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Evaluation of the DesignME course

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1. Foreword

This study has been prepared by Siv Merete Kjenes Arnesen and Astrid Espegren who both work as researchers at Norwegian Research Centre AS, NORCE Society in Kristiansand. The study was commissioned by SpeechDesigner, and is funded by the Agder Regional Research Fund.

In accordance with the agreement, the report is written concisely and in bullet point format. In addition to summarizing findings, we also present recommendations for further development of the DesignME course concept.

We have experienced great cooperation from the client, other project participants and from participants and department managers we have interviewed. Many thanks to all of you!

Thank you to SpeechDesigner for the assignment and for the opportunity to dive into and learn more about the topic of language-developing and culturally sensitive workplaces.

Kristiansand, 21th June 2021

Siv Merete Kjenes Arnesen and Astrid Espegren

2. Background and objectives

There is a growing need for labour in the municipalities in Norway in the nursing and care sector. According to Statistics Norway ¹, there has been an increasing proportion of immigrants working in this sector in recent years, and this trend appears to be continuing. In a study of Norwegian language skills among foreign-born employees, Ødegård (2020) notes that employees with a mother tongue other than Norwegian account for more than 40% of employees in the nursing home service in the City of Oslo. Health and care staff with a minority background are therefore an important resource. With an increasing proportion of minority language employees, some municipalities are also experiencing challenges related to language and cultural understanding in their service production. In the worst case, this can have consequences for the patient safety of service users.

SpeechDesigner and the Norwegian Multicultural Center have jointly developed a course program, DesignME, for minority language employees. The aim of the course is for individuals to strengthen their communication skills by improving their pronunciation and cultural understanding. The pilot project DesignME was tested at Kvinesdal residential and day care center and the technical cleaning department in November 2018 and October 2019. The course consists of a section on pronunciation (2x3 hours) and one on cultural understanding (2x3 hours). A trial of the DesignME course was conducted with employees from four nursing homes in Kristiansand municipality in spring 2021. The course was conducted in collaboration between SpeechDesigner and the Norwegian Multicultural Center. Progression in pronunciation and cultural understanding was measured by a test conducted by the course coordinator before, immediately after and three months after the course.

This study has followed and evaluated the experiences of minority language employees (participants) and their department managers with the DesignMEG course. Increased knowledge about how the course is experienced is key before the course is rolled out throughout the Agder region. The purpose of the project has been:

1. Increase knowledge about minority language employees and department managers' experiences with the DesignMEG course.
2. increase knowledge about whether the course contributes to better interaction between employees, users and relatives.
3. gain increased knowledge about whether the course contributes to creating more language-developing and culturally sensitive workplaces in elderly care.

In this report, we will first provide a brief review of relevant literature in the field, before summarizing how participants and department managers experienced the DesignMEG course. After that, we will discuss the research questions mentioned above in relation to the experiences from the course and other research literature.

¹ <https://www.ssb.no/helse/artikler-og-publikasjoner/innvandrerne-sto-for-1-av-6-arsverk-innen-omsorg>

3. Methodical approach

The research part of the project has been divided into two parts, consisting of a survey and qualitative interviews. By using data triangulation, we contribute to a somewhat richer data set for the evaluation, which aims to map the experiences of participants in the DesignME course and their department managers.

- Semi-structured interviews (Mills et. al., 2009)
 - 2 group interviews (minority language employees, department heads)
 - 8 individual interviews (four minority language employees, four department heads)
- Survey
 - 16 respondents, all participants who completed DesignME in spring 2021 - -
- Selection:
 - Selection of interview participants was carried out by the general manager of SpeechDesigner in consultation with the heads of department at the various nursing homes.

The group interviews were conducted prior to the preparation of the survey, and formed the basis for the questions/themes raised here. The answers from the survey formed the basis for questions and further elaboration in the individual interviews. The project has been very limited, and we have had to set clear boundaries. For this reason, we have not interviewed the course developers or course instructors. The evaluation is based solely on the experiences of participants and department managers.

4. Other relevant research in the field

In the healthcare sector, patients, relatives and colleagues alike depend on correct and understood communication. Understanding each other can be a challenge, but can also open up new opportunities in a sector with an increasing proportion of minority language employees. Below we have listed relevant research in the field under different main themes.

