

Multilingual Learners Gravitating Towards English: Primary Teachers' Perspectives on Languages Competing For Time

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Abstract

The current study explores teachers' perspectives on a rather recent phenomenon in early Swedish education, namely young learners' increasing use of English in their social interactions at school. The study was initiated in response to concerns among the teaching staff at a thoroughly multilingual primary school context who had noticed that many of their learners opt to speak English instead of Swedish or their home languages amongst each other. Across school subjects, 27 teachers took part in the study by participating in focus group discussions on two occasions each where they voiced their thoughts about multilingualism, learners' language use and proficiencies, and their experiences of teaching in the current context. A qualitative content analysis revealed positive attitudes towards multilingualism, which teachers felt were of paramount importance to learner identity and learning. At the same time, they experienced challenges in relation to their teaching and expressed concerns about learners' school attainment, now and ahead, due to many learners' lack of linguistic grounding in both Swedish and their home language(s). As an increasing number of young learners gravitate towards English, teachers felt that languages compete for time.

Keywords:

Home Languages, Language Use, Multilingualism, Primary School, School Attainment

Introduction

Contemporary Sweden is a multilingual society, with many people of varying linguistic backgrounds and the pervasive presence of English. According to the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2022), more than 20% of primary school learners have a basic proficiency in a language other than Swedish and 29% are eligible for mother tongue instruction¹. Due to residential segregation, this number is significantly higher in some areas. In addition, children in Sweden have abundant access to English not only through traditional media but more importantly, through social media and gaming (Sundqvist & Sylvén 2014; Sundqvist 2020). As a result, many learners with a migrant background grow up surrounded by a number of languages



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in their homes, in their free time, in school, in their community, and online.

Outside the classroom, learners explore and express their identity by choosing when and how to interact using their individual linguistic repertoires (Bylund, 2022). Most research on multilingual learners' language choices has centered on the use of the majority and the home language². In Swedish preschool and primary school contexts, however, teachers also report an increasing use of English among learners (Jällhage 2022a, 2022b; Larsson et al., 2023). Whereas some point out that such a development is logical in a multilingual migrant context, studies have also identified a concern among preschool teachers that many learners do not practice and develop their Swedish enough (Heikkilä & Lillqvist, 2023; Puskas & Björk-Willén, 2017).

Against this backdrop, the current study focuses on a Swedish primary school in a highly multilingual context where teachers report an increasing use of English as the language of social interaction among their learners. The aim is to deepen our understanding of the perspectives of teachers and the challenges they perceive, as such insights are necessary for stakeholders and all those invested in primary education and the fostering of multilingual identities in young learners. The study gives voice to these teachers, across school subjects, as they strive to ensure learners' academic success and promote the development of the majority language Swedish and also learners' varying home languages. More specifically, the teachers' perspectives are explored in relation to teaching and learners' language proficiency and use. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do these teachers perceive learners' language use and multilingual repertoires?
2. What possibilities and concerns associated with teaching in the current multilingual school context do teachers address?
3. What attitudes towards multilingualism are expressed among the teachers?

Background

In the following sections, the linguistic situation in Swedish society and education is described. A subsequent section discusses language development among multilingual learners. Finally, studies related to multilingual learners and teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism in a Nordic compulsory school context are reviewed.

Multilingualism in Swedish society and education

Sweden is a multilingual society. According to the Institute for Language and Folklore (2020), approximately 200 languages are spoken in Sweden

today. English holds a special position in Sweden, and is widely used in popular culture and TV, the workplace, and education at all levels (Strang, 2024; Sundqvist, 2020). The dominance of English thus affects the entire population, and most Swedes encounter the language daily. For more than 15 years, Sweden has ranked among the top ten countries in the global survey English Proficiency Index (EPI), often even in the top three (EF, 2023). Some argue that English can almost be classified as a second language rather than a foreign language (Sylvén, 2019). The population may thus be considered multilingual in general. However, in the context of the current study, we use the term multilingual learner to refer to individuals who use languages apart from Swedish or English in their everyday lives.

In order to safeguard the role of Swedish as the main language and the linguistic diversity in Sweden, The Swedish Language Act (2009:600) was introduced in 2009. It stipulates that Swedish must be accessible in all areas of society and that every citizen should be given the opportunity to learn, use, and develop their knowledge of Swedish. The same provision regarding students is brought forth by the Swedish Education Act (SFS, 2010:800). Furthermore, this law mandates that students should be given the opportunity to advance their other home language(s) alongside Swedish. Learners who are not yet able to follow teaching in Swedish have the right to language support, so called study guidance, in the home language.

English instruction starts in lower primary school and must be taught from year 3 at the latest (student age 9–10). In total, 60 hours of English are allocated in years 1–3 and 220 hours in years 4–6. At the same time, many children and adolescents engage with digital games and social media to an extent that far outweighs the time for English instruction in primary school (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014; Sundqvist, 2020). As for assessment, there are no national tests in English before year 6, which is also when learners are awarded grades for the first time. Most learners study another foreign language (most commonly French, Spanish, or German) from year 6 (student age 12–13), but they can also choose to study more Swedish and/or English instead.

In Sweden, learners with or without a migrant background grow up surrounded by a number of languages in their homes, in their free time, in school, in their community and online. Many of these children were born in Sweden, others have arrived more recently and, in some cases, their parents are work migrants who may or may not see themselves building a future in Sweden. Focusing on Swedish preschool contexts, Larsson et al. (2023) found that many preschool children use English as a *lingua franca*, especially in multilingual settings. At the same time, other studies conclude that there are preschools

where little Swedish is spoken and that fail to support the development of children's multilingualism. For instance, Heikkilä and Lillkvist (2023) describe a preschool context where, despite of spending a lot of time there, "children do not learn Swedish" (p. 527). Similarly, Puskas and Björk-Willén conclude that Swedish preschool children in their study were "not being given enough opportunities to develop their Swedish" (p.447). Their preschool teachers found it challenging to expand learners' Swedish in alignment with the intentions of the Swedish preschool curriculum (Skolverket, 2018) and expressed concern about learners' vocabulary development. As these multilingual learners enter formal education, primary school teachers need to deal with their learners' increasingly complex linguistic diversity.

