

“Language is all around us” A multicultural conference in Norway

The multicultural aspect in the foreign language classroom and language testing were the main themes of the four day conference arranged by LMS Norway of the Nordic Baltic Region of FIPLV. The conference was held 28 June - 1 July 2004 in Tyrifjord, Norway, at a beautifully situated hotel about 100 km north west of Oslo.

We were 53 participants from 7 countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Estonia and Latvia who spent a marvellous time together, exchanging experience between lectures and at work shops and, last but not least, when gathering around the multiple choice buffet table, groaned with the most delicious food.

Intercultural competence and multicultural awareness were being presented both theoretically and practically by lecturers from the Nordic and Baltic countries. The lectures, ranging from theoretical research projects to very down to earth classroom situations, provided food for thought. Some of the lecturers, as well as some participants, worked in classes with more than 50% minority language students. Others presented projects carried out in different multicultural contexts in their respective countries.

To sum up the conference:

In the Nordic countries, we used to have the so called assimilation policy – the immigrants were expected to melt in completely, absorbing the new country’s culture, preferably forgetting about their own. This policy was succeeded by a one-sided integration policy where immigrant children were placed in special classes. Nowadays, however, efforts are made to implement the multicultural way of learning, an interactive method encouraging students to learn about each other’s cultures, to give and take.

The definition of the term *multicultural* could be ambiguous. A monolingual dictionary gives the following definition: “involving or including people or ideas from several different countries, races or religions.” The term could imply many cultures living side by side without interacting but this conference took the definition a step further to include the interactive aspect of giving and taking. As regards the term *culture*, it should be defined in a broader way than just a country’s national culture. All school classes could be considered multicultural even if there are no immigrant children in them. We live in a diverse society and the aims must be that pupils learn how to be interculturally competent: which means learning how to deal with diversity in general. Thus they will learn to see that there are more advantages than disadvantages to be in a multicultural classroom.

The second theme of the conference was that of language assessment. Even in producing assessment tasks it is of vital importance not to get stuck in ethnocentricity but to reflect whether the material is biased, without being too politically correct. Good assessment is crucial for learning. It should be a natural part of the learning process. It is very important that assessment and test tasks are in the target language, thus preventing misunderstanding from minority language students.

We were also informed about the Swedish National Assessment Program and different language testing tools in Norway, Latvia and Canada.

To conclude:

We spent four days in Tyrifjord filled with interesting lectures and workshops, many fruitful discussions with colleagues from our neighbouring countries as well as wonderful food and magnificent scenery. All this in combination gave us much inspiration for our future work at school. The presentation of different aspects of multiculturalism provided excellent food for thought, making us aware of the need for awareness when it comes to bias and monoculturalism in schoolbooks for example.

Our sincere thanks to LMS Norway and in particular Ranveig Reggestad who had prepared this excellent conference in cooperation with the board of LMS Norway. We are already looking forward to the next Nordic Baltic meeting which will be held in Riga in 2006.

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Ranveig Reggestad, the President of the Nordic Baltic Region of FIPLV



Margareta Leoj presenting FIPLV



participants at work



the beautiful Tyrifjord

More pictures on the site below:

<http://www.lindalv.skola.kungsbacka.se/Offsite/lms/lms04.htm>