



# Language-learning tools used in Norwegian ECEC

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**ABSTRACT:** The article presents the findings from a qualitative content analysis of three language-learning tools used in Norwegian kindergartens. While the holistic approach to learning has been central to Norwegian early childhood education and care, the use of manual-based programs and tools can reflect a shift towards a school-readiness approach. The findings from the analysis show that the language-learning tools promote a view of language as an instrument for academic work and reading abilities in school, with a focus on isolated language components and majority language acquisition for children with minority home languages. This language view reflects the school-readiness approach's focus on early intervention and problem prevention. The article draws on language policy research and contributes to the ongoing discussion on the standardization of pedagogical practices in Norwegian early childhood education and its consequences for the child-centered and holistic approach to play, learning, and care.

**Keywords:** *language policy, language-learning tools, school-readiness, language teaching*

## Introduction

The article presents findings from an analysis of three language-learning tools that are widely used in Norwegian kindergartens. The study draws on language policy research (e.g., Spolsky, 2004), as the tools are seen to play a role in the implementation of language policy in early childhood education and care (ECEC).

Different terms are used to describe the phenomenon examined in this article, for example, methods, manuals, programs, concepts, and tools. What they have in common,

is the expectation that if a method is proven effective in one context, it can be transferred to another irrespective of differences between children, staff, and local conditions. Hence, it can be argued that the use of programs in ECEC contributes to a standardization of pedagogical practice (Seland & Pålserud, 2023). Another similarity is the commercial aspect of the phenomenon when methods offered at kindergartens are competitors in a market (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019). These commercial methods are of various types, ranging from evidence-based programs with clear instructions and guidelines, to materials used in specific learning activities (e.g., language learning). They are of different origin, for example, methods translated from an Anglo-American context, methods that have originated in Norwegian academic institutions, or methods developed by consulting firms, and they aim to support different areas of children's development (e.g., socioemotional, linguistic, mathematical) (Lund et al., 2022). The methods are introduced into the kindergartens in different ways. They can be chosen by the staff, often after being recommended by other kindergartens, but there are indications that most of them are imposed by local authorities (Lund et al., 2022). In this article, the term tool, and more specifically, language-learning tool, is used to refer to learning materials developed for use in language support in Norwegian ECEC. The term tool is used to emphasize that the intentions of the materials are to support teachers to accomplish a particular task, more specific, to support children's language development. The tools investigated consist of user manuals describing the methods and different learning materials like books and picture cards. Depending on what is referred to, the terms tool, manual, and material will be used in the analysis.

In this article, I see ECEC as being equivalent to the term kindergarten, which I will use below when I refer to ECECs as institutions. When referring to the research field or to policy, the term ECEC will mainly be used. Kindergartens in Norway are regulated by the *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017) which promotes a child-centered and holistic approach to play, learning, and care, often described as a characteristic of Norwegian and Nordic ECEC (Einarsdottir et al., 2014; Hännikäinen, 2016). However, there have been discussions in the ECEC field in recent decades as to whether the holistic approach is being replaced by a school-readiness approach, and the consequences this might have on pedagogical practices (Einarsdottir, 2017; Korsvold & Nygård, 2022; Ringmose & Brogaard-Clausen, 2017). The introduction of methods, manuals, programs, and tools can be seen as the result of this turn towards school readiness (Aabro, 2016; Ahrenkiel et al., 2012; Pettersvold & Østrem, 2012; Villadsen & Hviid, 2017). While language-learning tools seem to be particularly prevalent among the methods, manuals, programs, and tools used in Norwegian kindergartens (Lund et al., 2022), our knowledge of the theoretical and ideological approaches to child language in the tools is scarce. As these tools presumably have an impact on the pedagogical practices in kindergartens, it is important to critically explore

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

the underpinning approaches to children's language in the tools. Situated in a critical field of research on the standardization of pedagogical practices in ECEC, this article addresses this research gap.

## Background and theory

An overview study showing the spread of methods, manuals, programs, and tools in Norwegian kindergartens (Lund et al., 2022) confirms earlier assumptions that they are gaining ground in the field (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019; Aabro, 2016). Not only are the tools widely used, but the number of different tools found in the kindergartens is also worth noting. In the case of tools used to support children's language development, a total of 16 tools were reported by the participating kindergartens. Some of them were used systematically in all the municipalities in the study, and several kindergartens reported the use of more than one language-learning tool. In the study, the informants were asked to describe why they used the reported tools. Among the answers, several informants stated that language is one of ECEC's focus areas, and this requires systematic language support. The need for language-learning tools was also seen in relation to the increase in the number of multilingual children enrolled in kindergarten.

Norwegian ECEC has been undergoing considerable changes over the last three decades and is now considered to be an important part of the education system (Østrem, 2018; Greve & Jansen, 2018). Political interest in the ECEC curriculum has increased since 2009, when ECEC became an individual legal right for children, and up to the present situation where most children from age one to six attend kindergarten (93.4% according to Statistics Norway, 2023). During the same period, "early intervention" is a recurring term in central policy documents (Vik, 2014), often in connection with discussions on the role of ECEC in preparing children for school and strengthening school learning and success. The changes in ECEC policy combined with an increasing number of multilingual children attending ECEC, have led to a stronger focus on the kindergarten's responsibility for the children's acquisition of the Norwegian language before they start school (Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020). The increased focus on language acquisition is reflected in the public debate and in policy documents, for instance, political propositions for a national language assessment system have been raised in Norway on several occasions over the last decade (Meld. St. 41 (2008–2009); Meld. St. 19 (2015–2016); Ministry of Education and Research, 2020).

