

# Introduction to the Special Issue on Swedish as a Second Language

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## 1. Why an Issue about Swedish as a Second Language?

This Special Issue focuses on Swedish as a second language (SSL), which is the subject where second language students (L2 students) in Sweden, in primary and secondary school and in adult education, receive teaching in Swedish. The question of education for immigrant students in the dominant language of the new country has been handled in different ways in different countries. Solid and well-established research (such as Cummins 2000, 2021) has explored the topic from various aspects, and various ways of organizing education for L2 students have been investigated (for an excellent overview see Baker and Wright 2021). Meanwhile, educational policies on national and local levels sometimes only build on this research to a limited degree.

In Sweden, students who have Swedish as a second language have the right to SSL, following needs assessment according to the Swedish School Ordinance (SFS 2011a). The subject has its own curriculum and should give the same eligibility to further education as the Swedish subject, and thus be equal to it. Some differences between the two subjects Swedish and SSL have been, for example, that Swedish includes knowledge about Swedish dialects, about the history of the Swedish language, and also about other Nordic languages and national minority languages. SSL, on the other hand, includes contrastive perspectives on Swedish, as well as knowledge about Swedish morphology, phonetics, vocabulary and learning strategies with a focus on language development and communicative skills. After the latest revisions of the curricula, SSL now also includes topics such as dialects and sociolects (Swedish National Agency of Education, SNAE 2022).

Earlier research on SSL has mainly focused on topics such as:

- (a) Linguistic aspects of the acquisition of SSL on individual and group levels, such as language structure and phenomena that are particularly important for L2 acquisition, see, e.g., Abrahamsson (2009); Axelsson (1994); Bohnacker (2010); Eklund Heinonen (2009); Ganuza (2008); Grigonyte and Hammarberg (2014); Hammarberg (2014); Pienemann and Håkansson (1999); Thorén and Hyeseung (2020).
- (b) SSL as a societal, sociocultural and educational phenomenon, such as issues related to migration, inclusion, equity, democracy, justice, policy issues, governance and management, see, e.g., Bijvoet and Fraurud (2012); Jonsson and Milani (2009); Milani (2007, 2008); Rosén (2013); Sahlée (2017); Siekkinen (2021, 2022).
- (c) Didactics, both language didactics and issues of language in relation to the learning of knowledge in various topics within SSL, see, e.g., Axelsson (2004); Bjühr (2019); Franker (2018); Fridlund (2011); Lindberg (2003); Rydell (2018); Vuorenää (2016); Wedin (2021); Wedin and Bomström Aho (2019, 2022); Wedin and Norlund Shaswar (2021); Winlund (2021).

Other topics which have been less frequently or only fragmentarily researched are topics such as age of onset (Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam 2009), teacher education (Carlsson 2009; Hermansson et al. 2021), early literacy education for adults (Wedin and Norlund Shaswar 2019, 2022) and literature didactics (Economou 2015, 2018).



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In this Special Issue, the focus lies on SSL didactics including current research on issues related to learning and education of Swedish as a second language. The contributions direct the reader's interest towards classrooms by illuminating what the most important participants, teachers and students, do, which means their practices, as well as their perspectives on these practices. Thus, this Special Issue takes a practical approach to SSL by highlighting and discussing conditions for the subject from different points of view and from different theoretical and methodological starting points.

## 2. Perspectives on SSL—The Contributions of This Special Issue

This Special Issue contributes to the research on multilingualism and education by situating contemporary Swedish research on SSL on the international research scene by highlighting some current research issues raised by scholars in the second language field in Sweden.

As researchers and teacher educators, we encounter a variety of opinions in relation to the subject of SSL. In contact with in-service teachers and students, we find a strong engagement in the subject and among the students it is aimed for. We meet students who struggle in their challenging task to learn Swedish and who at the same time use the language as an important tool for their studies in various school subjects. We also meet teachers in SSL who show enthusiasm for their work and who in many cases also invest much of their spare time in their tasks. At the same time, many teachers express feelings of frustration and despair, which becomes clear through an interview study presented in [Wedin and Straszer \(Wedin and Straszer\)](#). Thus, SSL appears as a subject with a lot of challenges. Through interviews with some highly qualified and experienced SSL teachers (see [Wedin and Straszer \(Wedin and Straszer\)](#)), we earlier identified challenges connected to three main issues, namely: (1) the status of the subject and its participants, (2) inclusion and (3) knowledge among teachers and school management. These three identified challenges are also visible in the contributions of this Special Issue.

