

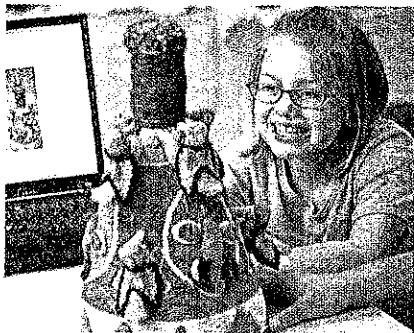
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# LEARNING LANGUAGES

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# Preschoolers Gather at a Norwegian Fish Market in Minnesota

BY VALERIE BOREY AND REBECCA HEGSTAD

It is a typical day at the famous fish market in Bergen, Norway. Vendors wrapped in rain coats huddle under white tents, selling everything from shrimp to flowers to handmade souvenirs. Some tables are stacked with salmon and herring, while others feature baskets of berries and fresh fruits. Families out for their household grocery shopping are interspersed with clusters of strolling teenagers and tourists toting cameras.

What's different about this day, though, is that it exists in the collective imagination of 10 Minnesotan preschoolers, aged 3 to 5, and the two Norwegian immersion teachers who are guiding the experience. They are not really at an outdoor market; they are in a preschool classroom. Although you can almost smell the fish and flowers, they are made of plastic and fabric, part of a socio-dramatic play session organized as part of the curricular theme "Going Places" in Concordia Language Villages' Norwegian pre-K program, Barnehage.

The activity took place in 2009, in which the class simulated a trip to Norway during "Going Places." Applying for passports, exchanging dollars for kroner, packing a suitcase, and planning an itinerary were all part of the tasks leading up to departure, approximately five weeks into the fall term. After taking a plane ride to Oslo and visiting the king's castle, the group rode a train to the southwestern city of Bergen. Here, they gathered at Fisketorget, one of the more recognizable landmarks in Norway; an open air market on the pier where fresh fish, flowers, and fruits and vegetables, and other handmade wares can be found. It was here that they began to try on the identities of shoppers and vendors, learning to handle their language structures not as students, but as speakers in context.