- **Challenges and opportunities:** Communication difficulties can challenge both patient safety and the quality of care services. Communication difficulties can also lead to prejudice among colleagues, between staff and patients, and between staff and relatives. Lack of communication opportunities can also challenge the working environment in general, and the inclusion of minority language speakers in particular (Tingvold and Fagertun, 2020). Studies also show that there is potential in multilingualism if managers facilitate the use of multilingualism for an increasingly diverse and multicultural group of relatives and patients (Bjerck et al., 2018).
- **Pronunciation:** Having a different pronunciation, or accent, can have an impact on minority language employees' ability to demonstrate their professional competence. Within the research literature, there are several studies that show that despite the fact that minority language employees speak fluently in the host language, having a foreign accent can have a negative impact on their professional status and their ability to do their job (Dahle and Seeberg, 2013; Munkejord and Tingvold, 2019).
- **Cultural understanding:** There are several studies that show that understanding the cultural context, in addition to language barriers, can affect the ability of minority language speaking staff to provide adequate care to patients. This is further complicated when patients also have communication challenges, such as dementia or poor hearing (Tingvoll and Fagertun, 2020).
- **The role of managers and colleagues:** A study of a language training program for healthcare workers found that the topic of language comprehension can be sensitive, as employees with a different linguistic background are often expected to be fluent in Norwegian (Krohne et al., 2019). Several studies highlight the importance of managers being committed to developing an inclusive working environment that facilitates continuous language development without stigmatizing employees (Tingvold and Fagertun, 2020, Munkejord and Tingvold, 2019). A knowledge summary on Norwegian language training for adult immigrants shows that having a mentor in the workplace and receiving good follow-up has a major effect on motivation, willingness to learn and self-confidence (Randen et al., 2018). In Sweden, work has been done on how best to involve colleagues in everyday life.

The result of the SpråkSam project, which was run by the Stockholm County Elderly Center Foundation from 2009 to 2011, was the development of a separate training program for "language ambassadors"².

² This programme is now part of the College of Health and Social Care. See <https://www.vo-college.se/sprakombud>

5. Evaluation of the DesignME course

The presentation of the findings of the study is based on a compilation of the entire data material (individual interviews, focus group interviews and survey). There was a high degree of consistency between these data sources. The data collection took place over a short period of time, and therefore did not provide an opportunity to look at the long-term effects of the course. It must also be noted that the course was held during the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2021. This meant that the course had to be divided into smaller groups, and that the cultural part of the course was conducted digitally.

The general experience of the course as a whole is very positive. The department managers express a clear need for courses that can help minority language employees improve their pronunciation and language comprehension. In working with people, it is essential to be understood and to understand others. Some participants experience a clear improvement in pronunciation, which is considered a good result given the short duration of the course. In addition, many find that they become more verbally active in the workplace and more eager to practice their own pronunciation both at work and at home. This is also an important effect of the course. The results of the cultural part of the course are in many ways more difficult to measure. Several participants feel that they have received good tips on how to communicate in different situations they encounter in their work. Some participants also felt that the topics covered were not as relevant for those who have lived in Norway for many years and have worked in the care sector for a long time.

5.1 The educational part of the course

- The participants were generally very satisfied with this part of the course.
- They felt that it was easy to understand the instructor, that they received customized help and that they learned concrete techniques to improve pronunciation (melody, rhythm and new sounds, dialects).
- Several also say that they have gained a different understanding of the Norwegian language.
- It was also pointed out that physical attendance was a good thing. This gave the instructor the opportunity to see whether the participants were paying attention or not, and made it easier to understand the techniques that were explained. It was also easier to ask for help.
- Several participants also mentioned that they wished this part of the course had been longer so that they could have learned even more.

"The pronunciation part was top notch - 10 points! Good time and physical meeting, he could see what we did right and what we did wrong. Corrected us. Very good experience." (Participant)

"We come from Asia and think that the Norwegian language has no rhythm and melody, and they just speak flat. But we were wrong." (Participant)

5.2 The cultural part of the course

- This part of the course received somewhat more varied feedback.
- In general, the first part of the culture section received better feedback than the second part. Several participants reported that it was somewhat more difficult to understand the instructor in the second part of the course.
- Several participants felt that their expectations were not met. Some participants felt that the topics were not as relevant for those who had lived in Norway for a longer period of time.
- Some also said that they had learned more about what is perceived as polite and impolite in Norway, how to get to the point quickly when giving important messages/information, and how to show respect and communicate clearly.
- The digital teaching was not perceived as ideal. In addition, several participants missed the opportunity to ask questions and request clarification during the course (a kind of chat function).
- Several participants found it challenging to have to answer questions by email, as they wanted to spend more time talking. Other participants also wanted to be able to discuss the topics among themselves, which was not possible in the way the course was set up.

