considered difficult even in the students' L1 (Extract 5). In an extended sense, having to accept that one's contributions are not ratified (as in Extract 9) might be considered a category-bound obligation as well.

To show that these rights and obligations are student-specific rather than situation-dependent, I conducted a comparative analysis of interactions with strong and weak students. Most saliently, I found that teachers adopt different language policies with different students (Extracts 6-8). More specifically, this means that certain students are addressed in Danish and are allowed to respond in Danish, while another group of students is addressed exclusively in English, and is expected to respond in English as well. While previous research shows that language choice is tightly connected with pedagogical focus (Seedhouse, 2004; Üstünel & Seedhouse, 2005; Sert, 2015), my data shows that language alternation occurs even when there is no change in pedagogical focus, i.e. it is solely based on which student is addressed. However, this is not generalizable to all Danish young learner (YL) classrooms. Using the same database, Sert and I found that participants in one of the project's classrooms successfully create intersubjectivity, even though the teacher exclusively speaks English, with all students (aus der Wieschen & Sert, 2018). We concluded that the key factors in creating intersubjectivity were that the teacher gave the students interactional space to engage in shared meaning-making practices, and that he used gestures skillfully in combination with designedly incomplete utterances (Koshik, 2002). This confirms a point that has been made by several empirical studies (e.g., aus der Wieschen, 2017; aus der Wieschen & Eskildsen, *forthc.*, aus der Wieschen & Sert, 2018; Eskildsen & Wagner, 2013, Sert 2015, Walsh, 2006): rather than adopting a top-down language policy or using different languages with different students irregardless of pedagogical focus as in the present study, YL teachers should be trained to, and make use of, multimodal resources for creating intersubjectivity.

The other form of differential treatment of weak and strong students I identified is related to ratification of student contributions (Extract 9). While I only presented one extract for reasons of space, Extract 9 is a prototypical example of what happens regularly in my database: contributions from weak students are accepted even when they are misaligned with the teacher's pedagogical agenda, whereas contributions from strong students are not ratified even when they contribute to the pedagogical goal.

Whether this differential treatment of the weaker students does more harm than good or is an active acknowledgement of these students' role as legitimate peripheral participants is a question that goes beyond the scope of this paper. From the empirical data collected as part of the vocabulary test it seems that those students who were in the bottom 10% of their age group at the beginning of their first year still receive some of the lowest scores after 2 years of instruction, and for the top 10% of each age group, this is even more salient. However, to what extent the scores of this summative assessment are accurate and relevant to the kind of participation required and enabled in the classroom is questionable, as doing a vocabulary test does not require the same types of competencies as participating in classroom interaction. Very much like in Hellermann & Harris' case study (2015), the scores of our language test do not reflect the competence that students can demonstrate in the classroom for the teacher to assess as part of the ongoing formative assessment. In a previous study (aus der Wieschen, 2017), I have discussed that standardized vocabulary tests cannot measure L2 proficiency of Young Learners in Denmark, as they do not reflect what is learned in and through classroom interaction.

Amalie's classroom for instance is a classroom that stood out in the vocabulary test because 5 students that belong to the top 10% of all of the 1st graders in our project are in this classroom. Amalie is one of them, but in Extract 4 we can see that her English does not necessarily conform to standard grammar. In a traditional language test, focusing on measures such as complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2008), her utterance in Extract 4 would have to be scored as failed, or at least not achieve the best score. In classroom interaction however, she was able to successfully position herself as someone who understands English and can be a translator, and she responded to the researcher's turn with an appropriate second-pair part, regardless of its grammatical form. Interestingly, Rosa, who stands out as a weak student in Extracts 8B and 9, is one of the top 10% students with the highest vocabulary test score in our project as well. Nevertheless, the teacher treats her as someone who is not required to reach the current pedagogical goal.

Where the teacher got this impression is unclear, but it might be a form of long-term responsiveness (Koole & Elbers, 2014), i.e. the teacher designed her first pair parts responsive to a previous – but not immediately preceding – display of low competence by Rosa. In the same fashion, Amalie's clear role as a strong student may be related to past assessments as well. Ethnographic data collected in addition to classroom interaction may be a way to collect evidence for this. Extract 10 below illustrates this point. The class has just watched a documentary in which Eric Carle talks about how he got the idea for writing and illustrating "The Very Hungry Caterpillar". This documentary did not seem to have been created for children, much less for children learning English as a foreign language, and most of the students have made drawings instead of watching the documentary. After the lesson, I asked one of the students (Amalie) about the movie.