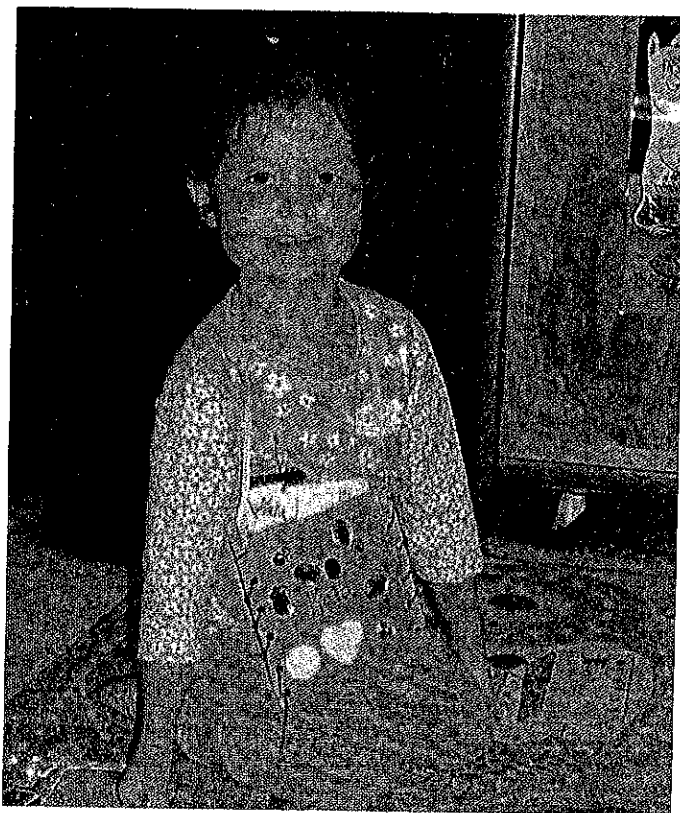
## Situated Learning at Barnehage

Barnehage is a Norwegian Immersion Pre-K program offered in Minneapolis, Minn., through Concordia Language Villages, featuring parent-child and drop-off classes for children aged 2 ½ to 5 years old, as well as supplementary Saturday classes for children 4 to 11 years of age. In the present article, we focus on our drop-off class of beginning Norwegian speakers. Most were taking the class because their family had Norwegian heritage, and some children had one or both parents who were native to Norway. At the time of the Fisketorget simulation, children had attended the part-time Barnehage program for anywhere from five weeks to two and a half years (five hours per week, eight months per year).

The curriculum at Barnehage is premised on a situated learning model, in which learning to know is not the automatic equivalent of learning to do. Whereas learning to know can involve decontextualized activities such as learning words from a dictionary, performing grammar drills, and memorizing vocabulary, in the situated learning model, knowing and doing are considered inseparable. Learning takes



On the plane to Norway



Children depended on their pocket holders to carry their money to the fish market

place when it is embedded in an authentic context, and when it is driven by the unique intentions and expectations of its participants. This approach to learning is informed by Lave and Wenger's (1991) anthropological perspective of learner

participation in communities of practice, where learning is conceived of as an apprenticeship within a broader context of social activity. For our children at Barnehave, what this means is that they are not here to learn Norwegian, but to learn how to participate as competent social actors in Norwegian society.

They learn to play the same games that Norwegian kids play, to make telephone calls, order food at restaurants, and use Norwegian money to buy things at the market. Dahl (2003) explored four key variables in the situated learning model which lend themselves to the language learning as enculturation approach that we adopt at Barnehave, and at Concordia Language Villages in general. The key variables are 1) identity (the way we do things in our classroom community); 2) access (the extent to which we scaffold learning in our community); 3) transparency (the level of complexity involved in the task); and 4) control (the extent to which individuals seek to master their participation in the community). Using these variables allows us to look at the larger context of our Fisketorget activity as being embedded within (and relying upon) the larger framework of our community.

## Identity

At Barnehave, we do not simply share an interest in learning Norwegian, we share a congruent way of doing things as a community. We have rituals we follow on a daily basis, ranging from how we greet one another during circle time, to how we take turns being line leader, to the transition songs we sing during clean-up and meal times, and even to the inside jokes we share. The children who are new to Barnehave are unfamiliar with our ways and choose to adopt our traditions (or not), to attend to our social norms (or not), and to align themselves with our routines (or not).

The children who are veterans to our program have so closely identified themselves with the way things are done at Barnehave, that they are quick to point out when we have skipped something important, and find ways to either take leadership roles in upholding our traditions (volunteering, for example, to be the first to call a game) or to subvert our routines in clever ways by, for example, deliberately substituting words in songs or well-worn phrases (see also, Cekaite and Aronsson, 2005, and Peck, 1977, on language play as a resource in L2 learning).

As part of our shared Barnehave heritage, there are some things that we routinely did prior to our activity at the Bergen Fisketorg that helped to set up our activity. When children line up to go to the gym, for example, we count heads out loud as a group in Norwegian, rehearsing numbers one through 10 on a regular basis. During meal times, children ask for snacks in Norwegian, "Kan jeg få \_\_\_\_\_?" ("Can I have \_\_\_\_\_?") , hear, "Vær så god." ("Here you go.") when they are served, and say, "Takk" ("Thank you.") in response. They use the same constructions during craft time, when asking for scissors or glue, when they want assistance, as well as when they ask for a colored sticker at the end of the day. During the course of the

session, and prior to our Fisketorget simulation, the children used similar language constructions to buy tickets for the plane and train, ordering food in a restaurant, and going to the bank to withdraw money for their trip. There was, in other words, a shared framework for understanding the context of interaction.

