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# “If you don’t know English, it is like there is something wrong with you.” Students’ views of language(s) in a plurilingual setting

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**Abstract:** Based on a repertoire-oriented stance to language learning and a broad definition of language awareness, this study investigates students’ discursive representations of the languages in their repertoires in the context of a plurilingual language awareness course (*Almen Sprogforståelse*). The study is based on a subset of data collected in a multi-case study focusing on language awareness across educational levels. Through an inductive and iterative thematic content analysis of interview and classroom data, the authors identify six themes central to the ways in which students talk about language: (1) language learning experiences and skills, (2) gateways, (3) attractiveness, (4) family and friendship, (5) everyday presence and (6) usefulness. The study investigates the relationship between the different themes and languages, revealing how students’ personal linguistic biographies and *Spracherleben* interact with classroom ideologies in shaping the ways in which students perceive and describe different languages. Despite students’ display of rich repertoires and language awareness, some languages are positioned discursively as need-to-have and others as nice-to-have or even impossible-to-opt-out-of, mirroring societal discourses surrounding these languages. In this sense, the results of the study underscore the importance of the development of critical language awareness, specifically in the context of the compulsory General Language Awareness course.

**Keywords:** language ideology; language attitudes; linguistic repertoire; language awareness; *Almen Sprogforståelse*; plurilingual education

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# 1 Introduction

As decades of research in SLA and L2 motivation have shown, students' attitudes to different languages have a clear impact on their language learning success (Dörnyei and Ryan 2015; Henry and Thorsen 2019; Ushioda 2009). Our current societies can be characterized as global, multicultural and multilingual public spheres (Douglas Fir Group 2016) and this is reflected in the European language curricula, especially in the Nordic countries, which increasingly represent concepts of multilingualism (e.g., Paulsrud et al. 2020). It is therefore vital that students' attitudes or views of different languages are considered in the perspective of this new reality characterised by increased multilingualism (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie 2017).

With the *multilingual turn* in research (Henry 2017; Marshall and Moore 2018; Meier 2016), focus has shifted from students' linguistic competences in individual named languages to the *linguistic repertoire* (Blommaert 2010; Busch 2012, 2017; Krogager Andersen and Daugaard 2023), which is seen as complex and dynamic. Nonetheless, language education is still overwhelmingly organized in separate language subjects with little contact across first, second and foreign languages (Douglas Fir Group 2016; Kabel et al. 2019). In this sense, there is a certain contradiction between our theoretically and empirically based research-oriented view of students' linguistic repertoires as fluid and interconnected and the everyday realities of school. The multilingual classroom calls for increased language awareness from both teachers and students (Young 2018), while also creating distinct opportunities for language awareness (Daugaard 2013).

Research has repeatedly underscored special potentials for language awareness associated with bi- and multilingualism (specifically metalinguistic analysis and control, Bialystok 2006, 2011; metalinguistic awareness, Dolas et al. 2021; Jessner 2008), but also the necessity of taking students' multilingualism into account in foreign language teaching in order to reap these benefits (Krogager Andersen 2020, 2024). The question is where this conflict between research-based knowledge and the practical organisation of language teaching leaves students, and how they perceive their own linguistic repertoires and the named languages that are connected to it.

The present study aims at tackling this question in the specific Danish context of the course on General Language Awareness (*Almen Sprogforståelse*, henceforth GLA). GLA forms a particular case in the Danish language curriculum, being the only plurilingual course in primary or secondary education. It was introduced at the entry to upper secondary education in 2005, originally only into the most academically oriented branch of upper secondary education (*gymnasium/STX*), but later also in the business-oriented branch of upper secondary education (*handelsskole/HHX*). It is a

45 h course, which aims to build bridges across the languages of the curriculum and to create “a common base” for language studies during upper secondary education (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet Danish Ministry of Children and Education 2004: 1.1, for an analysis of the curriculum, see Daryai-Hansen and Krogager Andersen 2024). Due to the plurilingual ambition of the course and its focus on language awareness, it forms an exceptional context for investigating students’ attitudes to their linguistic repertoires.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Language awareness in the GLA course and in this study