Multilingual learners' language development in school

In terms of language development among multilingual learners, Cummins (2000) introduced the terms BICS and CALP to differentiate between everyday and academic language skills. Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) refers to conversational skills, in other words context-bound language containing high-frequency words and phrases as well as simple grammatical structures. In contrast, Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) entails a more knowledge-related language competence, which is more subject-specific and context-independent, including grammatical and discourse structures which occur less frequently outside the context of schooling. CALP thus reflects "the extent to which an individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling" (Cummins, 2000, p. 67).

The BICS/CALP distinction emerged from observations by teachers and school psychologists who were concerned about the realities of classroom instruction and assessment faced by students from immigrant backgrounds. Typically, children achieve BICS-level language proficiency by the age of 5 or 6, whereas the development of academic language proficiency takes place during the school years (Cummins, 2021). As students co-construct conceptual knowledge with their teachers, they expand their linguistic repertoire from everyday language to encompass a more academic register and the specific language features associated with different school subjects (Gibbons, 2007). The framework is not a theory but rather a "conceptual distinction with clear implications for instruction" (Cummins, 2021, p. 202), underscoring the need for all teachers to promote language development within their subject domains.

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs about multilingualism

Ruiz (1984) identified three ideological approaches to language in society: language as a problem,

language as a right, and language as a resource. The framework has since been used in a number of studies in educational contexts (Hult & Hornberger, 2016; Ruiz, 2010). Language as a problem involves a deficit perspective on the language user, while language as a right focuses on the formal rights that a multilingual individual has. Language as a resource means that the individual's linguistic repertoire is viewed as something to be preserved, developed, and utilized.

A number of studies have explored teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism and multilingual practices in compulsory school in the Nordic countries in recent years. These have involved varying methodologies: surveys (Alisaari et al., 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Xu & Krulatz, 2023), focus groups (Yassin Iversen, 2021) interviews (Paulsrud et al., 2023) and interventions followed by interviews (Uddling et al., 2024).

Overall, these studies draw a complex picture of teacher attitudes to migration-related multilingualism in school. All the studies reveal that teachers in general express positive beliefs about multilingualism and migrant languages. Teachers also see the potential of multilingual approaches (Lundberg, 2019; Yassin Iversen, 2021); more than 90% of Norwegian teachers in their study reported that home languages are an asset for learning (Xu & Krulatz, 2023), in alignment with Ruiz's (1984) ideological lens of language as a right.

However, teacher attitudes are complex and the studies also illustrate tensions, where home languages are framed as both a learning resource and a problem (Alisaari et al., 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Paulsrud et al., 2023; Yassin Iversen, 2021). As a result of such overlap, teachers' attitudes are not easily assigned to one of Ruiz' ideological stances (Uddling et al., 2024; Yassin Iversen, 2021). Uddling et al. (2024) coined the category language as a conditioned resource, as home languages were regarded as instrumental tools learners can use to grasp content while they transition to the majority language. From this perspective, home languages can compensate for insufficient majority language proficiency. The other studies included in this review have arrived at conclusions similar to those of Ruiz (1984). Xu and Krulatz (2023) describe teaching as leveraging, limiting, or resisting multilingual approaches, where some teachers advocate for home languages as important social and cognitive resources that are vital to promote inclusion and diversity, while other more skeptical teachers underscore the role of the majority language for integration and academic success. Alisaari et al. (2019) found that teachers advocate, allow, or deny the role of multilingualism with some promoting multilingualism in their classrooms, some allowing occasional use, and others preferring monolingual classrooms as they believe the home language use hinders development in the majority language. Several

of the studies draw the conclusion that monolingual undercurrents permeate teacher beliefs (Lundberg, 2019; Paulsrud et al., 2023; Uddling et al., 2024).

These Nordic studies also indicate that there is a gap between multilingualism in theory and practices; while the role of home language use is often addressed in positive terms, actual multilingual practices are often not implemented (Alisaari et al., 2019; Lundberg, 2019; Paulsrud et al., 2023; Uddling et al., 2024; Xu & Krulatz, 2023; Yassin Iversen, 2021). However, among teachers who do enact multilingual practices, Xu and Krulatz (2023) found a strong correlation to positive beliefs towards multilingualism. In addition, multilingual-friendly approaches were more common among teachers with experiences of teaching learners with multilingual backgrounds.

These studies also foreground a number of challenges reported by teachers with regards to teaching in linguistically diverse settings. Teachers voice concerns that they are unable to monitor learners' discussion and whether these are on-task when learners are allowed to use their home languages during lessons (Alisaari et al., 2019; Yassin Iversen, 2021). Some regard home language use as acceptable as long as it does not negatively impact group dynamics and exclude other students (Alisaari et al., 2019; Yassin Iversen 2021). Curricular constraints and a lack of teaching materials are other obstacles reported from multilingual contexts (Xu & Krulatz, 2023). These studies underscore that many teachers feel unprepared to implement multilingual approaches in their classrooms. The researchers thus stress the need for teacher training to address language ideologies and better equip teachers with strategies to meet the needs of multilingual learners and orchestrate approaches that promote linguistic diversity (Alisaari et al., 2019; Paulsrud et al., 2023; Uddling et al., 2024). However, Paulsrud and Lundberg (2021) found monolingual ideologies to be prevalent within teacher education, where multilingualism is thought to belong to the sphere of language subjects and be associated with migration.

Only few studies have examined Swedish primary teachers' attitudes toward multilingualism, and those that exist are based on very small samples. Uddling et al. (2024) involved just two teachers, while Paulsrud et al. (2023) interviewed four. The current study contributes to this limited field by engaging the entire teaching staff of a multilingual primary school, providing a broader and more comprehensive perspective. Furthermore, it illuminates a current phenomenon attracting attention among teachers in varying Swedish contexts, namely the use of the English language as a social language among learners although they share home languages (Jällhage, 2022a, 2022b; Larsson et al. 2023).