Part of identity in a community of practice comes from the relationships established within the community. Appropriately, play is a foundation of community identity in early childhood settings (Bergen, 2002; Haas, 1998; Elkind, 2007). Incorporating both free play and structured play into a preschool language curriculum provides the opportunity for children to learn a second language naturally, while simultaneously building relationships (Skyu, 2008). Even though the children in Barnehave don't have the language skills to interact exclusively in Norwegian during free play, this time of the day is a vital ingredient to the learning process. Skyu acknowledges that many activities in language immersion settings are one-way (teacher to student) and teacher-directed.

The teacher acts as the primary model of language. This can be particularly true with a class of beginning language learners, and especially in part-time programs like Barnehave. However, we know that young children learn through actively interacting with the world around them. Free play, even if it happens in English, offers a chance for student to student interactions. R.P. McDermott (1996) writes:

Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on a relevance; though the play might happen in English, the children are developing a sense of belonging during these times; without the points of contact, without the system of relevancies, there is not learning, and there is little memory. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are part (p.292).

At its core, play leads to relationships, which build community, which establishes identity, which leads to language learning. Fisketorget drew on this assumption, counting on the children's comfort with each other to make room for language learning to happen.

## Access

Access to a community depends upon the stance with which a community receives newcomers – some communities have gatekeepers who actively block access to those who seek entry, some communities selectively ignore newcomers, while others actively encourage their participation. At Barnehave, we provide newcomers the tools to facilitate their comprehension, while also allowing for the fact that their participation will be different from that of veteran participants who have been in the program longer. Veteran participants take a hand in this process as well, often stopping to explain how things work (e.g., "It's time to go to the gym now. You have to find a place in line.") and model appropriate behavior (e.g., answering questions, leading parts of games, finding specific toys during

# FEATURE

free play). This type of newcomer/old-timer social interaction has been shown to significantly boost comprehension and language skills among second language learners in early childhood settings (Hirschler, 1994, Wong-Fillmore, 1976), and newcomers to Barnehave tend to respect the relative positioning of veterans as experts in the program, often seeking to do what they do.

Language scaffolding for Fisketorget happened at different levels depending on where the kids were with their language skills. During circle time and directed activities in both the classroom and gym, we played games to introduce new vocabulary related to our upcoming simulation, emphasizing words such as blomster (flowers), fisk (fish), frukt (fruit) and grønnsaker (vegetables). With newer students, we focused for five weeks on teaching numbers 1–10 and finding various ways to practice our counting skills (from counting heads on the way to gym, to counting out Norwegian kroner, to matching our seat assignments on the plane to the correct chair). Students who already knew their numbers got a chance to review, and also began to challenge themselves by rehearsing increasingly sophisticated constructions such as “Hvor mye koster det?” (“How much does that cost?”) and “Det koster to kroner.” (“It costs two crowns.”).

## Transparency

Previous simulations, such as the ones referenced above, helped to set up children's expectations for how the Fisketorg simulation would run. The children, who had been tracking their journey through Norway on a map, were shown pictures of the real Fisketorg in Bergen. In addition, asking for food, art supplies, buying train tickets and plane tickets, etc., provided children with a linguistic framework for anticipating the verbal exchange of vendors and shoppers. Students also became accustomed to the socio-dramatic play model used repeatedly in class. Children who initially ran a reality check early on during the session (e.g., asking the teacher, “We're not really taking an airplane today. We're just pretending, right?”) no longer bothered to question the play scenario, instead confidently informing their parents on pick-up that “We went to the fish market today!”

## Control

During the activity, there were differences in the way each child tackled the language, with veteran participants more likely to seek mastery over the buying and selling exchange than their near-peers. Some children understood (whether conscious or not) that the activity was both for play and language practice, and they took it upon themselves to use what they knew, or to ask for help to fill the gaps. Other children were simply concerned with filling their baskets with goodies. Despite these differences, the quality of the children's overall experience appeared uniformly positive. With the teachers acting as language resources and supporting the scaffolding necessary to challenge the learners, the children were all engaged, regardless of whether they were new learners or seasoned participants.