The GLA curriculum (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet Danish Ministry of Children and Education 2004) is organised around several concepts which may be seen as different conceptualisations of language awareness. The name of the course *Almen Sprogforståelse* (literally: General Language Understanding) is based on *forstå* (‘understand’), and may be interpreted along the lines of Schmidt’s (1995) *understanding*, which is defined through its relationship to *attention*, *intention* and *noticing*. Schmidt describes *understanding* as an abstraction which allows the language learner to see the relationship between a specific linguistic input and the abstract linguistic system, i.e., it implies *awareness* not only as the noticing of linguistic form and function but also as the coupling of this noticing to metalinguistic knowledge (Schmidt 1995: 29–30). Considering the course aims, such an interpretation of its title seems meaningful. The other concepts used in the curriculum are:

*Sproglig bevidsthed* ‘language awareness’

*Sproglig analysefærdighed* ‘linguistic analytical skill’

*Sproglig kreativitet* ‘linguistic creativity’

*Sproglig fantasi* ‘linguistic fantasy’

These concepts may all be seen as different aspects, dimensions or levels of language awareness, since LA has been defined throughout the past decades in many different ways (Frijns et al. 2018). Both James’ and Garrett’s (1992: 12) definition of LA (including the performative, the cognitive, the affective, the social and the power domains), van Lier’s model (1998, 2004) and later works drawing on this (Daryai-Hansen et al. 2023; Krogager Andersen 2020) conceptualise language awareness as a multidimensional (or multi-level) phenomenon. In the curriculum of the GLA course, *language*

*awareness (sproglig bevidsthed)* is discursively differentiated from *linguistic analysis, creativity and fantasy*, and while the two former appear to denote forms of metalinguistic awareness, the two latter may be understood as forms of *practical language awareness* in van Lier's (2004) sense (Daryai-Hansen et al. 2023).

The form of LA in focus in this article is based on a very broad definition of the concept by Krogager Andersen (2020: 13, our translation): *Language awareness is, in its different manifestations, different ways of relating to language: attentively, curiously, by way of experimenting, creatively, analytically, reflectively or holistically*. In this broad sense, language awareness may manifest itself in many ways through doing things with and talking about language, including talking about one's own or others' linguistic repertoires. It may take the form of metalinguistic or critical reflection on languages, it may be formed by the individual's linguistic biography or be related to linguistic ideology and the status of certain languages in society. This kind of reflections form the topic of this study.

## 2.2 Language repertoires, lived experience and language ideology

Throughout the past decades, the existing cognitive, formalist and monolingual views of language have been complemented by sociolinguistic, ecological, dialogic and multilingual ones. Research on language use and learning has thus undergone first a social turn (Block 2003; Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007) directing more attention to the social aspects of language, and subsequently a multilingual turn (Conteh and Meier 2014; May 2014) focusing on societal and individual linguistic diversity and multilingualism. These turns have led to quite radical re-conceptualizations of languages as semiotic resources rather than systemic structures or skills (e.g., Li 2011; Makoni and Pennycook 2007).

Rather than emphasizing the systemic nature of clearly separated and named languages, and accordingly conceptualising language learning as the acquisition of such systems, socio-culturally framed research on (multilingual) language use emphasizes how language is not just a system, but a semiotic resource (e.g., Blommaert 2010; Makoni and Pennycook 2007). Thus, learning and knowing languages "refers not so much to the mastery of a grammar or sociolinguistic system, as to the strategic capacity to use diverse semiotic items across integrated media and modalities" (Pennycook 2010: 129).

This resource-oriented view of language also entails a focus on linguistic repertoires rather than the acquisition of named languages. The concept of *repertoire* was originally used by Gumperz (1964) and connected to language use in rather stable speech communities (Busch 2017: 344). Today, the concept of repertoires is

used broadly in sociolinguistics and serves as a basis for very recent concepts such as translanguaging (cf. García 2009; Li 2018).

Similarly to Kramsch (2009), who emphasized the importance of the subjective experience in language learning, Busch (2017) extended the idea of repertoires to *Spracherleben*, the lived experience of language, to bring in the subjective trajectories and experiences of language users. She argued that language ideologies have a strong impact on people's linguistic repertoires. Language ideologies influence language policies and thereby determine what languages are available for learners as well as what languages are valued in society and how (e.g., Douglas Fir Group 2016). The lived experience is thus inherently connected to language ideologies and "personal attitudes to language are largely determined by the value ascribed to a language or language variety in a particular social space" (Busch 2017: 348). This connection between personal attitudes and the societal status of a language is also pointed out by Park (2022) and Padilla and Vana's (2019) work on ideologies reflected in foreign language textbooks illustrate how such societal valorisations are omnipresent in students' linguistic environments.