The discussions on a national language assessment system are an expression of language policy, more specifically language education policy. As one of the most important domains for language policy (Spolsky, 2004), schools and kindergartens play a key role in implementing the policy. In Norway, the language education policy for ECEC is regulated

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

through official policy documents from the central authorities. Giæver & Tkachenko (2020) show how documents from different time periods have shifted towards a monolingual language policy. Lund et al. (2022) found a connection between areas that are considered to be important in policy documents and political debates, and the number of language-learning tools used in Norwegian kindergartens. For this reason, the tools can be considered an important part of the implementation of language education policy in Norwegian ECEC.

Holm (2017) identifies three approaches to the linguistic categorization of young children in kindergarten, drawing on analyses of legislation, academic discourses, linguistic test materials, programs, and concepts that aim to develop children's language. According to Holm (2017), the first traceable institutional linguistic categorization is *the special-education approach* which can be traced back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This approach, drawing on theories in psychometrics and structuralist linguistics, categorizes children into groups of "normal children" and "children with learning disorders" (Holm, 2017, p. 24). The categories are based on the assumption that a child's language is age-appropriate or not according to a norm. The language to be measured within the special-education approach comprises components from the phonological, morphological, and syntactic system, or is a predefined vocabulary where its actual use in communication is not explored (Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020; Holm, 2017). With *the bilingual approach*, the second approach identified by Holm (2017), two more linguistic categorizations of children are added: "monolingual" as opposed to "bilingual" children. The background for the categorization is a school-readiness approach, where it is assumed that the achievements of emergent bilingual children are already "behind" before starting school. This assumption can be related to what Ruíz (1984) has called a *language as problem* orientation. The minority children's lack of majority language skills becomes a cause of concern that brings considerable attention to language support in ECEC. At the same time, the increased focus on minority language children led to a *language as right* orientation (Ruíz, 1984) when bilingual preschool children's language acquisition was regulated through the Danish Education Act in 1997 (Holm, 2017). Holm (2017) points out that the bilingual approach opens for different interpretations of language support, given the interactional or sociocultural approaches to language (e.g., Bloome & Green, 2015) and theories of bilingual development and second language acquisition the approach draws on. This made the *language as resource* orientation (Ruíz, 1984) a possible approach to language support, despite that the main goal was to support acquisition of Danish as a second language. In general, language acquisition seems to be regarded a social practice where the language support is integrated in the everyday life of kindergarten. The possibilities for different interpretations of language support of multilingual children are also addressed in the Norwegian *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks in Kindergartens* (Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020).

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

The emphasis on school-readiness is even more visible in the *reading-oriented approach* (Holm, 2017). The approach emerged in 2007 when language assessment of three-year-olds in Denmark was introduced as a reaction to the PISA results in reading comprehension. Within this approach there are certain aspects of language connected to precursors to reading that will call for pedagogical interventions with respect to all children in ECEC (Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020). The children are categorized as “children with special needs” and “children with general needs” (Holm, 2017). The categories from the bilingual approach are no longer present, as children are measured with the same tools, irrespective of language background. The silencing of bilingual competence is associated with the *language as problem* orientation where speaking a minority language is considered a deficit to overcome to increase later school success (Hult & Hornberger, 2016). In addition to this monoglossic view of language, the reading-oriented approach is based on a structuralist approach to language combined with research on early literacy and reading, where aspects of language that are considered important in predicting later reading skills are emphasized. With this in mind, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, concepts of written language, and knowledge of the alphabet are given more emphasis than language as social practice. A child's vocabulary is considered one of the most important prerequisites for developing literacy, and as a result, language support is directed towards programs and interventions designed to strengthen vocabulary development. Blum (2015a) claims that the importance given to vocabulary is based on an ideological stance we can call “wordism” and “the language or word gap discourse” (p. 25). In Norway, the idea of a “word gap” has been used to legitimize the introduction of a national language assessment system in ECEC (Meld. St. 41, 2008–2009).

Even though the increase in the use of methods, manuals, programs, and tools is a relatively new phenomenon in Nordic kindergartens, several studies have focused on their impact on ECEC. For instance, there are several critical analyses of behavior management programs (Buus, 2019; Seland, 2020; Seland & Pålertud, 2023; Aabro, 2016), and analyses of language assessment materials used in Danish kindergartens (Holm, 2017; 2019; 2020). In Norway, Giæver (2018) examined how the expectation of appropriate acquisition of the majority language before starting school leads to structured language interventions and the use of standardized language assessment programs in kindergarten. Beyond Olsen's (2020) description of four Norwegian language-learning tools, there are no analyses of language-learning tools used in Norwegian kindergartens. This article contributes knowledge on the standardization of pedagogical practices in ECEC in general and on the language support practices more specifically. Due to the arguments in favor of using language tools found in the above-mentioned overview study (Lund et al., 2022), it is relevant to examine whether the tools take the linguistic diversity in Norwegian kindergartens into account.