Method

Participants

This study was initiated in response to a prior collaboration where a teacher at the school in question raised some concern about students' increased use of the English language as a social language, at the perceived expense of both Swedish and the students' other home languages. After contact and agreement with the school leadership, the entire teaching staff at the school were invited to take part in the study and gave informed consent to join in audio-recorded focus group discussions on two occasions each.

The school in question is located in a suburb of a major Swedish city and is rich in diversity regarding languages, cultures, religions, due to migration. Learners come from different language backgrounds and practically all of them, according to the principals and the teachers, have home languages other than Swedish. The school covers preschool class to school year 6 and has several hundred learners.

This study involves the entire teaching staff at the school. All of them are licensed teachers. Some are generalist primary teachers while others are subject teachers. Together they cover subjects such as Swedish, Swedish as a second language, English, maths, natural science, social science, music, physical education, arts, crafts, modern languages, and special needs. A few of the teachers responsible for modern and home languages are hourly staff who teach at multiple schools in the area and are thus not employed by the present school primarily. That means that they are not part of the teaching teams and partake in staff meetings at the present school, and were therefore not involved in the present study.

Data collection

Data was collected through a focus group approach, beneficial for exploratory research (Hennink, 2014). This method was chosen as the purpose of focus groups is to initiate discussion among participants, aiming to capture common and dominant ideas and perceptions while also uncovering varying perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In joint meaning-making, the participants have the opportunity to address issues related to the focus group topic that they believe to be important and interesting to discuss. They may ask each other questions, build on or react to what others are saying and reflect together. This way, a range of perspectives can be addressed. Furthermore, the approach allowed us to gather data from the entire teaching staff at the school.

Focus group discussions were conducted in Swedish. In all, eight focus group discussions were organized, as each researcher moderated two focus groups

each on two different occasions. Each focus group consisted of 6–8 teachers, which is a typical focus group size (Hennink, 2014) and practical as all 27 teachers could participate in one out of four discussions conducted the same afternoon. On the first occasion (Focus Groups [FG] 1–4), the groups were rather homogeneous, with generalist teachers for preschool class–year 3 and years 4–6 teachers joining separate groups. Sharing perspectives with colleagues who work in a similar context can promote openness among participants (Hennink, 2014). The starting point for the discussion were pre-determined broad questions, addressing teachers' perceptions of learners' language use and language choices in school, with teachers, each other, in and out of class, and learner attitudes towards varying languages. However, statements arose in the various discussions that led to follow-up questions, which differed from group to group.

One month later, each teacher participated in a second focus group (FG 5–8). For the teachers, the spacing of focus group discussions allowed them time to process input and potentially carry on conversations with their colleagues. For us as researchers, it gave us time to transcribe and get an overview of the initial focus group data. This time, the groups were mixed up, as more heterogeneous constellations may provide slightly new dynamics and discussions (Hennink, 2014). Once more, the researchers conducted two focus groups each. Teachers were encouraged to share any reflections sparked by the first focus groups. The questions centered largely on topics emanating from the first focus groups. In sum, the eight focus group discussions lasted between 31 and 42 minutes, amounting to 290 min in total.

Analysis

All recordings were transcribed by the researcher who conducted them and stored together with the recordings on Sunet, a secure cloud provided by Stockholm University. An inductive and data-driven qualitative content analysis was conducted, as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004), often used to explore people's experiences. Meaning units, consisting of words, phrases, or whole utterances that convey meaning in relation to the research questions, were identified. In order to make the data more manageable, fillers and iterations were removed while aiming to preserve the manifest content. This way, the meaning units were condensed, entered into an Excel spreadsheet, and coded. In a collaborative and iterative process, codes were sorted into tentative categories and subcategories that were compared and adjusted, until arriving at a stable interpretation. Through this analytical process, four categories and subcategories were created (see Table 1). The first category revolves around learners' language use and

language choices, as perceived by the participants. The second category addresses the teachers' perceptions of learners' language proficiencies in the varying languages. The third category focuses on the strategies, approaches, and possibilities and challenges related to teaching across school subjects in the current multilingual context. The final category deals with teachers' reflections and attitudes towards multilingualism.

Table 1.

Categories and subcategories resulting from the analysis of the focus group data.

Category	Subcategories
Teacher perceptions of learners' language use in school	• Swedish as the language of schooling • The absence of home languages in school • English as a lingua franca • Mixing Swedish and English
Teacher perceptions of learners' language competence	• Swedish • Home language • English • A lack of linguistic grounding
Teacher reflections on teaching	• Multilingual approaches • Challenges in relation to the multilingual classroom
Teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism	• Positive aspects of multilingualism • Concerns related to multilingual language development

Findings

The following sections present the findings from the analysis of the focus group recordings, organized according to the categories and subcategories developed. Quotes from the focus groups are included, translated into English and numbered to separate the eight focus group discussions.

Teacher perceptions of learners' language use in school

Swedish as the language of schooling

The focus group discussions revealed that an understanding of Swedish as the language of instruction was well established at the school. According to the participants, learners expect both teachers and learners to interact in Swedish in the classroom. One teacher explained that "they want to use Swedish, they know it's the language that we use here, in school." (FG 6). At times, learners support one another using other languages, predominantly English; "generally, we say that we speak Swedish in school and then we help each other out in different

languages" (FG 6). Teachers noted that newly arrived learners resort to English when necessary but attempt to learn and speak Swedish.

The absence of home languages in school

The focus group participants said that they generally do not hear home languages other than Swedish during lessons. There seemed to be a shared understanding among the staff that many learners feel ashamed of their home languages, which was a matter of concern. One teacher described how she sometimes conducts roll call in the morning by having learners call out, for example, their favorite color or dish. One morning she chose last names, but several learners refused to join in and one learner commented that "it's in my language and I don't want to say" (FG 6). Although many learners use phrases such as "my language" and "my home country", they are not eager to speak the language in front of peers, or, in some cases even name the language in question. Several participants described how together with their learners' parents, at teacher-student-parent conferences, teachers may invite learners to describe or translate something to their parents in the home language but most often, learners are not willing to speak this language in front of others who do not understand. In year 6, learners do "absolutely not" (FG 8) speak their mother tongue, but only Swedish or English. Other teachers were under the impression that learners entering their teenage years, towards the end of primary school, increasingly start to identify a bit more with their home language and culture.