As mentioned above, our schooling systems are still largely organized around the system view of languages, i.e., languages are treated as separate school subjects, but at the same time people's linguistic and semiotic repertoires are more and more diverse and nuanced. Therefore, we are obliged to treat language simultaneously as a system and as resource. As Otsuji and Pennycook (2010) point out, language can be seen simultaneously as specific languages with fixed, codified and named boundaries, and as local and individual resources. This view is particularly important in the context of this study where students both learn languages as school subjects, encounter different languages in their everyday lives, and attend a plurilingual course on language awareness. In this complex and multilayered context, we examine how their personal lived experiences connect to language ideologies prevalent both at school and in society.

### 3 Data and methods

This article draws on data produced in the context of the research project 0132-00280B (financed by The Independent Research Fund Denmark) investigating language awareness in plurilingual education in Denmark through curriculum analysis and multiple case study, and is based on one specific case: LA as manifested through views of language by two groups of upper secondary students in the GLA course. All students and teachers involved in the project were informed about the purpose and content of the research and signed consent forms in accordance with GDPR guidelines.

Table 1: Overview of focal students.

Student Alias	School	Linguistic repertoire as represented in Language Passport (chosen L3 in bold)	Gender
Anna	A	Danish, <b>German</b> , English, Norwegian, Spanish	Female
Christina	A	Danish, <b>German</b> , English, Norwegian, Swedish, Spanish, Russian	Female
Leila	A	Danish, <b>German</b> , Turkish, English, Spanish, French, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Arabic	Female
Aisha	A	Danish, English, <b>German</b> , Arabic, Swedish	Female
Mark	A	Danish, English, <b>German</b> , Norwegian	Male
Thomas	A	Danish, English, <b>German</b> , Norwegian, Vietnamese, Swedish	Male
Sonia	B	Danish, English, <b>Spanish</b> , German, French, Norwegian, Latin	Female
Tabitha	B	Danish, English, <b>Spanish</b> , German, Arabic, Turkish, Norwegian, Latin, Somali, Swedish	Female
Safia	B	Danish, English, <b>German</b> , Spanish, Swedish, Norwegian, Afghanian, Somali, Russian, Italian	Female
Rihanna	B	Not present on the day of the language portrait ( <b>French L3</b> )	Female
Mikkel	B	Danish, English, Norwegian, German ( <b>Spanish</b> )	Male
Peter	B	Danish, English, <b>German</b> , Norwegian, Swedish	Male

The case schools were chosen for their plurilingual and multicultural profiles, and six focal students were selected in each classroom (a total of 12 students) to represent the linguistic, academic and gender diversity in each classroom. Linguistic diversity was established by including The European Language Passport (ECML 2016) as an initial activity and choosing students with varied linguistic repertoires as represented in these Language Passports (Table 1).

In both schools, the full course was observed by Author 1 and documented by field notes, audio recordings and collected student work. Furthermore, the focal students participated in group interviews (with three students in each group) midway and after the end of the course. In the midway interview, these students were posed with a task: 25 pictures with a range of different motives were spread out in the classroom and the students were asked to pick the three which best represented three of the languages in their Language Passports and elaborate on their choices. The primary data in this article stems from this task. To supplement these data, we chose to include all the transcribed classroom data from school A where the same languages were mentioned by any student (Table 2).

Table 2: Data overview.

	Data type	Students	School	Data format
Primary data	Interview extracts – picture task	Focal students only	A & B	Audio & transcripts
	Pictures chosen	Focal students only	A & B	Twenty five pictures
	Interview extracts – views of named languages	Focal students only	A & B	Audio & transcripts
Supplementary data	Post-course interviews	Focal students only	A & B	Audio & transcripts
	Mentions of the named languages during classroom discourse by focal students	All, focus on focal students	A	Audio & transcripts
	Classroom observations	Focus on focal students	A	Field notes

3.1 Research questions

We investigate language awareness in the form of students’ views of their own linguistic repertoires and the languages connected to them, guided by the following research questions:

- 1. What themes emerge in students’ talk about the languages in their personal repertoires?
- 2. How do these themes relate to specific languages and their status in society?

3.2 Method of analysis

The data were analysed using thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) and the approach was inductive and iterative (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009; Mayring 2015). We started off with an explorative and data-driven approach to the transcripts related to the picture task, first looking at which pictures were chosen to represent which languages. After gaining an initial overview of the pictures, we looked at the discursive representation of the languages in students’ oral elaborations on their choices. On this basis, we decided to code all data where focal students mentioned any of the named languages from the picture tasks using Nvivo software, and created a subset of data for each language, which we analysed inductively. This analysis led to the formation of initial keywords such as *cultural heritage*, *easy to read*, *need to know* related to each of the languages. Taking this as our point of departure for



further coding, we compiled keywords into overarching themes, and recoded all the data on the basis of the themes identified. This recoding formed the basis of the thematic analysis presented in the following sections.