"Helps me understand more about what we should/shouldn't, so we can understand each other better." (Participant)

"I had a different expectation. Plus - it's not two-way communication. Instructor narrates. I was not allowed to raise my hand and ask: What do you mean? Not very wise to have it digitally." (Participant)

5.3 Experience of being selected as a course participant

- The interviews show that the participants felt positive about being selected to take the course. They saw this as an opportunity. This may be influenced by the selection of interview participants.
- The department managers reported a slightly more mixed response. Most were positive, but there were also some who wondered why they had been selected, whether they were particularly poor in Norwegian and whether they had done something wrong.

"One of them asked - Do I speak Norwegian so badly?" (Head of department)

"I was so happy! I expected to learn more about pronunciation and Norwegian culture." (Participant)

5.4 Post-course training and follow-up in the workplace

- The participants agreed that it was important to practice the techniques afterwards, but they had different thresholds for doing this at work. When asked directly, no one said that it was embarrassing to practice at work, but there were several who said that they did not.
- The participants thought it was very positive that they received links with tips on how to practice pronunciation techniques.
- Many also found it very motivating to see progress on the tests.
- There was great variation when it came to follow-up from the head of department. Some department managers had not spoken to the participants, while others planned to bring the participants together to discuss how the workplace could continue to work with what they had learned on the course.

"If you don't train and practice, you won't get it right, because when you learn language as an adult it's hard to change." (Participant)

5.5 Perceived improvements in communication after the course

- Several participants state that they are more aware of how they speak, that they try to speak later and more correctly.
- Some participants say that they have become more confident that they are understood, and that they have started talking more with colleagues. This was also confirmed by department managers who feel that some of the participants have become more confident and gained more self-confidence.
- Some also state that they try to express themselves in different ways in order to be perceived as polite.
- Two of the participants we interviewed had used the new pronunciation techniques at work and received feedback that this is not normal Norwegian. In some situations, this had led to good discussions about the Norwegian language.
- The department managers give slightly varying feedback in terms of results. For some participants, they do not notice any particular difference, while others have flourished and had a clear improvement in pronunciation. One manager has also noticed that the employee who attended the course uses more active body language after the course.

"I think more than before. Now I know if there's a melody." (Participant)

"I spoke to someone on the phone after the course and thought: you've become so good at Norwegian. There was better pronunciation of some words that she swallowed a little more before. More confident and more self-confidence." (Head of department)

"Got some feedback from employees that [course participant] had started talking so strangely - 'we don't talk like that'. But they talk more, and when there are disagreements about how they say things, it turns into nice discussions." (Head of department)

5.6 Participants suggestions for improvements to the course

- Both parts of the course should be conducted with physical attendance and not digitally. If the course is digital, it should be possible to use the chat function and possibly divide into smaller rooms so that participants can discuss together.
- More group exercises could be arranged in leisure time or at work.
- It may be a good idea to include Norwegian colleagues in the course. This would make it easier for them to understand what problems minority language speakers have with pronunciation and help them practice and learn after the course.
- The tests were motivating, but difficult to understand. The results were in percentages, and the participants wanted to know more about where they had improved and what they should work on next.
- In the culture section, there were suggestions to change the topics to be more relevant to those who have been in Norway for several years. Suggested topics were: Norwegian culture at work and Norwegian culture in private (in the family and various social contexts). How to get attention without being rude? How to give feedback in a good way. How to give a speech in a polite way?