In addition, teachers perceived that learners attend mother tongue instruction due to a sense of duty; "I think that you... as a child you often connect the language to your own identity, and nationality... If you don't know your home language, if you don't attend mother tongue instruction, you are letting your origin down in a way..." (FG 3). The varying languages among learners appear to be ranked in a certain hierarchy, according to the participants; some languages, like English and Arabic, enjoy a high status, whereas many others do not.

English as a lingua franca

In some ways, English appears to function as a lingua franca during lessons according to the focus group participants. Many learners, of all ages, appear quick to offer each other support by adding translations in English: "You may hear 'det är en bil [it's a car, in Swedish], a car [in English]' – I think that's cool" (FG 5). According to the teachers, learners seem to assume that people who do not know Swedish will understand in English.

The teachers found it unsurprising that learners with English as part of their linguistic background —

those for whom it is a language of community and belonging — use English outside of lessons throughout the school day. However, each focus group noted that English is also used among other groups of learners, both boys and girls, who do not have English as a home language, particularly in upper primary school, and most notably in years 5 and 6. The teachers pointed out that this is a rather recent phenomenon; "I know two girls whom I've heard recently, who have started. Apart from them, I haven't noticed that earlier" (FG 2). Other teachers described learners who prioritize English over both Swedish and their home languages, and "speak English all day in school" (FG 1) — in the school canteen and during the breaks. Outside of the classroom, some learners also address adults in English. Several teachers characterized the rapid increase in English use as dramatic or as a snowballing development.

The focus group discussions reveal a common understanding of English as a social language that learners use to talk about their interests outside of school, gaming, TikTok, and other social media. A recurrent theme is how learners appear to find a lot of enjoyment in English and have fun with the language. One teacher described how some girls almost take on another personality as they speak English. They laugh and dare to speak. The teachers attributed the use of English to its high status; it is easy to impress others by speaking English and mastering good pronunciation. According to the teacher accounts, it appears to them that some learners dare to speak and make mistakes in English while they are rather reluctant to engage orally in Swedish. Some teachers also believe that English may provide a kind of free zone for learners, as exemplified in this quote:

It's not as emotionally charged to speak English... I mean, it's more ok to make mistakes, to say something in the wrong way, because it's not... it's nobody's home language, maybe, or no one's strongest language... you don't need to perform in the same way in English, during the breaks. These girls, many of their parents can hardly speak English. So it becomes, like a secret language. (FG 8)

The teachers thus brought forth a variety of possible explanations for the prevalence of English during learners' interactions with their friends. Furthermore, English as a mediational tool was contrasted to learners' home languages that teachers perceived to be rather passive and associated with a sense of duty and expectation. Against this background, they argued, English is a communicative resource that learners associate with status, enjoyment, and fun.

Mixing Swedish and English

Especially in school years 4–6, teachers described how many learners switch between Swedish and English, in particular outside the classroom, and they mentioned potential reasons for such linguistic choices. Sometimes,

learners include words or phrases in English when they feel that they need to, either because they do not know how to express the content in Swedish, or in order to interact with someone who may not master Swedish well enough. The teachers observed, however, that it is more common for learners to include expressions and slang from English in their speech, often related to gaming and social media. The teachers noted that words and expressions from other languages are also used, sometimes criminal slang, which was a cause of concern to some of them. In addition, learners use chunks of words, mostly from English, to express and emphasize emotions and reactions. One teacher said: "It's like a whole other language, like Swedish is mixed with all kinds of other languages" (FG 2). Language use among many learners in year 4–6 was thus described as creative and building on many linguistic resources.

Teachers' perceptions of learners' language competence

Swedish

The focus group discussions reveal a large consensus about the lack of sufficient proficiency in Swedish among many learners in the present school context where most of them were born in Sweden and practically all have home languages other than Swedish. According to one participant: "Their Swedish is, well, a bit difficult to understand at times. Or there are linguistic difficulties, I would say, very much so... a lack of vocabulary and concepts" (FG 2). Many learners' Swedish was not perceived to be age appropriate for primary school in relation to vocabulary size, grammar, and syntax. Recent instances were recounted when learners had failed to understand words such as roof, wall, raspberry (FG 5), or smiled (FG 4), to exemplify difficulties with everyday language. Hence, according to the focus groups, from the very beginning of preschool class, there is great diversity as far as language proficiency among learners. It is their understanding that many learners who start school with a limited knowledge in Swedish have attended multilingual or English preschools and often use a mix of Swedish and English.

Yet, according to the teachers, not all learners appear to feel hindered by their limited proficiency in Swedish. They use the language they know, but although their Swedish may appear fluent, it is "meager and limited" (FG 2). Other learners instead prefer to remain quiet. A few teachers pointed out that many do not admit to not understanding the teacher and that a common strategy in their groups is to listen for tone and intonation, rather than content, and then confirm with a "yes" even though they do not understand (FG 5).

Teachers in subjects such as physical education and craft highlighted that although these subject matters

may seem practical, they rely heavily on language. A teacher in physical education reflected that the lessons involve "a lot of equipment and materials that they are not used to" (FG 6). Similarly, teachers in home and consumer studies and crafts agreed, as these subjects revolve around specific but also everyday vocabulary, such as cloth, brush, frying pan, or needle. According to the teachers' testimony, many learners who do not master this vocabulary often resort to pointing, gesturing, and using "it" and "that" in reference to nouns and verbs to communicate.