## 4 Findings

Some languages were more prominent than others in our data in terms of how often they were mentioned and by how many students. The languages mentioned were (in order of prominence): English, German, Danish, Arabic, Latin, Spanish, French, Vietnamese, Italian, Swedish, Turkish, Somali, Norwegian, Greenlandic. Both Arabic and German received similar amounts of attention to Danish, Arabic being mentioned at some point by all students but two, and German in a more individualised way very often by some students and not at all by others.

Spanish and Latin also received a substantial amount of attention, being mentioned by all but two students, by some more often than by others. An overview of the coding (in Appendix) shows how some languages were mentioned by only one or two students, while others were mentioned by six or seven.

We identified six different themes in students' talk about languages, which were (1) *language learning experiences and skills*, (2) *gateways*, (3) *attractiveness*, (4) *family and friendship*, (5) *everyday presence*, and (6) *usefulness*. Of these six themes, (1) *language learning experiences and skills* was more frequent than the others (111 references in data coding). The other themes were rather evenly distributed with number of references ranging from 37 to 54. We will next discuss each theme in turn and the role of different languages within them. The data examples are presented both as longer extracts separated from text or as shorter quotes embedded in text and marked with quotation marks. Pseudonyms are used to identify the student in question.

### 4.1 Language learning experiences and skills

The first theme, *language learning experiences and skills*, was very prominent. Students discussed their language learning experiences and assessed their language skills both in the context of the interviews and classroom activities, in metacommentary to the tasks they were doing and in off-task talk about school and future plans. All these comments may be seen as manifestations of metalinguistic awareness of language learning (Daryai-Hansen et al. 2023) and reflect the students' experience as language learners and users in both formal and informal contexts.

We found that students frequently talked about their language learning experiences in primary and lower secondary school, contrasting them with their current classes. In relation to both German and English, several students criticised what they had learned in primary school, as in Example<sup>1</sup> 1 below:

**Example 1:**

Anna: Maybe more ought to be done ... to make people learn proper English, right, because the way I recall it, we didn't learn proper English in primary school!

Some students also recounted experiences of Arabic classes, with some critique, for instance, because they only learned to read or write or because the variant taught was different to the one that students would have liked to use (e.g., Tunesian Arabic).

Latin was described very much in terms of the topics and activities students had encountered in the classroom, and a distinct teacher echo was audible in students' descriptions of the importance of Latin because of its role in Indo-European language history. Latin also seemed to be associated with metalinguistic reflections, and to some extent even with cross-linguistically relevant metalinguistic knowledge, as in the example below:

**Example 2:**

Mark: Yes, I find especially case marking, I get it 100 % better after the GLA course, because earlier on, when we just talked about it in German class, well I didn't get any of it. But after we did it in GLA, I can actually also make use of it in German class.

Whereas Latin and German were described primarily in formal learning contexts, Danish and English were described in terms of both formal and informal language learning. Danish was constructed, on the one hand, as something "you just understand and do not have to think about" (Safia), but on the other hand, as associated with "annoying norms" (Susan) and learning about "useless" aspects of language, such as metaphors and genres, as in example 3 below, taken from a discussion on written text norms in Danish L1 class:

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes have been translated from Danish and slightly shortened by removing restarts and minimal responses from conversational partners from the original transcripts. Square brackets indicate omissions, and triple dots indicate pauses.

**Example 3:**

Leila: I really don't think we should care about commas.

Christina: Commas, I don't give a shit

Leila: Oh, really, I think we should use comma ... like in English, there aren't any commas, you just put them.

Christina: Comma [in English:] is *unnecessary*

This extract highlights the students' experience of topics in Danish L1-teaching, which they find irrelevant, in that sense expressing *critical awareness* of language learning (Daryai-Hansen et al. 2023). As illustrated by this example, students' talk about learning experiences in Danish are related to the formal context and content of the L1-classroom, whereas references to their Danish skills are naturalised and implicit, for example, when they talk about how some things should be written in Danish to make sure everyone understands.

An *informal learning* dimension was prominent for English, which was described in relation to music, films, TV shows and the internet. French, Spanish and Italian were also mentioned as languages that students had tried to "learn for themselves" (Safia), just for the fun of it, and languages such as Somali were described as something "you just know, you don't think about the conjugations and so on" (Tabitha), clearly in contrast to the formally learned languages Latin and German. Through these descriptions, a clear divide appears between formal learning in school settings and informal learning at home or in the family.