"We could practice more with tasks in our spare time or at work. Be together and practice with each other. Very useful. Mirror each other. What do we do better? There could be Norwegians in that group too." (Participant)

5.7 Department managers' suggestions for improvements to the course

- It would have been a good idea to have several employees from the same workplace on the course so that they could help each other practice afterwards.
- There could have been follow-up of the participants afterwards. In addition to links with exercise tips, groups could have been arranged throughout the year and an evaluation one year after the course.
- One department manager would have liked a template/tool for following up with participants afterwards.
- Topics that could have been included: How to talk on the phone, how to communicate with people who are difficult to communicate with (non-verbal communication with people with dementia). How we think in Norway in relation to trust in the authorities (relevant in relation to the Covid-19 vaccine).

"Such courses should have been included much earlier in the educational process for some people, for example at the start of the nursing assistant program. I've experienced not being able to approve someone who was going to take the certificate as a nursing assistant because they weren't good enough in Norwegian." (Head of department)

6. Discussion of the research questions

The following research questions will be answered through the research project:

1. how does the course contribute to minority language employees becoming better at understanding and making themselves understood?
2. whether and, if so, how does the course contribute to better interaction between employees, users and relatives?
3. whether and, if so, how does the course contribute to creating more language-developing and culturally sensitive workplaces in elderly care?

The research questions are answered on the basis of a comprehensive review of all the data material in the project.

1. How does the course help minority language employees to better understand and make themselves understood?

Employees who participated in the DesignME course felt that the course gave them greater insight into what constitutes precise pronunciation in Norwegian. The course instructor was easy to understand and showed each participant how to use the different techniques. However, it was somewhat variable whether the participants themselves and the department managers experienced a clear improvement in the participants' pronunciation after the course. The data collection was conducted shortly after the end of the course, and therefore says little about the long-term effects. It is also important to note that there were actually some participants who had noticeable improvement in pronunciation, which is impressive considering the duration of the course. In addition, both participants and department managers can confirm that several of the participants have become more confident and motivated to talk to colleagues, relatives and patients. Most have become more outspoken, talk more and are motivated to practice different techniques. This in itself is an important effect of the course, and in the long term will help minority language employees to better understand and make themselves understood. Several participants and department managers felt that the course could have been longer, and that group practice could have been arranged afterwards. It would probably have been an advantage if there were more participants from the same department on the same course. This would provide greater opportunities to support each other in further training and in communicating what they have learned to other colleagues and managers. In addition, increased participation would remove some of the stigma that some may experience by being selected to take such a course.

The cultural part of the course gave participants an increased understanding of the importance of speaking directly in emergency situations, e.g. on the phone to the emergency room, in overlap with colleagues and reporting. The participants experienced that they need a broader understanding of Norwegian culture and knowledge of the local culture where the elderly come from, in order to better meet the needs and experiences of the patients. This supports previous research that documents the connection between cultural understanding, language barriers and the ability of minority language staff to

provide adequate care (Tingvoll and Fagertun, 2020). However, several participants felt that the cultural part of the course was not as relevant for those who have lived in Norway for many years and worked in the care sector for a long time. One suggestion was therefore to adapt this part of the course to a greater extent to the type of course participants. This can either be done by having separate courses for those who have long-term knowledge of Norway and the care sector and those who do not, or split the course into different modules with different topics and let the participants themselves choose which modules (topics) are most relevant to them.

2. To what extent and how does the course contribute to better interaction between staff, users and relatives?

Some participants stated that they have become more confident in answering the phone and talking to relatives and colleagues after completing the DesignME course. In this respect, the course has contributed to increased interaction between employees (participants), users and relatives. Through the cultural part of the course, some of the participants gained an increased understanding of the importance of giving direct messages and not being afraid to ask questions about cultural differences, thereby increasing their understanding of colleagues and residents. Such insight can have an impact on both interaction and patient safety. At the same time, some minority language employees call for Norwegian colleagues to show greater interest in and understanding of their culture. Such mutual interest in each other's cultural competence can be a resource and have an impact on collegial interaction, especially when it comes to the care services having to deal with an increasingly diverse and multicultural group of relatives and patients (Bjerck et al., 2018). This involvement of colleagues and mutual understanding of each other's cultural and linguistic competence is both input for further development of the DesignME course and input on how to work with language and cultural understanding in the workplace.

3. To what extent and how does the course contribute to creating more language-developing and culturally sensitive workplaces in elderly care?