Extract 10

- 01 **RES:** **kunne du overhovedet forstå det han sagde**
 could you understand at all what he said
- 02 **AMA:** **ja det hele**
 yes everything
- 03 **PAR:** **ja kun fordi du er englænder eller hvad man kalder det**
 yes only because you are English or what it is called

Actually, neither Amalie nor her parents are from England, but when she was younger she spent a total of two years in the USA with her parents, one year starting when she was a few months old, and another when she was 3-4 years old. Factually correct or not, this categorization on the one hand gives her certain rights (Extracts 1-3) and obligations (Extract 4), and on the other hand this may hinder her opportunities for participating in classroom interaction (Extract 9).

Hall (1997) shows how a Spanish as a FL teacher (for unknown reasons) constructs two groups of students, a primary and a secondary, the first of which has more interactional rights and gets more affirmation and attention from the teacher both in teacher-led IRF discourse and student initiatives, resulting in limited opportunities for participation for the latter group. It seems in Hall's discourse analytic study that it is mainly the teacher who assigned the students to these groups, i.e. there were no between group differences with regards to quality or quantity of contributions that would warrant this separation, yet still, the teacher evaluated the participation and learning of students in the primary group to be better than in the secondary group. In Extract 8B, instead of closing the sequence (Waring, 2008), the teacher could have asked Rosa to present her object in English, which would have given Rosa a second chance to demonstrate her knowledge, very much like Nesrin was given a second chance in Extract 5, and would have resulted in an opportunity for the teacher to assess Rosa's proficiency anew.

In the same fashion, ignoring high achievers, by not nominating them when they volunteer or not acknowledging their learner initiatives may result in missed learning opportunities as well. Li (2013) studied the relationship between facilitated or missed learning opportunities and epistemic asymmetry and L1 and L2 identities. The teacher in this case study from a Chinese as a FL classroom is not a native speaker of English, but some of the students are. When the teacher asks the students to translate an English sentence she invented to Chinese, some of the L1 English students discuss the pragmatic appropriateness of the English sentence, a discussion which the teacher closes even though similar pragmatic rules apply in Chinese. While it might be unrealistic that young learners discuss pragmatics in class, the data in the present paper shows that they do actively contribute to something that could develop into a learning opportunity; i.e. by using complete sentences (Extract 8A) or discussing real-world use of “E things” brought to the classroom (Extract 9).

As for the age of the students, the differentiation practices observed happen in both 1st and 3rd grades. While one of the tasks might only very unlikely be found in a 1st grade, namely students reading a story in English, the principle of calling on a known high achiever to be a role model – as the first to do a difficult task such as reading aloud, or as the lead singer - is the same in both age groups. However, these practices are not found in every classroom. While no classroom practices differentiation in the “common” sense, i.e. differentiation of content, differentiation of process, differentiation of product, and differentiation of environment, the kind of interactional differentiation observed in the present paper is not practiced in every classroom either. Initially, four classrooms were selected for analysis for the present paper, but none of the Extracts presented here are from one of these classrooms, as no form of differentiation takes place in this classroom. This is because the practices described in this paper require some kind of talk-in-interaction in English, but not all teachers teach in a way that lets students demonstrate what they know and can do.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed at identifying practices of interactional differentiation in primary school EFL classes. Using conversation analysis, the study found that both teachers and students assess students as high or low achievers, as students demonstrate their proficiency in interaction. The study identified several ways to support and challenge the strongest Young Learners: nominating them as the first to do something new and difficult (i.e. reading aloud), asking them to do something not related to the curriculum (translating; Extract 4), granting them certain rights (such as being the lead singer; Extracts 1 and 2). Not shown in this paper for reasons of space are two more practices: engaging in private conversations in English with students, both inside the classroom and on the school yard, and providing students with extra material such as letting them borrow English books. As for the weakest Young Learners, a major challenge regarding supporting these students is that they are quite difficult to identify in regular classroom interaction. One of the practices this study found is teachers using the L1 when addressing apparent low achievers and letting them contribute in L1. However, teachers should be careful to not miss opportunities for reassessment like in Extract 9B. Another practice I found in the data but have not investigated systematically is the teacher’s positioning during interactions with apparent low achievers. Preliminary analysis shows that when eliciting answers from the seemingly weaker students, teachers of young EFL learners stand physically close to them if the classroom arrangement allows for this, oftentimes on eye-level, and touch them.

Usually differentiation has to do with planning tasks that can be carried out in different ways depending on the students’ abilities and proficiency levels or giving students different tasks based

on their abilities and proficiency levels. The data in the present paper show different participation frameworks that can be linked to proficiency differences, i.e. differentiation here is more of an interactional than a pedagogical tool. From a usage-based perspective it has ramifications for learning because it is the interactional engagements that form the primordial scene of learning.

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