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

In the content analysis described below, the deductive phase is primarily based on Holm's (2017) approaches to linguistic categorization. As the ECEC field in the Nordic countries has faced the same shift from a holistic approach to a school-readiness focus, especially in how children's language development is approached (Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020; Karila, 2012), the categorizations are suitable instruments for analyzing Norwegian language-learning tools. One of the reasons for using language-learning tools found in Lund et al. (2022), was language support of multilingual children. To pursue this further, I have used Ruíz's (1984) framework for examining different language orientations, that is, *language as resource*, *language as right*, and *language as problem*, examining the tools' approaches to multilingualism. The analysis will use the theoretical frameworks to explore the following research questions:

1. Which theoretical and ideological approaches to child language are found in the language-learning tools' manuals?
2. Which theoretical, ideological, and political arguments are used in the language-learning tools' manuals?

## Method and materials

The three language-learning tools analyzed in this article were chosen from the list of tools found in Lund et al. (2022) and are widely used in Norwegian kindergartens. The specific choice of the three tools in this study was based on accessibility. As most of the tools are commercial products, I was dependent on being able to borrow the tools from kindergartens. Due to the digitalization of the more recent tools, the choice of slightly older, physical tools was necessitated. Nevertheless, they are relevant to analyze because they are still in use according to the results of Lund et al. (2022). I used two criteria for choosing the tools from among the ones I was able to borrow: 1) The tool must have a user manual providing the theoretical background for and a description of the method. 2) The tool must have some sort of material (e.g., picture cards, illustrated books) in addition to the manual.

The three chosen tools are described below. In the presentation of findings, I will use the original (Norwegian) names of the tools. Nevertheless, I first provide my translation of the names to give readers an impression of what the tools' names mean.

### **Grep om begreper – en metodikk for begrepslæring (“Capturing concepts – a concept-learning method”) (Ibsen & Grove, 2015)**

This tool is presented as a practical and structured method for learning word meaning in ECEC. The method's target group comprises children aged three years and older, both

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>



children in need of, as they put it, “an extra push” (i.e., children with language impairment and children learning Norwegian as a second language), and those who do not have such a need (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 4). The goal of the method is to teach children how to use learning strategies to infer word meaning when they encounter new words, or as expressed in the manual: “learn to learn words” (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 4).

The method presented in the tool’s manual is a mind-mapping strategy adapted to the ECEC level. It suggests that figures, pictures, and symbols should be used in the mind-map in addition to written words to make it “more concrete” (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 12). The material consists of ten picture books about preselected words to use in group sessions, magnetic pictures from the books, and a magnetic white board for the mind maps.

The manual’s method instructions recommend an intensive working period with three group sessions per week for 8 to 12 weeks with groups of three to five children. In each session the teacher introduces the word of the day, followed by a conversation about the word’s content, form, and use, exemplified as an introduction to different types of semantic relations (synonyms, antonyms, hierarchical relations etc.), with such activities as detecting rhymes, splitting words into syllables, introducing the written form, making a phonemic analysis of words, and developing narrative competence.

The manual also contains a description of possible types of documenting language development, from case descriptions of children to a word measuring tool to evaluate the effect of the intervention.

### **Språkkista (“The language treasure chest”) (Bråthen, 2012)**

This tool is mainly intended for teaching Norwegian as a second language in ECEC but is also recommended for other children in need of some extra “language training”, or “language help”, as expressed in the manual (Bråthen, 2012, p. 3).

The tool’s method is described as thematic group activities or individual training in ten preselected topic areas. The author recommends starting with the first topic at the beginning of a new school year, beyond that there is no definite progression. The selected topics are: Myself, Home and family, Kindergarten, Food, Clothes, Animals, Vehicles and traffic, Seasons, holidays and festivals, and Transition from kindergarten to school.

The manual describes different activities recommended for each topic, including a regular circle time for each topic. In the manual, there are lists of different groups of words for each topic described as key words and concepts, superordinate and subordinate concepts, and verbs.

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

The material consists of a magnetic white board, illustrated thematic conversation cards, thematic picture books with photos illustrating key words, magnetic picture cards, picture cards for daily schedules, thematic picture wheels, a wheel with the days of the week, thematic memory games, a CD with thematic songs, and an activity book for children.

The activity book provides room for teachers' notes so they can document the child's language development. The documentation method is described as a word recognition and definition test.

### **Tall- og språksprell ("Number and language games") (Valle et al., 2010)**

The goal of this tool is to stimulate children's literacy and mathematical development, prevent school failure and detect children at risk of developing learning difficulties. For this analysis I have only investigated the part of the tool that focuses on language and literacy development. Therefore, I will use the short form *Språksprell* (Language games) in the presentation of the findings.

The material consists of a folder with instructions for play-based activities, picture cards, and cards with letters. The activities are meant to stimulate language awareness and vocabulary development to promote literacy development. The activities are recommended to be used three to four times a week in circle times with groups of up to ten children, each lasting for approximately 15 minutes. It is recommended that the progression and structure presented in the manual should be followed to strengthen the preventive impact.