Home languages

Multilingualism with reference to home languages was acknowledged as positive and important in all the focus groups discussions. The participants described how they try to acknowledge, show an interest in, and encourage the use of other languages, for example by asking for common phrases. However, as described above, the teachers perceive that many learners do not master their home languages very well nowadays. To exemplify, one teacher described how she asked learners if they could say a simple phrase in their home language, for instance her name and that she is a teacher at the school in question. Yet, she continued, "almost no one is able to say it. I'm thinking, these are pretty basic words but hardly anyone is able to do it" (FG 1). Situations were also described where a teacher encouraged a learner with Arabic as a home language to help a newly arrived learner by translating into their shared language, but that they were not able to assist in this way. According to the participants, the mother tongue teachers (who work in several schools and did not take part in the study) confirm these suspicions, claiming that there are only one or a few learners in their groups who have a good mastery of the language.

As pointed out in the focus groups, the term home language may be misleading, as learners may employ a variety of languages at home. One teacher hypothesized that learners mix Swedish and home languages and believed this to be "unfortunate, as they don't develop either language well enough" (FG 5). In addition, teachers pointed out that language competence may be more receptive than productive. One teacher explained that "initially, you expect there to be a mother tongue that is actively used, but maybe it's not that active for the learner" (FG 5). Some learners shared with their teachers that when they go to what they refer to as their home country to visit their family, they interact in English rather than in the national language or languages.

English

Similar to the conditions in most Swedish classrooms, the English proficiency levels are diverse in the present school context; "Some speak English almost fluently,

and have no problems whatsoever, and others don't understand any English, at all" (FG 3). As described in the background, some recently arrived learners speak English as part of their origin, whereas others have no competence in English on arrival to Sweden, according to the teachers. Among those born in Sweden, there is a great span.

Several teachers emphasized that there are learners who claim to know more English than they do Swedish or their home language/s and feel that English is their strongest language. Several reasons are suggested to account for this phenomenon. Teachers speculate that learners may overestimate their proficiency in English, possibly because they feel that they have a good understanding; online videoclips are often possible to understand in spite of limited language. "Tiktoks and YouTube clips and those sorts of things are mostly in English, that they watch nowadays. So it's not odd that they would feel that, 'well English is my strongest language, because I understand English really well'" (FG 7).

As for their own productive skills, the participants described that many learners use English phrases and expressions, with good pronunciation, that may impress both teachers and peers. Learners may themselves perceive that they get along well in English; "I think that they feel that they are good at English, and also that they're more on the same level" (FG 4). Some teachers suggested that learners may have experiences of using it as a lingua franca and employ the same approach as in Swedish, namely to refer to objects and actions with "it", "that", and "like this". Applying such strategies to interact, the teachers argued, learners may not be aware of their limited proficiency in the language.

The teachers acknowledged that learners master English in certain domains and around specific topics, and there is thus a risk that not only peers but also teachers overestimate their general knowledge of English, although it is in fact not very fluent and rather limited. Other teachers reported being fascinated by learners' competence in English, as they overhear conversations during lunch where learners are able to recount in a rather elaborate manner what they have done throughout the day and conversations they have had. Several teachers also underscored that the learners' joy and their confident approach to communicating in English must not be regarded as negative. Moreover, the staff pointed out that learners' good command of English sparks pride in them and is praised by their caregivers. Nevertheless, the teachers voiced concerns that learners' proficiency in English does not compensate for their limited mastery of Swedish, which is the language of schooling and vital for school achievement in the Swedish context.

A lack of linguistic grounding

A recurrent theme throughout the focus group data is a perceived lack of linguistic grounding among many of the learners, as exemplified by the excerpt: "my perception is that they don't master their home language, and not Swedish either" (FG 4). Furthermore, there was large consensus about the limited language competence as the underlying problem for language development; proficiency in a language – any language – was underscored as the prerequisite in the learning of additional languages. Some participants described examples where newly arrived learners had caught up with the peers in Swedish in one semester. This was attributed to a solid competence in their home language as they arrived, from which to build their multilingual repertoire on. Others pointed out that this is also related to motivation; they perceive that some newly arrived learners, without any knowledge of English or Swedish, use and learn English rather quickly while their Swedish remains "quite weak" (FG 7).

The discussions reflected teacher concerns that learners who start school at the age of 6 have not begun to develop their literacy skills in any language and that they have limited mastery of several languages, in varying domains. With learners' increasing use of English during the school day, one teacher reflected on the fact that many learners born in Sweden would still say that English is their strongest language, and adds: "It makes me wonder, how did that happen?" (FG 7).

Teacher reflections on teaching

Multilingual approaches

The belief that home languages, and English, can function as resources and a lingua franca in their teaching, was consistently voiced in the focus groups; "working in an area like ours, you have to use all languages as resources" (FG 1). Various ways of implementing multilingual approaches were described. Some of the teachers make use of languages other than English, occasionally, as a strategy. Many participants described how they encourage learners to help each other and make use of their varying linguistic resources. Others expressed more skepticism towards allowing learners to speak home languages during lessons, as they feel unable to follow the reasoning among the learners, which, in their view, hampers the teacher's ability to scaffold and help learners. In the end, they argued, learners will still lack the subject specific words and concepts and, in addition, they are unable to discuss the content with the teacher, in Swedish.

Challenges in relation to the multilingual classroom

A certain frustration in relation to teaching thus emerges from the focus group analyses. With very few exceptions, the staff members were not licensed to teach Swedish as a second language and did not feel equipped to teach learners who do not master the majority language. Nevertheless, some teachers considered the possibility that they in fact ought to regard and focus more on Swedish as a foreign language and devote more time to aspects of grammar and vocabulary when it comes to everyday nouns and irregular verbs. As an example, one teacher recounted how learners had known the infinitive 'le' [smile] but had not understood the verb in past tense 'log' [smiled]. Furthermore, teachers in the early years described how common approaches to teaching decoding and reading, such as Bornholmsmodellen³ do not work the way they used to five or ten years ago, since learners do not have the vocabulary size to participate in the language games and rhymes that underpin this approach.