A *skills* subtheme was also recurrent. Knowing and using Danish and English seemed self-evident when students mentioned how a 9-year old brother was almost fluent in English, how English subtitles are useful for watching movies in other languages and how you have to take care not to talk English too much if you want to learn other languages. The skills depicted in relation to English as well as students' home languages Arabic and Somali were clearly of a communicative nature, relating both to communication with personal relations (Arabic, Somali) and with a wider global community (English).

When it came to German skills, however, several students expressed negative self-assessments, related to a different, metalinguistic type of skills. They mentioned the case system, conjugations and joked that it is dangerous to write something in German when the teacher has to read it and safer to write in German at home where you can use Google Translate. Clearly, the focus here seemed to be on *form* rather than communication, as in the excerpt below:

**Example 4:**

Tania: German, I don't speak German, like it is really ...

Anna: And you almost only learn grammar in German class. That's how I feel.

Tania: But still, I don't know how to conjugate anything (laughs)

Anna: I am totally lost in German!

This image of German as a difficult language with a distinct focus on forms was recurrent, especially for Anna and Christina. This corresponds to the negative discourse on German teaching found in a recent study, where students would rather not say it out loud if they like German (Birkeholm 2022: 21). The negative self-assessment related to this 'difficult' language seemed to be further exacerbated by students' past experiences of failure in relation to German, as expressed by Anna: "And then, when you try, you get it wrong anyway, and then you are like ... okay, how many times can I get it wrong?"

The negative self-assessments and the sense of hopelessness seen in the comment by Anna also emerged in the picture task, where both Anna and Christina chose pictures for German that they related to difficulty and confusion. Anna chose a picture of a computer screen displaying code, and explained her choice with the following comment:

**Example 5:**

Anna: Well it is because I always found German difficult, so I looked at it and it reminded me how I sometimes feel German is kind of unmanageable [...] I don't know what it is, but sometimes I just feel like there are so many things to remember (laughs)

Christina chose a picture of a snowboarder in motion, commenting that:

**Example 6:**

Christina: I think I feel like German – my dad is fluent in German. And sometimes that stresses me out because then I feel like I have to be able to make it work.

Both of these images of German depict the language as a challenge – not so much boring as undecipherable and risky business, and associated with a negative assessment of students' own skills. Negative self-assessments were sometimes combined with a sense that "this is something I ought to know," reminiscent of

Dörnyei and Ryan's (2015) *ought-to L2 Self*. This sense of obligation was found both in relation to German (example 6), and other students mentioning similar sentiments in relation to French and Arabic in examples 7 and 8 below:

**Example 7:**

Rihanna: I have to learn it to be able to speak to my family

**Example 8:**

Aisha: I should know it because I am a Muslim.

As evident from examples 5 and 6, this sense of obligation in some cases contributes negatively to students' attitude towards the languages concerned.

## 4.2 Gateways

The theme *gateways* emerged when students talked about the language(s) in terms of them being connected to each other, and either giving or not giving access to understanding other languages. In other words, one language was seen as a gateway to other languages. The connections mentioned by students mostly focused on syntactic or lexical similarities and differences, expressing meta-linguistic awareness at the syntactic and lexical levels (Daryai-Hansen et al. 2023). For example, Spanish, Italian and French or Swedish and Danish were seen as mutual gateway languages as they are so similar in respect to cognate lexicon and grammar.

Latin was most prominently talked about as a predecessor to many other languages (both Romance and Latinate vocabulary in Germanic languages), as illustrated by the following quotes from students:

**Example 9:**

Christina: All the words that were similar, and how the words have changed, and then it suddenly makes sense, when you see a word in English which is really from Latin, like from English to French to Latin, where you suddenly think, what? But then it makes sense [...]

**Example 10:**

Anna: Well, I also find I have become more eh ... aware, you know that they are different languages, the ones that descend from Latin, you know, Italian and Spanish and languages like that, but when we have worked with things, it is really very similar in the way they have become

Talking about Latin as a basis for other languages is no surprise in the context of the course, where Latin is presented in those terms to students. So, in a way, the students may be said to echo the ideology of the course while displaying contrastive metalinguistic awareness.