The activities are divided into six topics: attention to sound, rhyming, syllable awareness, phonemic analysis, syntactic awareness, and morphological awareness. Each topic has a sheet for recording observations and registering the child's proficiency. It is recommended that this should be used before and after each topic to measure the impact of the intervention and identify children at risk.

### **Qualitative content analysis**

Qualitative content analysis methodology was the approach employed to analyze the tools. For a more complete understanding of the data, I chose an abductive approach. This involves moving back and forth between inductive and deductive approaches (Granheim et al., 2017).

The content analysis was performed in several steps. First, I read through all the tool manuals to obtain a sense of the whole, taking notes along the way. During this inductive phase, I had the research questions in mind when I reviewed the manuals looking for

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>



patterns. The identification of patterns in the inductive phase of the analysis was the basis for determining the theoretical frameworks for the next phase. In the deductive phase, the data were coded into units based on the theories accounted for in *Background and theories* section (see Table 1 for examples). From the units identified through the coding, I have formulated four themes that capture the essence of the tools which are presented in the next section.

TABLE 1 Examples of coding into theoretical units in the deductive phase of the content analysis

<i>THE SPECIAL-EDUCATION APPROACH</i>	<i>THE BILINGUAL APPROACH</i>	<i>THE READING-ORIENTED APPROACH</i>
In the class, there are four children who are in need of special language support. One child has difficulties with pronunciation, two of the children are multilingual. The remaining child is the one the staff is most concerned about. It is a boy struggling with language comprehension (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 35).	Many multilingual children are left out because they feel uncertain about everyday Norwegian (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 78).	Working with the language system can help strengthen children's later reading and writing skills (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 25).

## Findings and discussion

### Precursors to reading

The most prominent approach to categorization of children's language in the tools' manuals is *the reading-oriented* approach (Holm, 2017), where a child's early language development is seen as a precursor to reading skills in school, exemplified by this quotation from *Språksprell*: "In this way we are working towards making the children better prepared for when they start school" (Valle et al., 2010, p. 12). Following Holm's argumentation, through the categorizations of children in the reading-oriented approach, there are no children who do not need language support. In all the analyzed tools, I found the same arguments; every child will benefit from support through these tools, some children more than others, as we can see in this quotation from *Grep om begreper*: "Not only children with special needs, but all children, will benefit from the help to establish a solid foundation of concepts" (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 3). The terms used to categorize children in the quotation can be compared to the categories Holm (2017) finds in his analysis: "children with special needs" and "children with general needs".

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

In two of the tools, *Grep om begreper* and *Språksprell*, the school-readiness approach is explicitly expressed, for instance, by pointing out the relation between early vocabulary in preschool years and later reading comprehension. In *Grep om begreper*, supporting children's vocabulary development is presented as "both a short-term and long-term investment" (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 6), while the main goal of the activities in *Språksprell* is to facilitate development of reading skills (Valle et al., 2010). *Språkkista* has no explicit arguments relating to school readiness, but the manual has suggestions of activities supporting aspects of language that are considered important as predictors of later reading skills (i.e., identifying rhymes, recognizing letters, and identifying sounds in words) (e.g., National Early Literacy Panel, 2008).

As mentioned above, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, and knowledge of the alphabet are emphasized in the analyzed tools, but some aspects are given more attention than others in the different tools. In *Grep om begreper* and *Språkkista*, the main purpose of the interventions is vocabulary development. The discussions about word learning and vocabulary in the tools will be presented in the section entitled "Wordism." *Språksprell*, however, focuses on phonological awareness, mainly connected to spoken language. The activities have a progression from paying attention to sounds, through identifying and producing rhymes and recognizing syllables, to undertaking phonemic analysis. The tool's manual has a section on theories of literacy development. In addition to a section on children's normal reading development, it includes a section on reading disabilities. The absence of a focus on children's emergent writing is striking, even though it is known that children's invented spelling and exploration of written texts are important for literacy development, and that children's writing can give teachers valuable information about their metalinguistic insights (Hagtvet, 2014; Hoflungsen, 2017). Early text production will not only have an impact on phonemic awareness, the discovery of the use of written text can increase the motivation to learn how to read and write (Korsgaard et al., 2019). This lack of a focus on the functions of written text can be seen as a consequence of the structuralist approach to language the reading-oriented approach is based on (Holm, 2017).

The focus on oral activities to train phonemic awareness in *Språksprell* can be an expression of a *special-education approach* to the categorization of children's language (cf. Holm, 2017), as variations in phonological skills and phonemic awareness are related to reading accuracy (Duff & Snowling, 2015). If children are identified with phonological deficits, early interventions promoting these skills are seen as a way to prevent these problems from arising later in life. This leads me to the next section, where I will demonstrate how traces of *the special-education approach* are visible in the tools.