Throughout education, teachers need to introduce subject specific terminology, and all learners will be confronted with new concepts across school subjects. The participants pointed out that this is part of their job and not a problem; "It's important to remember, of course, that this is the case in every classroom in the whole country, that the new content in each school year, is new to everyone" (FG 8). The teachers underscored that more advanced and academic vocabulary does not cause any great difficulty; a Swedish word such as 'universell' [universal] can easily be understood by examining other forms like 'universum' [universe] and compared to other languages. However, one teacher pointed out, in relation to the current school context, that "here, it's not only that but in addition, the everyday words in between..." (FG 8). The challenge perceived by the participants instead lies in the high-frequency mundane vocabulary that young learners are generally expected to understand as they start school, such as 'wall' or 'smiled'.

As described previously, practical subjects such as crafts and home and consumer studies revolve around plenty of subject specific vocabulary to be taught, but also many everyday nouns and verbs. Teachers described how communication around sewing, sports and cooking becomes challenging when most such vocabulary is unknown. Concerns were thus voiced as to whether these subjects should focus more on developing learners' language, and how they would go about that. One teacher underscored the importance of using Swedish during instruction, "so that they get... the word for the feeling, and the word for the material, and words for tools and equipment..." (FG 3). The teachers in question agreed that learners need to hear new words, write them and use them

in a variety of ways in order to acquire them. At the same time, they said that their learners expect these subjects to focus on the practical – on doing and making – rather than talking about, to expand vocabulary, and rightfully so.

In all the focus groups, the importance of literacy and reading for language development was emphasized. Teachers reiterated that they struggle with sparking a joy of reading, by for example reading aloud, and using reading logs as homework. They underscored that it takes lots of practice for learners to reflect on their reading and make inferences, as many learners prefer working with closed questions and want to be able to find explicit answers in the text. Some explained how they structure their teaching to focus more on making inferences, reflecting and relating content to themselves and felt that such work is successful. Other strategies mentioned revolve around offering plenty of visual support, explicitly teaching strategies, and encouraging learners to guess the meaning of words.

Teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism

Positive aspects of multilingualism

The attitudes towards multilingualism that emerge from the focus group discussions are positive overall; knowing multiple languages is a positive thing, in general. The findings reflect a common understanding of the importance of knowledge in and continuous development of home languages. Ideally, the teachers would like learners to feel proud of their varying linguistic competencies, although in reality, they were of the impression that many of them are ashamed of their home languages. Furthermore, languages were discussed in terms of identity, emotion, belonging, emotion, culture and heritage, and thus important for children to have access to "from the beginning" (FG 8).

The observations that learners communicate and want to use English, in authentic situations, was characterized as a positive thing. One teacher in the earlier years expressed that "we had never reflected over English as something negative... I can see the problem, but I have always regarded it as somewhat positive, that you dare use different languages" (FG 6). The level of English was impressive to teachers: "They actually speak... fluently. That's pretty amazing... that you can take on a new language like that although the family doesn't speak English" (FG 6).

Concerns related to multilingual language development

At the same time, the attitudes towards the use of English among learners in school are multifaceted. The increasing prevalence of English was provoking to many teachers, as some learners opt to speak English instead of using Swedish or their home languages.

Considering the limited proficiency in Swedish that the teachers observe among many learners from the onset of compulsory school, the teachers described the primary school years as an uphill journey for these learners. One participant pointed out that time and resources are limited, and the fact that some learners receive extra help one-on-one with a remedial teacher was perceived as problematic and a waste of money. Aware of the risk of coming across as negative, this teacher commented: "Maybe I'm a bit, like, boring. They speak English, they shouldn't speak English... but I stand by that position (FG 8). According to the focus groups discussions, the teachers assert that they must work hard to convey the importance of practicing Swedish to learners and their parents, in order for learners to advance, and also to benefit from their education. At home, however, findings reflect the importance of families using their home languages; "I think we all agree on that, that's not the issue" (FG 1).

The responses highlight the perception that the current situation, with an increasing number of learners speaking English, is rather recent, "in particular the last four or five years" (FG 4). Teachers perceived the growing number of schools that advertise an international approach as problematic; greeting a new class, "you have learners who speak Turkish and Arabic and other languages at home, then attend English preschool and then start preschool class in yet another new language" (FG 2). One teacher reflected that they are potentially working against time: "in ten years' time, maybe we are all obliged to speak English, throughout lower primary school" (FG 8).

During the focus group discussions, various attitudes and approaches towards learners' language use in languages other than Swedish emerged. Some of the teaching staff regarded their own home language as a social resource to connect and bond with children with a similar linguistic background outside of the lessons. Some teachers described occasionally responding in English to learners who address them in English during the lunch break. Others explicitly ask learners to speak Swedish during lunch. The role of social interaction in Swedish was emphasized by some teachers: "it's super important also when they play" (FG 2). The participants asked themselves how much Swedish learners actually speak throughout a day and argued that learners who do not yet master Swedish should "take advantage of having Swedish friends. This may be the only place where they have the possibility to speak Swedish, right here in school" (FG 7).

The potential need of a language policy at the school was addressed among some of the staff. One teacher, maybe as a joke, maybe seriously, suggested that English should be banned outside of English lessons. Another teacher voiced... "You don't want to be

harsh, or mean... and like, oppress a learner because they don't speak Swedish very well, but at the same time... you don't want to allow the learner to speak too much English... I think it's a challenge for them to strike a balance" (FG 3). In all, the focus group discussions conveyed a concern about balanced language use that is sensitive to regulate and challenging to achieve.

Discussion

The current study explores teacher perceptions and experiences related to learners' language proficiency and use in school and across school subjects in a multilingual suburban school setting where practically none of the learners have Swedish as their home language, according to the teachers. The study was initiated in response to teacher reflections that English has rapidly gained ground as the language of interaction among learners, also among learners for whom English is not a home language and who do share other languages. In the following sections the findings will be discussed in relation to each research questions.