In contrast to Germanic or Romance languages, where similarities were highlighted, Arabic and Somali were constructed by students as very different from any other languages in the students' lives, as when Tabitha (who herself speaks Somali) said:

**Example 11:**

Tabitha: Well, both in terms of grammar and meaning, I don't think it is similar in any way. And I think Somali grammar is much more difficult than it really is in ... well, the languages we know.

This quote illustrates how Somali was constructed not as a gateway to any other language, but rather as too different for comparison.

The obvious contrast between the students' understanding of the Romance and Germanic languages as "all related" mutual gateways and Arabic and Somali as "too different for comparison" may be understood to reflect the typological and genealogical contrast between the Indo-European languages, on the one hand, and the Semitic languages, on the other. However, it may also reflect a difference in students' metalinguistic awareness in relation to the two groups of languages: since they have studied Germanic and Romance languages at school, they are more aware of their structures, making it easier to see the structural similarities.

## 4.3 Attractiveness

The theme *attractiveness* covered talk evaluating languages either appreciatively or critically. French, Spanish and Italian, appeared to be very stereotypically appealing to students. Mark, for instance describes French as "luxurious" and "sophisticated"

and Safia thinks Italian is “cool”. These accounts are clearly linked to prevalent ideological views of these languages in Europe and elsewhere (Lund and Risager 2001).

English was evaluated recurrently in students’ talk, too, but not only in the stereotypical way seen for French and Italian. Rather, different *kinds* of Englishes seemed associated with different values for different students. Some students said that British English sounds nice and Australian sounds stupid, others that British is too posh. One student said that the many variants of English were a good thing, as they give speakers more options to express themselves. Clearly, this diversity of opinions reflects the students’ familiarity with more nuances of English and their greater overall familiarity with the language, allowing them to form independent likes and dislikes.

The students’ feelings towards German seemed rather mixed. German was seen as a useful language used on holidays or in future work, but at the same time it seemed as if disliking German was an expectation among this group of students, as illustrated by examples 12 and 13:

**Example 12:**

Anna: Not everybody wants to take German, you know .... So if I **could**, I would have opted out of German a long time ago, obviously!

Even when Anna says something positive about German class, she still adds:

**Example 13:**

Anna: It’s not that I like German better now, you know, but I do feel that I can learn it in a different way ...

These quotes suggest an orientation to a norm that German class is not something one likes, similarly to what is shown by Birkeholm (2022).

## 4.4 Family and friendship

The fourth theme was *family and friendships*. While Danish was unsurprisingly a language used in personal relations, English was depicted as a globally connecting language.

Non-European languages, typically heritage languages, such as Somali, Turkish and Vietnamese, featured prominently in this category, connected to close family and relatives living abroad. In connection with these languages, students also displayed some awareness of languaculture, for example when three students discussed the use of respectful pronouns in Vietnamese, referring to the importance of the relationship between the addressee and one's parents.

Arabic played a special, religion-related role in some students' talk. Some students expressed the feeling that they needed this language in their repertoire as it was an inherent part of their background (cf. examples and 8). This view of language is connected to the ideological position of the language in maintaining the cultural heritage in the new environment, phrased concisely by Aisha:

**Example 14:**

Aisha: I am an Arab and I am a Muslim and so I should be able to read and write Arabic so I can read the Quran.

In spite of the prevalence within this theme of heritage languages which are not part of the standard curriculum in Denmark, family played a role also in relation to French (Rihanna needing it to talk to relatives), German (Christina feeling the need to work it out because her dad knows how to), and even in relation to Latin, where Sonia mentioned the fact that her mother knows Latin and that this is something they have in common and might continue exploring together in the future.

## 4.5 Everyday presence

The theme *everyday presence* was used to describe how the students depicted some languages as present and accessible in their surroundings, and others as less so. French and German seemed to be opposites within this theme, since French was depicted as rare and inaccessible in the immediate environment and Arabic and German as something students meet on a regular basis, as illustrated in examples 15 and 16:

**Example 15:**

Mark: You meet Arabic 100 times more often than French



**Example 16:**

Safia: German, you just meet it more often.

This is not surprising, since most of the students take German as their third language, and many of them came from primary schools where French was not on offer.

Students seemed to consider English an active resource in their linguistic repertoires, present in their everyday lives and readily available.

The way Safia (example 17) talked about English as a gateway to understanding other languages reinforces this impression of English as an active linguistic resource for students.

**Example 17:**

Safia: It was exciting, you know, if you see something exciting, like say an Italian movie, you start by turning on the Danish subtitles or the English subtitles to understand it.