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

## Early intervention

The concept of *early intervention* has gained an important position in Norwegian education policy over the last decades (Vik, 2018), and is firmly embedded in the *school-readiness approach* as the aim is to prevent problems from arising later in children's lives, especially in connection with school success. A key part of this prevention approach is to identify the children in need of an intervention (Vik, 2018). As Holm (2017) points out through his analysis, there has been a change over time when it comes to who are categorized as "children in need." This is due to changes in what has been identified as the problem (Vik, 2018). The identification of the "children in need" in the tools is not obvious. In two of them, *Grep om begreper* and *Språkkista*, the category "children in need of extra language support" is used to describe a heterogeneous group consisting of children with language impairment, multilingual children (children learning Norwegian as a second language and minority-language children are the terms used in the tools), children with language difficulties, and children in need of extra language training. *Språksprell* is presented both as a general early intervention tool (e.g., "the activities contribute to the prevention of possible difficulties" [Valle et al., 2010, p. 5]), and as preventive intervention for children at risk (e.g., "identifying children at risk of developing difficulties" [Valle et al., 2010, p. 15]). The children at risk are described as children with language and speech impairments and children in need of extra help. The activities described in the manual can be used to identify children at risk. Those who have substantial difficulties in managing the tasks and activities described in the manual can be at risk of having problems in school (Valle et al. 2010). Based on this description in the manual, an interpretation of what is a criterion for being categorized as a "normal child" (cf. Holm, 2017) is the ability to manage the recommended activities in the tool.

According to Vik (2018), the idea of early intervention is based on a problem-oriented approach to children's needs. When it comes to language intervention, these needs are linked to seeing language from a problem-orientation perspective (Ruíz, 1984), in other words when, in one way or another, children fail to perform in accordance with the norms and expectations of what is perceived as normal development. As we can see from the examples in the tools, the categorization of a "normal child" is rather narrow, for instance when multilingual children are categorized together with children with language impairment which can be read as a consequence of a monolingual evaluation of multilingual children (Holm, 2019). I will discuss this further in the next section: *Multilingualism as a problem and as a resource*.

The problem-oriented approach that is visible in the tools (e.g., seen in the examples from *Språksprell* above) can also lead us to the idea of a "language gap," an idea "that language is principally made up of discreet units the size of words" (Blum, 2015a, p. 25) that is

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

linked to the structuralist view on language. According to Holm (2019), a consequence of an expansion of *the special-education approach* with theoretical background from structuralist theories of language and psychometric assessment theory is that no child will escape the control of normality established by standardized language tools.

### **Multilingualism as a problem and as a resource**

As mentioned in the theory section, *the bilingual approach* (Holm, 2017) opens for different interpretations of language support for multilingual children. Here I will show how this is also the case for the tools I have analyzed.

*Språkkista* is the only tool where multilingual children are explicitly mentioned as the main target group. In the manual, the term *minority-language children* is used to describe the target group, a term defined in Norwegian policy documents as “children with a different language and cultural background than Norwegian. However, this does not apply to children whose mother tongue is Norwegian, Sami, Swedish, Danish, or English” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023). *Minority-language children* is defined in exclusionary terms as other-than Norwegian and Sami, both national languages of equal worth. Swedish, Danish (closely related to Norwegian), and English (the level of competence is generally high in Norway) are included in the majority as the children speaking these languages are normally able to communicate with the ECEC staff (Bubikova-Moan, 2017). The use of the term *minority-language children* corresponds to the terminology used in Norwegian policy documents the last 30 years where *multilingualism* is scarcely mentioned (Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020).

Even though the other tools do not have multilingual children as a main target group, acquisition of Norwegian as a second language is mentioned as one of the reasons for using the tools. In all the tools, multilingual children are described as a group of children with a special need for language support. As discussed above, multilingual children are categorized as a group of “children in need of extra language support” together with children in need of special education, or as expressed in *Grep om begreper*, “children who, for various reasons, use little language” (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 23). There are also examples where multilingual children are grouped with younger children. One example of this is the advice given on how to ask questions in conversations: “Don’t ask difficult questions of the youngest children or children with little proficiency in Norwegian” (Bråthen, 2012, p. 9). Another example is the advice given in *Grep om begreper* to skip parts of the books used with the tool where the children are introduced to abstract reflection when reading them to two- and three-year-olds or children early in their second-language acquisition (Ibsen & Grove, 2015). The tool operates with the term “language level” to describe children who are at a different level in language development in Norwegian than their age would otherwise indicate. According to this, a five-year-old

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

multilingual child can be expected to be on the same “language level” in Norwegian as a two-year-old monolingual child (Ibsen & Grove, 2015). The categorization of children into different “language levels” can be related to *the special-education approach* which is characterized by using a psychometric measurement method distinguishing between “mental age” and “chronological age” (Holm, 2017).

Comparing multilingual children to children with language impairments and younger monolingual children can be regarded as part of the *language as problem* orientation (Ruíz, 1984). The children’s multilingualism is seen as a problem that can be solved through special language support. An example from *Grep om begreper* can illustrate this deficit perspective: “Many multilingual children are left out because they feel uncertain about everyday Norwegian” (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 78). This perspective on multilingual children’s capabilities is even clearer in *Språksprell*, where multilingual children are described as lacking not only Norwegian words, but also concepts, as we can see in this quotation: “This can present itself as limited vocabulary and lack of language concepts in Norwegian, which can lead to misunderstandings and problems in communicating” (Valle et al., 2010, p. 84). To prevent an even larger problem later in school, early intervention is presented as a solution: “Without sufficient language support in Norwegian before starting school, there is a high probability that minority-language students will fall behind in terms of school performance. Bearing this in mind, it is important to have early language intervention” (Valle et al., 2010, p. 84). The example is related to the idea of a “language gap” (Blum, 2015a) that can be bridged through a language shift to the majority language to meet the expectations from an educational system based on a monoglossic ideology (cf. García, 2009).