Learners' language use and repertoires

Research question 1 focused on teachers' perceptions of learners' language use and multilingual repertoires. In sum, the focus group discussions indicate that the teachers perceive that many of their learners favor English at the expense of Swedish, which in turn, is favored over home languages. According to the accounts of these teachers, the use of English as a social language among learners is steadily increasing at their school, in the corridors, during lunches and breaks. English enjoys high status, and learners use it to enrich their speech with expressions and phrases. These findings resonate with those of Larsson et al. (2023), that established that preschool children use English for a variety of purposes, for instance as a lingua franca, in order to position themselves, or as a secret language. As for home languages, the teachers report that many primary learners do not want to make use of these in school, echoing findings by Uddling et al. (2024).

The teachers are concerned that some learners claim that English is their strongest language, although they do not have English as one of their home languages. The teachers note that such claims may be inaccurate; learners may overestimate or exaggerate their mastery, which may be limited to certain domains. In addition, the teachers believe that learners may wish to identify with a language and culture that is perceived as desirable, and take on an image as English speakers.

In the current study, a salient finding is the teachers' emphasis on their perception of learners' low competence in both the majority language and their

home languages. Similar to Alisaari et al. (2019), our analysis reveals large consensus about the perceived lack of a solid linguistic competence among many of the learners. From the perspective of Cummins' (2021), these concerns refer to learners' BICS; it is the basic conversational skills of everyday language that teachers believe some learners struggle with, both in their home languages and in Swedish.

As regards the majority language, the teachers working with learners in preschool class to year 3 describe how they have noted a change within the last few years. They state that many learners nowadays enter school with a command of Swedish far below an age-appropriate level and are not always able to understand everyday language. At the same time, they describe how many of the newly arrived learners, thoroughly anchored in their home language, rapidly catch up, or exceed, their classmates. Previous studies with young multilingual learners conclude that learners' skills in their home language impacts their acquisition of a majority language (Thompson, 2015), in alignment with Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, which holds that BICS forms the underlying proficiency from which learners can transfer concepts and strategies across languages (Cummins, 2021).

Possibilities and concerns in relation to teaching

The second research question went on to investigate the teachers' views of the possibilities and challenges associated to teaching in the current context. At an individual level, teachers describe different ways of approaching multilingualism, for example by making use of other languages themselves, responding to learners in English or another home language to build rapport, or encouraging learners to support each other using their home languages. However, in their experience, such initiatives are not always successful, since they feel learners are reluctant or unable to provide such assistance.

Cummins' (2000) introduced the terms BICS and CALP to illustrate how teachers need to help learners advance their academic language repertoire and achieve the registers relevant within the different school subjects. However, in the current school context, it was the BICS competences that were identified as the major challenges. The teachers assert that many of their learners have not developed the level of BICS in their home language that could be expected by the age of 5 or 6, according to Cummins. With regards to subject specific concepts and more academic language within the realm of CALP, these were generally perceived as less problematic and as part of instruction, especially in years 4–6, among the teachers in the current contexts.

A recurring description emanating from the focus group discussions is of the primary school years

as an uphill journey for many of their learners. Home languages are discussed not only as vital for learners' identity but also as mediational tools for learning, echoing previous studies where teachers acknowledge that home languages are assets (Alisaari et al., 2019; Xu & Krulatz, 2023). However, the current findings underscore that the teachers believe that many learners in the present school context are unable to benefit from these linguistic resources, to mediate cognition and emotion, and classroom interaction to a lesser extent than five or ten years ago. The teachers perceive that the lack of linguistic grounding poses major challenges in relation to school attainment and access to further education. They worry about not only language development and education but also learners' socio-emotional needs and their developing identities.

The focus group discussions with this staff, teaching multilingual learners across school subjects, mirror a concern and frustration with regards to their own teaching and how to make linguistic diversity a resource in these classrooms. The conditions in the current school setting differ in various ways to those of previous studies, and also illuminate the perception of teachers on the role of English in the lives of young learners today. However, the findings add to the call for more teacher support in ways of implementing multilingual strategies to meet the needs of these multilingual learners and foster multilingual development across languages (Alisaari et al., 2019; Xu & Krulatz, 2023; Yassin Iversen, 2021). Some teachers point out that they are not teachers of Swedish as a second language and do not regard themselves as language teachers per se. Such utterances reflect a view that multilingual development belongs to the domain of language subjects (cf. Paulsrud & Lundberg, 2021).

Attitudes towards multilingualism

The third research question addressed teachers' attitudes towards their multilingual school context. As a phenomenon, multilingualism is conceptualized as something positive among the teachers in the current study, as found in previous Swedish studies (e.g. Lundberg, 2019; Paulsrud & Lundberg, 2023). In alignment with the curriculum, teachers underscore the interrelated nature of learning, language, and identity. They want to contribute to a positive multilingual identity development among learners, so that they can embrace their linguistic heritage and culture while also identifying as Swedish. The teachers want learners to feel proud of their varying home languages and stress that all languages should be appreciated. There was strong consensus about the importance of mother tongue instruction and a continuous development of Swedish and home language alongside English and potentially

other languages. Thus, language-as-resource and language-as-right stances are reflected throughout the data (Ruíz, 1984; see also Hult & Hornberger, 2016; Ruíz, 2010).

In recent years, the teachers in this study have noted what they describe as a dramatic change in language use at school, with learners opting to interact in English to an extent they have not seen before. The study reflects a situation that the teachers perceive as new and quite challenging, as has been reported in Swedish teacher trade media (Jällhage, 2022a, 2022b) and in preschool studies (Heikkilä & Lillkvist, 2023; Larsson et al., 2023; Puskas, 2017). Hence, the current study serves as an example of the changing linguistic contexts and the professional teaching situation. Today, with the immense influx and status of English, many learners resort to interaction and exploration in a new language, as evidenced by the current findings. They are using and broadening their linguistic repertoire in new ways, beyond the possible control of teachers and other adults. Learners opt to use varying languages for different purposes and may thus have other language orientations than we assume (as in Puskas & Björk-Willén, 2017).