However, this omnipresence of English does not mean that students saw themselves as having unhindered access to the language, in the sense that they expressed some insecurity about their ownership of English. On the one hand, students used English actively amongst themselves and for communication with non-Danish speakers, but on the other, they also expressed a certain humility in relation to English, leading to an appreciation of Global English (examples 18 and 19):

**Example 18:**

Anna: It [English] is not my language, not for me to decide.

**Example 19:**

Christina: [Global English] allows us to be in on the language

Another language emerging in students' talk as prevalent in the surroundings was Arabic (cf. Example 15), but this was described in a certain sense also as exclusive, given that only some people know it. At the same time, students reflected that Arabic remained somewhat invisible in school, since it is not a language taught there, and thus Arabic skills may go unnoticed by fellow students.

## 4.6 Usefulness

The language dominating this theme was English, which was described as useful since “so many people speak it” (Mark) and “it is spoken in many large countries” (Anna). In fact, English seemed to be strictly *needed to have*, as Leila put it:

### Example 20:

Leila: If you don’t know English, it is like there is something wrong with you

In spite of the dominance of English within this theme, other languages were mentioned, too. Christina and Mark believed that Arabic is useful since it is more present in society than for example French, and because it plays a significant role in relation to Islam and Islamic history and culture. Christina and Safia also found that Spanish is relevant, since it is so widely spoken in South America.

The relevance of French and German seemed contested, as seen example 21 below:

### Example 21:

Author 1: So why do you think we learn German in Denmark?

Anna: Beats me! I have been trying to figure that out all through primary school ...

Other students, especially Peter, saw German as a language relevant because of the opportunities it offers for travelling in Germany and German-speaking countries and studying or working there. Mark revealed a nuanced view on German classes, arguing that learning German is important.

### Example 22:

Mark: If we spoke only English and Danish, we might become bigoted and just expect everybody to understand us.

This comment reveals a certain critical language awareness pertaining to the risks related to speaking only two languages and thus having a narrower linguistic and intercultural frame of reference (for discussions of the importance of this type of critical literacy, see e.g. Férez Mora et al. 2022; Wallace 2018).

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to examine how a group of students attending a specific course on language awareness perceive their own linguistic repertoires and the named languages that are connected to it. Departing from students' descriptions of specific languages in their repertoires as obtained through a picture elicitation task, we carried out a thematic content analysis of interviews and supplementary classroom data. Due to the inductive character of the analysis, the coding categories used were non-exclusive, and we are aware that this may have led to some overlaps within the categories.

Six themes were identified in the data: (1) *language learning experiences and skills* (2) *gateways*, (3) *attractiveness*, (4) *family and friendship*, (5) *everyday presence*, and (6) *usefulness*. These themes were connected to the different languages mentioned to greater and lesser extent, with English, Danish, Arabic and German being more prominent in students' talk than others.

Zooming in specifically on these four languages, we see four different language profiles emerge:

**English** was a prominent language within all themes, but most notably within *gateways*, *usefulness* and *everyday presence*. This reflects the special role that the English language plays in students' lives, being used actively in everyday activities as well as in school. The nuanced views of English emerging across the themes seem to reflect the richness of students' experiences with English in both formal and informal settings, their awareness of their own learning and growing expertise in English, and of the special status of English in society.

**Danish** was primarily mentioned in relation to *learning experiences and skills* and *family and friendship*. This is not surprising, since many of the students have Danish as a family language and since they attend school in Danish. The only surprising part is that they do not mention Danish at all in relation to *usefulness* or *attractiveness*, indicating perhaps that the Danish language is somewhat self-evident and invisible to them both in terms of its linguistic characteristics and the uses they put it to.

**Arabic** was mentioned most often by those students who have a personal relationship to it, although other students also mentioned the *everyday presence* and *usefulness* of Arabic, indicating that it is a language noticeable to all students (in contrast to the other immigrant languages, mentioned only sparsely by non-speakers). For those who do have a personal relationship to Arabic, it featured strongly within the themes *family and friendship* and *learning experiences and skills*.

**German** had special prominence within the talk of specific students, two of whom were primarily preoccupied with the difficulties they perceive in relation to learning the language (*learning experiences and skills*), and one who focused on the possibilities it might offer in the future (*usefulness*). In relation to German, it is interesting to note that the negative discourse surrounding it in our data actually mirrors tendencies reported elsewhere (Birkeholm 2022).