The *language as problem* orientation supports linguistic assimilation where monolingualism is the goal. The children’s home language can be part of the transition to the majority language, but only temporarily. This position on the children’s home languages is also visible in the tools, for instance in this description of code switching: “When a child is learning a new language, language mixing is common. The child will eventually stop mixing languages when the second-language skills are better” (Bråthen, 2012, p. 8). Using other languages than the majority language in kindergarten is described as random and temporary language use leading the child towards the majority-language goal.

Two of the tools, *Grep om begreper* and *Språkkista*, describe multilingualism in terms of Cummins’ interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 2000), for instance this quotation from *Språkkista*: “If the child already knows the conceptual content, it will be easier to learn words for the same concept in other languages” (Bråthen, 2012, p. 7). Cummins (2000) points to the importance of instruction that supports both languages, claiming that

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

transfer between the languages does not arise automatically. The manuals for the tools, on the other hand, provide few examples of how to support the children's home languages. Nevertheless, the thematic picture books that are part of the material in *Språkkista* translate keywords into 11 languages. But examples of how to use the translations as language support are lacking, with the exception of one suggestion to use them in collaboration with parents who have little or no knowledge of the majority language (Bråthen, 2012). The manual refers to recommendations from the Framework plan on the importance of children's mother tongue and cooperation with minority language parents. This is the only example of the *language as right* orientation (Ruíz, 1984) in the tools. Maintaining the home language is recommended in the manual, but it seems that the responsibility for this is left to the parents.

Although the *language as problem* orientation is visible in all the tools, there are also signs of a *language as resource* orientation (Ruíz, 1984) in them. The manual for *Grep om begreper* has instructions on how to collaborate with parents and multilingual teachers in translating the key words used in the language sessions. The reason for using the children's home language is that "It is not a bad idea to reverse the roles every so often in regard to who is the one with the 'language power'" (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 18). In the description of the children's home language, we find such words as *acknowledgement*, *valuable*, and *status*, words that can be connected to a symbolic use of multiple languages within mainstream education with the aim at acknowledging and valorizing migrant languages (Duarte, 2020). Making the home languages visible in the group is described not only as valuable for the child speaking another language than Norwegian, but for all the children in the group. However, use of the home languages is still considered an instrument for learning, as the main reason for using them is the development of language awareness (e.g., identifying the arbitrary nature of meaning). For the same reason, teachers are encouraged to make use of their own language repertoires, including dialects and the neighboring Scandinavian languages. The manual has explicit examples of how to involve multiple languages while using the tool as language support. There are also examples of how to compare languages in a metalinguistic conversation. The picture books supporting the tool have characters with different skin colors and names reflecting different cultures, which might encourage talking about the characters' language proficiency. However, words from different languages are rarely explicitly mentioned. There is one exception, where a word is written in Arabic in one picture in one of the books with the instruction to compare the Arabic written form of the word to the Norwegian form. According to Bialystok et al. (2005), seeing words written in two different ways can make children aware of the symbolic representation of words in print. In the suggestions for how to involve children's home languages in the activities described in the manual, multilingualism is considered a resource for all.

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>



In sum, the theoretical views on multilingualism displayed through the analysis of the tools' manuals alternate between the *language as problem* orientation and the *language as resource* orientation. Even though there are some examples of cross-linguistic activities, I would argue that the tools are based on a monoglossic language ideology. The arguments for using the tools for language support for multilingual children is to ensure later school success. This is believed to be best achieved through early language intervention in Norwegian. To the extent home language support is mentioned, it is mainly seen as an instrument for learning Norwegian or the responsibility for it is shifted onto the parents. However, there are a few examples where both children's and teachers' multilingual repertoires are highlighted as a resource for all.

### **“Wordism”**

The title of this section has been borrowed from a language ideology bearing that name (Blum, 2015b). “Wordism” sees language as principally comprising units the size of words. In this section I argue that the tools are based on this ideology. According to Blum (2015b), the ideology not only posits that language is principally about units the size of words, but also the more words the better, that the referential function of language is its main purpose, and that the job of parents (and teachers) is to ask questions where the answer is known by the asker. She connects “wordism” to an idea of childhood as learning for schooling, an idea frequently appearing in the analyzed tools.

