

Two educators exploring *utforskning* in English teaching

An interview with Anne-Lene Løvig Glomsrød and Rebecca Linnéa Söderström Barreng

By **Virgina (Gini) Lockhart-Pedersen**, Associate Professor, National Centre for English and other Foreign Languages in Education, Halden

The verb å utforske is one of the most frequently used words both in the core as well as subject specific curricula in the Norwegian school. The term, often translated as “to explore”, and variations such as “inquire”, “discover” or “experiment”, also appears as a key word in several competence aims in the English curriculum throughout the school – from grade 2 to grade 10 as well as vocational and general studies programs at secondary grades (MER, 2024)¹. To support pupils’ attainment of those competence aims, teachers might adopt an inquiry-based approach

in their classrooms. As used in the curricula, the term inquiry (to inquire as a verb) has been explained as “experiencing and experimenting, which can foster curiosity and wonder. Exploring can mean sensing, searching, discovering, observing and investigating. In some cases, it means investigating different aspects of a matter through open and critical discussion” (MER, 2018, p. 16)². The broad definition, which encompasses a wide range of activities and attitudes, can be difficult to translate into practices in the classroom.

For English language teachers, the lack of specificity may complicate or hinder them from implementing the intentions of LK20. In some cases, language teachers may need pedagogical and didactical support to confidently design and manage inquiry-based lessons. As a concrete step towards addressing the challenges faced by English teachers to fulfil the curricular intentions, the Norwegian National Centre for English and other Foreign Languages in Education engaged two new colleagues in the fall of 2024 for a 6-month project to investigate what inquiry-based approach

¹ Ministry of Education and Research (MER) (2024). Curriculum for English (ENG01-05). Established as regulations. The National curriculum for the Knowledge Promotion 2020.

² MER (2018) Guidelines for the design of national and Sami curricular for subjects in LK20 and LK20S.

Anne-Lene Løvig Glomsrød

has worked as a primary school teacher for 33 years, working in Oslo, Bærum, and Halden. She specializes in teaching Norwegian and English in grades 1-4.

Rebecca Linnéa Söderström Barreng

is an English and Norwegian teacher with experience in 9th and 11th grades. She has also worked as a researcher at the University of Oslo, contributing to the research project EDUCATE³.



aches might look like for teaching and learning English in Norwegian classrooms and to suggest some practical ways teachers could integrate inquiry-based approaches into their classrooms.

With the aim of raising awareness about the project initiated by the Centre and the project leaders' experience of working on the project, Anne-Lene and Rebecca, the project leaders, were invited to a 45-minute Zoom interview. The interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word Transcriber and where necessary, translated into English using Perplexity's Sonar large language model. The selected and relevant excerpts from the interviews are presented here. The excerpts were edited to adapt them to written format while at the same time every effort was made to ensure the original meaning was retained.

What motivated you to join the Centre and the inquiry-based project?

Anne-Lene: I've been a teacher for 33 years. My pupils are often very open to trying new things. So, when LK20 put the emphasis on an inquiry-based approach, I tried to incorporate it into my classroom. I didn't have much time to work with it, and I wanted to learn more about it. The project gave me that opportunity.

Rebecca: While working for the research project EDUCATE, I found the topic of inquiry-based teaching very interesting. So, when there was an opening at the Centre that would allow me the opportunity to focus more on the topic, I applied.

In your own words, summarize the main objectives of the project at the Centre.

Anne-Lene: Our main objective was to create a resource for teachers with ideas and methods for inquiry-based teaching that could work at both primary and secondary schools. To create the resource, we had to figure out what we thought inquiry-based teaching was and test our approaches with different kinds of pupils. There were many additional activities, including discussions with colleagues at the Centre and schoolteachers. We had to do a lot of work along the way before the resource was ready.

Rebecca: The objective was to give teachers in English classrooms at different grade levels a resource that would support inquiry-based teaching and learning. We wanted to support teachers' curiosity about inquiry-based teaching and give them something to use so that they didn't have to create everything themselves. We

wanted a resource that would provide a springboard for creating their own inquiry-based lessons.

How did your understanding of inquiry-based teaching and learning evolve through the project?

Anne-Lene: I didn't know much about inquiry-based approaches, at least not consciously. I realized early on that much of what I've done in the classroom involved exploration, for example dialogues about stories or creating words from letters. Before, I thought of inquiry-based approaches more in relation to math and not so much in terms of English language learning. At primary schools, we don't have time for in-depth discussions about our own teaching approaches. Through the project, I would say that I have evolved a more conscious, purposeful understanding of inquiry-based approaches, and much of my understanding is the result of discussions with colleagues, teachers and extensive reading. My understanding of the approach has led me to change how I plan my teaching. I will let go a bit more and allow for more pupil-led paths to learning. Although I experimented before, my teaching was often teacher-led, and now I understand that even younger pupils can test and explore language. In

³ The EDUCATE project analyzes how life skills, exploration, and digital competence are integrated into school subjects following the introduction of LK20. The project is funded by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2021–2025).

addition, I understand that in many cases inquiry-based teaching requires allowing time for the pupils to investigate language learning. Inquiry-based teaching and learning cannot happen when I rush through activities.