We do not find that the course in itself has contributed to creating more language-developing and culturally sensitive workplaces in elderly care. The sample is too small and the time period for the project too short. At the same time, several of the participants miss more continuous language training in the workplace and wish to have their pronunciation corrected by Norwegian colleagues. They say that they express this to colleagues, but that they rarely meet colleagues who actually correct their pronunciation. There are exceptions, and it seems that in some departments there is openness and room to talk about language and language challenges between colleagues. At the same time, our data shows that in some cases there can be deeply offensive behavior from Norwegian employees towards minority language employees in the care service, and in some cases also from relatives and patients. This coincides with Tingvoll and Fagertun (2020), who find that communication difficulties can create challenges for the working environment, and studies also show that a foreign accent can have a negative impact on the professional status of minority language employees (Dahle and Seeberg, 2013; Munkejord and Tingvoll, 2019). Based on this

knowledge and based on findings in our data material, we would therefore like to point out that it is important that any correction of the pronunciation of minority language employees must take place within an agreed and safe framework.

Some participants said that the DesignMEG course had increased their understanding of the importance of talking to Norwegian colleagues, both to improve pronunciation and language, but also because in Norway we talk to each other at work. This can be said to be a direct effect of the course, which contributes to more language-developing workplaces, i.e. the minority language employees become aware through the course that they themselves must take responsibility for getting to know their Norwegian colleagues and practicing better communication. The DesignMEG course can help to create more language-developing and culturally sensitive workplaces by involving managers to a greater extent in the preparation and follow-up of the course by the course organizer. Little happens in the departments to facilitate more language-developing workplaces unless the manager is involved. A template for managers' follow-up afterwards and tips on how to create more language-developing workplaces could be useful tools for managers to facilitate language development in the workplace to an even greater extent.

Several of the department managers we interviewed were keen for their minority language employees to become proficient in Norwegian and function optimally in their positions. They were therefore involved in their employees' training and development, and expressed a great need for courses in cultural understanding, communication and pronunciation. Studies show that it is very important that managers are committed to developing an inclusive working environment with room for continuous language development (Tingvold and Fagertun, 2020, Munkejord and Tingvold, 2019). Both managers and participants responded positively when asked whether it would have had a good effect if Norwegian colleagues attended this course together with minority language participants. It is possible that this could have contributed to Norwegian colleagues gaining greater insight into and understanding of the minority language employees' challenges in learning Norwegian, and that they could be a practice partner at work afterwards, cf. mentor in the workplace (Randen et al., 2018).

7. Summary of recommendations

- Involve the head of department before and after the DesignME course. Give managers tips on how to communicate an invitation to a course in a good way and how to follow up with participants afterwards.
- Try out an implementation of the course where Norwegian colleagues participate in all or part of the course.
- Arrange both the pronunciation part and the cultural part of the course physically.
- Create groups for participants to work in, both during and after the course. A forum for practice and networking.
- Give participants better insight into which words/sounds they pronounce correctly and incorrectly, so that practice can be more purposefully linked to the tests that are carried out.
- The course should be designed to last somewhat longer than the current duration. This applies especially to the pronunciation section.
- The culture section should offer different topics that participants can choose from, as their needs and interests are determined by how long they have been in Norway, family situation, work experience, etc.
- The course could include elements of cultural exchange to a greater extent, to highlight employees' cultural competence and create interest in each other's cultural background.
- Look into the possibility of including such a course earlier in the education process (introduction program and vocational education).

8. Concluding remarks

The evaluation shows good effects of the DesignME course for minority language employees in the nursing and care sector in Kristiansand municipality. Improved pronunciation, increased boldness and motivation to speak Norwegian in the workplace, as well as increased insight into Norwegian culture are some of the effects of the course. At the same time, the course has a potential for further development, which is specified under recommendations. What is worth noting is that both minority language employees and department managers at nursing homes are calling for more such courses, and that such courses should come early in the educational process for minority language speakers who are studying in the health and care sector. This is important for their adaptation to their work tasks, collegial cooperation, work with relatives and, not least, in relation to safeguarding patient safety.

Department managers find that they receive professionally qualified applicants for advertised positions with such poor Norwegian language skills that they cannot hire them. Considering the need for "more hands" in the care sector, it is important to ensure that minority language educated health professionals and nurses have good pronunciation and language comprehension so that they can be employed in the care sector. The DesignME course is a course that has potential in the education and training education and training sector for minority language speakers, as well as for employees in the care sector.

9. Literature

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