“Wordism” was present most clearly in two of the tools, *Grep om begreper* and *Språkkista*, as the main purpose of the interventions in these tools is vocabulary development. The manuals see developing vocabulary and the meaning of words as the most important part of the language system, or “one of the core areas in language” as expressed in *Grep om begreper* (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 3). Several metaphors are used in the description of the semantic system. Conceptual meaning is described as constituting fundamental building-blocks, and the system is described as a tree trunk, a mental drawer, or an archive where the concepts are saved (Ibsen & Grove, 2015). The tree metaphor states: “Working with the branches, e.g., syntax or pronunciation, has little effect if the trunk is too thin and can't stand straight” (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 7). The use of these metaphors shows an approach to language as an abstract and ideal system, and a cognitive property, consisting of a number of components, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, morphology, and syntax that are seen as prerequisites for communication (Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020, p. 45). The tree metaphor is based on the assumption that children's acquisition of grammatical competence starts with individual words, learned in isolation. These are then glued together with abstract meaningless rules, the so called “words and rules” approach (Pinker, 1999 as cited in Tomasello, 2015, p. 95), an approach to language that considers the word to be the basic unit of language acquisition. This idea has been criticized by

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

Tomasello (2015), who proposes a usage-based theory of language acquisition as an alternative, where the utterance in children's early linguistic communication is the unit of interest, as "an utterance is the smallest unit in which a person expresses a complete communicative intention" (p. 92). The communicative intention of an utterance will in most cases contain much more than just a referential function, what Austin (as cited in Bryant, 2015, p. 439) called the locutionary speech act. To determine the function or purpose of an utterance, the illocutionary speech act, the listener is dependent on the context. In the tools, on the other hand, word meaning is expressed as something children learn in isolation, one word at a time, while adults take on the role as donors of language (cf. Ahrenkiel et al., 2021). Below, I will show examples of this approach to children's acquisition of word meaning from the *Grep om begreper* manual.

The goal of the tool is to teach the children how to use learning strategies to infer word meaning when they encounter new words through a mind-mapping strategy. For each group session a new word is presented by the teacher. The mind map is constructed through a conversation on the meaning of the chosen word. The manual provides a description of what should be considered as respectable competence in a child's word knowledge; "the child is able to describe the word in a way that others can understand" (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 85), that is, the locutionary aspect of a word isolated from its context. Before a child reaches this type of competence, they are, according to the manual, only able to give subjective or egocentric descriptions of the words. This description of an expected progression in developing word knowledge is grounded on the assumption that word knowledge exists in isolation from context and intentions, as "individual words 'without motive'" (Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020, p. 49). The idea of a certain progression in vocabulary development is expressed through the suggested words for use in the group sessions. It is recommended to start with words that refer to concrete concepts, and then introduce "the oldest children and children without language difficulties" (Ibsen & Grove, 2015, p. 80) to words referring to abstract concepts. The proposed progression is based on a well-known dichotomy of language, the distinction between contextualized and decontextualized language (García, 2009). But the definition of abstract concepts is not clear. In the lists of suggested words, few of them actually refer to abstract concepts (see the last paragraph in this section).

As mentioned above, the ideology of "wordism" suggests that the referential function of language is seen as its principal activity, leading to interactions where parents (and teachers) ask questions where the answer is known (Blum, 2015a), and establish utterance schemas for naming objects (Tomasello, 2015). In this traditional approach to word learning it is assumed that children primarily acquire words when a child and an adult are jointly focused on the same referent and the adult makes an explicit link between the referent and the novel word (Graham et al., 2015). As has been seen above, this

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

approach to word learning is apparent in the manual for *Grep om begreper*. In the other tool that mainly focuses on vocabulary, *Språkkista*, verbs like *rehearsing* and *training* are used to describe children's acquisition process, while the verbs *presenting* and *naming* are used to describe the teacher's role. According to Blum (2015a), another dominating aspect in "wordism" is the idea of direct instruction, an important aspect of the explanations for using the tools in supporting children's language in kindergarten, as demonstrated in this quotation from *Språkkista*: "We will present key words and concepts within the theme, introduce relevant verbs and make the children familiar with superordinate and subordinate concepts" (Bråthen, 2012, p. 20).

The traditional approach to word learning presupposes a concrete referent to link the word to. Here I will examine how this can affect the choice of words suggested in the manuals. Both manuals have lists of words for each suggested topic for work in group sessions. In *Grep om begreper*, the word lists are divided into words referring to concrete concepts and words referring to abstract concepts. Examples of "concrete words" are words for objects (jacket, hat, boots, mushroom, thermos bottle), and words for weather conditions (rain, wind, cloud). Examples of "abstract words" are mostly verbs (freeze, rake, harvest) and adjectives (wet, withered), which reflects an unconventional view of what abstract concepts are, and what makes it uncertain if the children will experience the progression from concrete to abstract concepts recommended in the manual. The magnetic pictures that are part of the material supplied with the tool illustrate words connected to the preselected topics. About 60 percent of the illustrated words are words for objects. *Språkkista* has wordlists with keywords, related words, and verbs for each of the suggested topics for the group sessions. The keywords are illustrated in picture books and on magnetic picture cards, the most important material supplied with the tool. As in *Grep om begreper*, the words presented as important in *Språkkista* are words for objects and verbs referring to observable and experienced actions. Examples from the topic *food* are nouns and verbs like meat, fish, egg, bread, cheese, milk, apple, tomato, yoghurt, to drink, to taste, and to smell. There is no explanation as to why the vocabulary presented is of special importance for the children to learn. *Språkkista* has a preselected vocabulary, whereas in *Grep om begreper*, the preselected vocabulary is limited to the ten picture books included in the tool. The remaining vocabulary to use in group sessions is supposed to be decided by each teacher using the tool. Nevertheless, what counts as important in a child's vocabulary is decided by an adult, independent of what the child might need the most in her life.