A language which was not quite as prominent, but still occupied a distinct position within students' talk was **Latin**. Latin was clearly constructed by the students as a *gateway* to other languages – an image reproducing ideas in both observed teaching and the written curriculum. Another theme prevalent for Latin was *learning experiences and skills*. This reinforces the clear image of Latin as anchored firmly in the formal school setting: it is a language to which only one student has any relationship outside of school.

These different relationships between each of the named languages and the themes emerging from students' talk illustrate how students' views of the languages are shaped by their individual experiences, linguistic repertoires and biographies.

The analyses show that not only personal language learning experiences, but also societal, social and family norms (cf. family language policy, Lanza and Lomeu Gomes 2020) contribute to the shaping of students' views of the languages of their repertoires. Societal norms were reflected through stereotypical representations of specific languages (such as French being *luxurious* and *sophisticated*), social norms through expectations concerning specific languages, and family language norms through experienced obligations to learn certain languages valued in the family (Latin, French, Arabic and even German).

Despite this adherence to prevalent linguistic norms in their surroundings, students also expressed critical awareness of language learning, questioning the relevance of specific parts of language teaching (such as grammatical norms in Danish, English teaching in primary school), or even the named languages on offer – why not study Vietnamese instead of French or German?

Considering the ways in which these students talk about languages in the plurilingual context of the GLA course illustrates the contradiction hinted at in the introduction. The named languages emerge as salient concepts even in a context promoting the inclusion of all languages, valuing students' full linguistic repertoires and establishing cross-linguistic connections, and even when students recognize and reflect upon their own plurilingual repertoires. Moreover, the named languages feature clearly even in a thematic analysis focusing on themes recurrent across languages. This leaves us to conclude with Otsuji and Pennycook (2010) that we must

think simultaneously of a fluid and dynamic linguistic repertoire and of the individual named languages which appear in it.

As highlighted by Busch (2017), even multilingual speakers with diverse repertoires do not treat all languages as equal and thus we might ask in her words (Busch 2017: 350): “Why are certain languages sought after, others rejected, and still others treated with indifference?” In this study, the language most obviously sought after might be English. As mentioned above, students’ talk about English reflect an intimate relationship with the language: they know it from both formal and informal settings and have both past experiences and hopes and dreams for the future connected to English.

The only language clearly rejected by any students in this study was German, a tendency reported elsewhere, too. Considering this apparent societal trend, these students may have been influenced by a generally negative discourse surrounding German. However, it is clear from the images they chose in the initial picture-elicitation task (the snowboarder and the computer code) that they also have vivid emotional responses of insecurity and confusion related to the language and that these responses are based on lived experiences “charged with feelings of [...] discomfort” (Busch 2017: 352). These unpleasant experiences seem related to students feeling inadequate in language learning situations.

Both English and German and many other languages contribute to these students’ linguistic repertoires and their *Spracherleben* – their lived experience of language. What emerges from the above analyses and discussion is that their attitudes to and the ways in which they reflect upon and talk about languages are simultaneously rooted in individual linguistic biography and thus highly individual, and socially constructed both at societal level in the form of language policies and norms and public discourse on specific languages, in the classroom by teachers who discursively position specific languages as useful or attractive, and among peers when students describe languages as nice-to-have (French, Italian), need-to-have (English) or impossible-to-opt-out-of (German). What this implies for future GLA teaching and curriculum is a continued need for critical language awareness in order to allow students to critically reflect on these aspects and fully appreciate their own linguistic repertoires.

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Appendix

Number of mentions per language.

Student/language	Arabic	Danish	English	French	German	Italian	Latin	Somali	Spanish	Swedish	Tunesian	Turkish	Vietnamese	Greenlandic	Norwegian
Anna	0	4	9	0	14	1	2	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Christina	2	7	11	2	6	0	5	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	1
Leila	5	4	8	2	3	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	8	1	0
Aisha	8	2	4	0	3	0	2	0	0	0	5	0	1	0	0
Mark	4	4	6	5	9	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0
Thomas	0	4	6	0	2	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	7	3
Sonia	3	3	5	1	3	3	4	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tabitha	8	3	5	1	0	0	2	5	3	0	0	0	1	0	0
Safia	4	5	7	1	6	5	1	2	4	2	0	0	0	0	2
Rihanna	6	1	4	1	0	1	0	0	1	2	5	0	0	0	1
Mikkel	1	2	1	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Peter	1	4	2	3	5	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total <sup>a</sup>	42	43	68	16	51	12	29	9	24	11	5	10	14	3	6

<sup>a</sup>Total includes mentions by non-focal students, so does not fully match the sums of each column.

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