The length of time the children participated varied, though this seemed to be related more to developmental level and experience in the program than actual language ability. Some 3-year-olds participated for only 4–5 minutes after which time they wandered a bit. However, they became reengaged when we switched roles (buyers/sellers) half way through the experience. Most 4- and 5-year-olds continued playing for 10–12 minutes.

Some children used Norwegian from the start of the activity, while others started in English and switched to Norwegian as they adapted to their roles. After trading roles, a few children who were trying out their new role looked to the teachers for guidance. Though they had heard the first group of sellers calling out “Fisk! Fisk! Tre kroner!” (Fish! Fish! Three crowns!), several sellers who were new to Barnehave that semester wanted the teachers to help them get started with the language for their particular booth (fish, flowers, fruits or vegetables, and how many crowns they cost). On the other hand, the buyers didn't need as much prompting. They utilized the much-used expression “Could I please have a flower?” that is repeated in many contexts in the daily schedule of the program. The experienced students were challenged to apply more advanced structures: “Could I please have two flowers?”, or “Could I please have a red and a blue flower?”.

## Shaping the Community of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) make an important distinction between the teaching curriculum, which is essentially constructed by the instructor and stems from the instructor's perspective of what knowing something entails, and the learning curriculum, which is situated in community practice, from the perspective of the learner. The learning curriculum includes not only didactic practice from the instructor, but also the “circulation of knowledge and practice among peers and near-peers” (p. 93).

This distinction allows us to look at the learning environment as something that is shaped by the various practices and interactions that take place between instructor and students, peers and near-peers, and the overlapping communities in which instructor and students are also engaged (for example, the school, the broader teaching community, the parent school community, etc.). Thinking about the learning environment as being formed at the intersection of these relationships opens up possibilities for exploring how learning takes place as a community process, instead of as a transmission from teacher to student.

In Barnehave itself, we have witnessed the circulation over time of Fisketorget practices among peers and near-peers. The original group of children in 2009 (who have since mostly graduated and moved on to kindergarten) adopted the buying/selling role as part of their free play, using a small wooden puppet theater that stands on the floor. After Fisketorget, the children started using the puppet theater during free play as a flower vendor stand, without puppets.

The children would sit behind the stand selling fabric flowers through the open window, exchanging non-existent money, and drawing the curtains shut when the shop owners went on break or closed the store for the evening. Interestingly enough, it is almost always the shopkeeper who initiates this play (often in a mix of English and Norwegian), despite our observations that this role required greater prompting in the initial simulation.

This free play activity evolved into a tradition of sorts, passed on to the next generation of participants (and the younger incoming generation which followed), that continues to this day. Though new students to Barnehave have never experienced Fisketorget, they nevertheless join in the dramatic play as vendors and shoppers at the flower stand. The play has become part of the collective memory of the community, even to those who don't know the history behind the game's origins and even when the teacher is not structuring the play.

In the Fisketorget simulation, we saw how some of the key variables in a situated learning model came into play. Grounding their identity in a shared heritage allowed children a similarly shared framework for interpreting events and engaging with one another through play, rather than relying on teacher regulation. Access to community support (including teachers and near-peers), provided authentic opportunities for participation, regardless of language level.

Transparency (or clarity of task), was established through comparison with previous exchanges and transference of relevant information. As for control (the extent to which individuals seek to master their participation), we saw children participating at different levels and seeking different challenges depending on their own developmental needs. In adopting the flower shop as a free play activity, we further saw evidence of children independently seeking mastery over their own participation as Norwegian speakers, which in turn informed the kinds of play into which newcomers were enculturated.

There is a difference between learning to know and learning to do. We suspect that if parents asked what their child did at Barnehave on the day of Fisketorget, the response wouldn't be a list of the language constructions they learned, or a description of the architectural design of the buildings surrounding Bergen's marketplace, or a reflection on the dynamics of role playing. Instead, they would respond simply, "We bought blomster!"

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