## Concluding remarks

Through the lens of the theoretical framework accounted for in the *Background and theories* section, I developed the four themes used to present and discuss the findings. The purpose of the study was to examine the theoretical and ideological approaches to child language applied in the language-learning tools, as well as the arguments used to justify the use of these tools for language support. As the themes in the findings emphasize, the approaches to children's language development found in the tools correspond to a shift in the ECEC field from a holistic approach to a keener focus on school readiness. The themes visualize a view of language as an instrument for the children's academic abilities in school through a focus on the acquisition of isolated language components that are considered important for predicting later reading skills and on majority-language acquisition for children with minority home languages. The school-readiness approach's attachment to the idea of early intervention and the role ECEC plays in preventing problems from surfacing later in school makes the *language as problem* orientation (Ruíz, 1984) the most salient approach in the tools analyzed in this study.

The phenomenon examined in this article is characterized as methods, manuals, programs, and tools that can be used in any contexts without taking the local conditions into account. In other words, they are universal, fit anywhere, and are not sensitive to context (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019). This characteristic is visible in various ways in the analyzed tools.

In the tools, selected aspects of language are given more attention than others, and vocabulary is believed to be the most important part of the language system. Language development is therefore implied to rely on acquiring fragmented components learned in isolation from context and intentions. Within this view of language development, the referential function of language is seen as its main activity, and words are acquired in interactions where the adult makes a link between the referent and the novel word. When language learning is understood simply as object-naming, this may lead to adult-led language practices where teachers ask questions where the answer is known. Such a view of language does not correspond to the holistic approach associated with Norwegian and Nordic ECEC, where learning is seen as relational, local, and situated, and children's perspectives are emphasized (cf. Seland & Pålserud, 2023).

Seeing language development as solely a question of filling a word gap by adult-led training may be a result of an expansion of the *special-education approach* (cf. Holm, 2019). In the analyzed tools this approach is displayed through an emphasis on preventing problems from arising in school. This view conflicts with an emphasis on the intrinsic value of childhood, which is a core value of the Norwegian kindergarten

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

(Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 8). The result of using a tool based on a *special-education approach* as a universal method for language learning is, among other things, that multilingual children are categorized together with children with language impairment. A silencing of the linguistic diversity found in most Norwegian kindergartens these days makes the unsensitivity to context particularly visible. However, the monolingual evaluation of multilingual children found in the tools may be due to their publication dates. Hopefully, more recently developed tools are more inclusive in their approach, but as the studied tools are still in use in many kindergartens, they maintain a monolingual approach to language education. This is worrying and may lead to kindergarten staff adopting old, monoglossic views, in which children's emergent multilingual abilities is seen as a deficit or hindrance rather than a resource.

Giæver and Tkachenko (2020) argue that the *language as resource* orientation can be found in the *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergarten* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), and this orientation makes interpretations in the direction of a heteroglossic language ideology possible. On the other hand, they regard the lack of concrete strategies in the policy documents as causing a considerable focus on the Norwegian language. The widespread use of language-learning tools in the ECEC, and the number of tools available (cf. Lund et al., 2022), can be an expression of the need for strategies to fill "an open implementational space" created by the absence of a clear language education policy (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021, p. 39). When offered to the kindergartens as strategies for language support, language-learning tools can be considered an important part of the implementation of language education policy for Norwegian ECEC. As the findings show, the interpretations of ECEC's role in children's language acquisition conveyed by the tools can contribute to strengthening established approaches to language found in recent policy documents and public debates (e.g., Ministry of Education and Research, 2020).

Mary and Young (2017) argue that "ideological beliefs about language and languages continue to obstruct progress" in many classrooms (p. 109). In this article, I have given examples of how language-learning tools can play a considerable part in the practiced language policy (Bonacina-Pugh, 2012). As mentioned above, the Framework Plan implies a heteroglossic ideology. However, if the practiced language policy is to be made heteroglossic, *language as resource* strategies for language support must be foregrounded.

It is important to stress that the intention of this study is not to undermine the value of supporting aspects of language that are precursors to reading, which have well documented effects (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008), or to question the importance of supporting children's learning of Norwegian as a second language. The motivation for

Lund.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 149–172. <https://journal.fi/jecer>

the analysis is to consider whether language-learning tools could have an impact on the pedagogical practices preferred in kindergartens (cf. Holm, 2020; Ministry of Education and Research, 2011, p. 141), on what teachers see as important in children's language development, and, not least, on which languages are acknowledged as valuable in the kindergarten's linguistic environment. As I have shown in the discussion, the approaches found in the tools are not compatible with the linguistic diversity found in many Norwegian kindergartens. The simplification of language and language development, due to the focus on precursors to reading in the majority language, undermine the holistic approach to children's lives highlighted in the Framework Plan:

The children shall be welcomed as individuals, and the kindergarten shall respect the child's experiential world. Children's lives are shaped by their environment, but children also exert influence over their own lives. Kindergartens shall make allowances for the children's differing abilities, perspectives and experiences and help to ensure that the children, together with others, develop a positive relationship with themselves and confidence in their own abilities. (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 8.)

The *language as resource* strategies for language support I call for may not be supplemented with a manual, but hopefully the child's experiential world, as cited in the quotation, will be more apparent when using them for language support rather than the analyzed tools.

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