While many teachers underscored that it is positive and fascinating to see their learners dare to interact in and explore their linguistic repertoires in this new and popular language, they also express concern. What teachers perceive as a lack of multilingual competence and linguistic grounding that form the basis of their multilingual development and identities is a recurrent theme throughout the analysis. As teachers within Swedish compulsory education, they see it as their task is to use and provide ample opportunities for learners to develop their Swedish and their home languages, as stipulated by the Swedish Education Act (2010:800). Working with their multilingual learners, the teachers were concerned about school attainment within a school system where learners will need to perform and express themselves in Swedish in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. The new role of English in the lives of these young learners is not itself regarded a problem; again, many teachers stressed that it is wonderful to see learners enjoy and dare to speak a new language. However, the teachers discern a change in learners' language abilities in their home languages and Swedish and express concern about what they interpret as a lack of linguistic grounding among their young learners. In their opinion, many learners who gravitate towards English would benefit from practicing their Swedish at school, and their home language in their free time. The findings reveal that at the heart of what the teachers experience as problematic is the way that languages are perceived to compete for time and attention. According to them, English is gaining ground at the expense of Swedish and home languages, both of which learners need to develop.

Ruíz (1984) introduced his three ideological positions to describe language policy in society. Such ideological underpinning and the policies in which they are orchestrated are important to be aware of in our contemporary multilingual societies and educational systems. Recent Nordic studies (Paulsrud et al., 2023; Uddling et al., 2024; Xu & Krulatz, 2023; Yassin Iversen, 2021) have found teachers to hold monolingual ideologies, although they speak in positive terms about multilingualism but also focus on school attainment and an alignment with the dominant role of the majority language.

In this study, the teachers expressed a conviction about languages as resources and rights, yet finding themselves in classrooms where learners' proficiency in Swedish and their home languages are perceived by them as problematic. Their assessment of language competencies, however, should not to be confounded with ideological beliefs about the benefits of multilingualism per se that would question the importance of home languages. Therefore, in our view, even though these teachers bring up everyday challenges and hurdles in relation to teaching and learner competencies in their varying languages, such findings do not translate as language-as-problem perceptions in the framework by Ruíz (1984). Based on the analyses of the focus groups discussions conducted in the present context, we believe that such an application of Ruíz' model to be faulty and counterproductive. Furthermore, we see a risk that such interpretations fuel notions of bad practice and position teachers, and also their learners, as problems, instead of directing attention to systematic educational measures that could help address the situation and secure opportunities for school attainment and equality aligned with the language-as-resource ideology.

The study contributes valuable findings to the field of primary education. The observations and interpretations of the teachers at the present school are not generalizable. However, the increasing presence of English in the lives of young learners will be recognized in most educational settings. Consequently, teachers are confronted with new language practices among their learners. The findings reflect an ambition among primary school teachers to promote the development of learners' multilingual identities and linguistic repertoires – in all languages they wish to learn. In order to back teachers in advancing supportive learning environments, listening to their reflections and everyday challenges that they face in their professional roles is vital. It is therefore an important task for researchers, policy makers, and stakeholders to take their concerns seriously and work together with them to tackle the perceived challenges of teaching in groups of linguistic diversity while meeting learners' needs with limited lesson time and resources that are part of their everyday reality.

In addition, looking into young learners' multilingual identities and their perceptions and use of languages, including English, are interesting avenues of further studies that may have implications for teacher education and compulsory education as whole.

Limitations

As in all research based on focus group and interview data, participants may, of course, withhold or adapt their beliefs to a situation — just as in any social interaction. Among colleagues and in the presence of researchers, this may have further contributed to a reluctance to express genuine opinions. However, we perceived the discussion climate to be open, and there were instances in which teachers articulated opposing views. Moreover, conducting two rounds of focus groups, a month apart and in different constellations, appears to have been fruitful, as several participants commented that the discussions had been stimulating and that they returned for the second round to share thoughts they had reflected on since the initial session. Nevertheless, expressing negative attitudes towards multilingualism may still have posed a challenge.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the teachers' evaluations of learners' language skills in their home languages is based on their experiences and interactions with their learners. Although most of the teachers grow to know their learners quite well as they spend several hours with them every day and over many years, nothing can be concluded about learners' actual home language proficiency.

The perspectives and experiences of teachers in the current Swedish multilingual primary school context are not thought to be generalizable to other settings. However, given the growing influence of online media platforms operating in English and the increasing presence of English in the lives of many young learners across educational settings, issues concerning to the role of English in multilingual development and in language education and are likely to become increasingly relevant to explore.

Conclusion

The current study gives voice to primary teachers, across school subjects, in a highly multilingual context where they observe that English has rapidly gained ground as a language of interaction among their young learners. The staff expresses positive attitudes towards multilingualism and all the varying languages that may constitute the linguistic repertoires amongst learners. Nevertheless, they also articulate concern. They perceive that many of their multilingual learners, in particular those born in Sweden, lack a solid linguistic grounding, in both their home language and Swedish from the beginning and throughout

primary education. Consequently, the teachers acknowledge their important task of providing ample scaffolding and developing teaching practices that will sustain learners' linguistic development across languages. Furthermore, they believe it is necessary for learners to practice their language skills in and out of school. Due to the growing popularity of English for social interaction, teachers perceive that languages compete for time. In order to develop strategies and advance the quality of education that will support multilingualism throughout primary school, our understanding of the beliefs and experiences of challenges that teachers working in multilingual environments perceive must be deepened. Only then can academia, teacher educators and professional practitioners join forces to advance pedagogy that is mindful of the linguistic context that are continuously developing and that helps young learners reach their multilingual potential.

Footnotes

¹Learners are eligible for mother tongue instruction if at least one parent has a home language other than Swedish, if the language is used in the home on a daily basis, and the learner has basic proficiency in the language (SFS 2010:800).

²In the context of our paper, the term home language(s) is used to refer to language(s) that an individual uses at home. We acknowledge that there are other possible definitions and also other similar terms, such as mother tongue and L1. Referring to previous studies, we use the term employed in the original texts.

³A model involving language games and activities developed to promote metalinguistic awareness and facilitate early literacy (Kjeldsen 2019).

AI Disclosure Statement

We have not used AI in any form at any stage of the work.

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