Rebecca: My understanding has evolved towards a more practical understanding. When the project started, I had been doing research, so my understanding of inquiry-based approaches was theoretically grounded. In this project, we took an inquiry-based approach by testing our ideas with teachers and pupils and listening to teachers express their needs. Therefore, my understanding of inquiry-based approaches evolved into a practical approach of **testing out, asking questions, and actively listening to others**. Although my theoretical understanding of inquiry-based approaches may not have evolved much during this project, I want to continue doing research on inquiry-based approaches. I am sure my theoretical understanding will also evolve in the future.

What challenges or surprises did you encounter, and how did you overcome them?

Anne-Lene: One of the interesting challenges for me was working on the same topic over a longer period of time. As a teacher, I'm used to having lessons and then rushing to my office to do a few things and then rushing back to the classroom again. I think taking time is part of an inquiry-based approach – taking time

and reflecting! I had to learn to find my own pace for sitting down and working on something for an extended time. I had to develop an awareness that I was easily distracted, for example by my emails or a conversation with a colleague. I think pupils may have a similar experience of inquiry-based approaches. To stay in the flow and focus on the work to be done at hand requires pupils to also learn how to notice their distractions and plan their work accordingly.

Rebecca and I had different experiences and backgrounds, so we had to find a way to collaborate. We were supposed to make a booklet for grades 1-10 together. My experience of learning to collaborate was similar to pupils learning how to work together when using inquiry-based approaches. We had a lot of discussions, and we made many changes along the way. We learned from the process we were involved in.

In general, I faced the challenge of being in a project as opposed to being a classroom teacher. Project work demands a different set of competences, which I believe align with inquiry-based learning. I had to learn to ask questions, find relevant resources, and synthesize information. However, as we worked, **I was surprised at how simple steps could be used to make teaching more exploratory. For example, I discovered how to ask more open questions. So, inquiry-based approaches didn't need to be complicated.**

Rebecca: The initial phase of the project was difficult, which can also be true of inquiry-based approaches with pupils. We didn't have a defined path to follow. We had to create the path as we went along. I used a big sheet of paper and three color pens to draw what I wanted to do and what inquiry-based teaching and learning in English was to me. I put the picture up on my office wall, and I looked at it every time we got stuck!

It was also difficult to find teachers to collaborate with in the timeframe we had available. Although there were teachers who said yes to school visits, they often had a time frame that didn't fit with the project, and I had to say no.

Finally, it was difficult to decide on the structure of the resource we were making, because we had so many ideas. We needed time and discussions to finalize the structure. In addition, some of the lessons in the booklet are lessons we have made and used in our own classrooms. I wasn't always ready to alter them. I guess putting out my own work made me feel vulnerable. What if someone didn't like it? So, it was difficult to be transparent in the creative process of writing lessons for others. I think pupils may also encounter these challenges when I use an inquiry-based approach in the classroom.

In terms of surprises, I was surprised how many of the teachers we talked to wanted to have a physical resource for planning

inquiry-based lessons. That gave me a sense of purpose for the project.

What do you hope will be the benefit of your resource for teachers, pupils, and the Centre?

Anne-Lene: I hope the resource rekindles a sense of curiosity and investigation when planning lessons and eventually rekindles curiosity in our pupils. I hope the booklet will give teachers the support they need to do this. In addition, I hope the Centre has built up competence through our discussions and involvement with inquiry-based approaches to language learning, and that the Centre continues using this approach in future projects.

Rebecca: For the teachers, I hope the booklet provides inspiration by reminding them that **teaching can be fun, too, without having to spend hours planning.** Perhaps the resource can act as a spring-

board for creating lessons of their own. I hope the Centre distributes the booklet as a complement to the other teaching resources found at the Centre. With the help of the activities in the booklet, I hope pupils get to experience that learning English can be interesting and fun.

What elements in this project are you interested in exploring further? What might the Centre explore further?

Anne-Lene: I was given several opportunities to work with the Escape Room approach during the project. I experimented with Escape Rooms in teacher education, at conferences, and in teacher development courses. I would like to continue working with Escape Rooms, which is also the topic of my master's thesis. **I am also interested in helping pupils to develop an inquiry mindset, including curiosity and a willingness to**

overcome obstacles and uncertainties. These are the competences we found to be important while working on this project. I want to investigate how to design my teaching better so that pupils can practice being curious and have the perseverance and grit to test things out and see if they work.

Rebecca: In the future, I would like to hear what pupils think. How do pupils experience inquiry-based lessons? I would also love to write articles about this project or inquiry-based teaching and learning in English. Maybe I will even start a research project, perhaps studying inquiry-based teaching in relation to language identity? Now that would be awesome!

The practical teacher resource *Curiosity Speaks English!* is the main outcome of the project, available on the Centre's website. The booklet includes inquiry-based lesson plans built around the three core elements of the English curriculum (LK20): communication, working with texts, and language learning. It also presents inquiry-based approaches that support formative assessment, along with example projects and useful criteria for assessing inquiry-based competences.



In addition to developing the resource, Anne-Lene and Rebecca contributed to a deeper understanding of inquiry-based teaching through both formal and informal discussions at the Centre. They introduced activities such as Escape Rooms and writing strategies during staff meetings, encouraging colleagues to reflect on and experiment with inquiry-based methods in their own practice.