Regarding the first, the status of the subject and its participants, power relations have been made visible through earlier research ([Hedman and Magnusson 2018](#); [Hyltenstam and Milani 2012](#)) and reports ([NASD 2004](#); [SNAE 2018](#); [SI 2010](#)), where a low status is often attributed to the subject, its teachers and its students. School leaders and teachers in subjects other than SSL have been reported to focus on perceived deficiencies among L2 students, particularly regarding Swedish language proficiency and experiences of life in Sweden (see, e.g., [Wedin 2010, 2021](#)). As teacher educators, we meet teachers who express how they in various ways are treated as less important even in questions related to L2 students, and who give examples of situations where they perceive that SSL as a subject is attributed with a lower status (see [Wedin and Straszer](#)). One factor behind this may be that SSL in its present form is relatively new in the Swedish school system ([SFS 2011b](#)) and not as well established as other subjects. SSL tends to be positioned as a support tool for special needs rather than as a subject in its own rights. The fact that a lower percentage of the teachers compared to other teacher categories are qualified for their job adds to this. This first issue is raised by Hedman and Magnusson in their article in this Special Issue. As they claim in their article, this may also be related to currents of xenophobia and resistance against immigration in the society at large. Hedman and Magnusson also address the second issue that we identify as challenging in SSL: issues related to inclusion and exclusion. In an earlier analysis of discourses of SSL in the academic field in relation to the concept of equality ([Hedman and Magnusson 2018](#)), they studied the contrast between discourses about equality as uniformity and equality as equal opportunities in the subject. In their research, they found both suggestions of closure of the subject and suggestions for improvement. They concluded that crossing discourses about SSL both collided and intertwined with each other. In their article in this issue, Hedman and Magnusson take the issue one step further by reflecting on how to arrange for sustainable, equitable and high-qualitative language educational provisions that include the teaching and learning of the language of schooling. They present discourses in relation to SSL and discuss the role

of pedagogical scaffolding for advanced literacy and literary content, and of multilingual aspects in SSL, as well as examine policy frictions that appear in their empirical data.

Thirdly, problems related to knowledge, or rather lack of knowledge among staff regarding learning conditions that are important for L2 students, may be connected to both a lack of research in some fields on the acquisition of SSL and to inadequacy in education for teachers and school management. Three of the articles in this Special Issue address important topics in SSL didactics that are still under-researched: conditions for developing reading skills (Bomström Aho), the writing process among L2 students (Zetterholm and Lindström) and teacher response to L2 students' language production (Jakobson). Bomström Aho explores reading practices in a transitional program at upper secondary school and shows that teachers highlight the importance of reading and the fact that reading in the subject they teach can help students to become competent readers of Swedish texts, while the amount of reading and processing texts varies. Zetterholm and Lindström investigate revisions that 9-year-old SSL students make during writing activities and they show that the mean proportion of the students' revisions is relatively low compared to findings in earlier research. Jakobson, in her study, focuses on teachers' verbal comments on adult L2 beginners' writing and she finds that applying the main distinction between 'focus' and 'manner' is important in the L2 context. Results like these add to knowledge about teaching and learning in second language education.

Thus, each of the four articles in this Special Issue on the school subject Swedish as a Second Language contributes to the field by deepening the knowledge in important aspects. While the first article by Hedman and Magnusson addresses issues on a subject level, regarding issues of status and inclusion, the three others address didactic issues. Issues of development of reading skills, raised by Bomström Aho, and of the writing process, raised by Zetterholm and Lindström, both deal with topics that are crucial for the development of the L2-education in itself. Jakobson's study on teachers' responses to students' language production, where the importance of distinguishing between *focus* and *manner* turns the focus on less researched aspects of L2-education, is important in this aspect. Taken together, the challenges identified in these studies need to be further addressed to strengthen the quality of second language education in Sweden and elsewhere.

### 3. L2 Students—Unequal Student Conditions?

The challenges mentioned above result in a problematic situation for L2 students in Sweden, and the School Inspectorate (see [SI 2010, 2020](#)) notes that there are problems with equivalence regarding educational equality for individual students. In a report regarding the development needs for SSL in Malmö town ([Malmö stad 2021](#)), the need for awareness among principals is highlighted to create equality in education. Furthermore, the need for clear routines for the subject is stressed, as well as development around assessment regarding who should study SSL and for competence among staff. [SNAE \(2019\)](#) concludes that this may be one explanation for the relatively low school results among L2 students.

In contemporary Sweden, with its changing conditions and patterns for mobility, as in many other countries, the school system faces new challenges. The 2015 surge of migration in Europe resulted in new opportunities across public institutions, particularly for the school system. The pandemic COVID-19 pandemic made the variable and changeable nature of mobility even more visible as well as its effects on conditions for learning among students who find their linguistic environments changing, as well as their opportunities for education (see [Straszer et al. 2022](#)). The current war in Ukraine adds new factors to the changing conditions, as many Ukrainian teachers have continued to teach their students remotely. At the same time, voices are raised in public debate that argue for changes in language policies for education, with agendas other than the one that characterizes research on SSL. Some examples are demands for language tests in relation to citizenship and employment, and recently for the closing of the subject Mother Tongue Tuition<sup>1</sup> and discussions following ongoing work on a national level on merging the two school subjects, SSL and Swedish. Ideologies expressed in these debates may result in changes on a policy

level that will affect conditions for education for second language students and specifically for the subject SSL.

#### 4. Discussion

The changing nature of patterns for mobility and ideologies regarding education policies for the education of second language learners means that the rather ambitious project that SSL is part of; a project which aims at equal educational conditions for all residents in the country, may be subject to change. Apart from SSL, support in the form of Mother Tongue Tuition and what in Sweden is called Study Guidance Assistance through the pupil's Mother Tongue (see, e.g., Rosén et al. 2019) in some aspects is also a vulnerable educational project which may face changed conditions. On the other hand, the tendency towards an increasing number of second language students and the increasing number of teachers who are educated in learning conditions for second language students as well as in the teaching of the school subject SSL may strengthen opportunities for the development of better conditions for learning among L2 students and thus also for the subject, SSL.

The need for increased knowledge is still great, both in the form of research and among teachers. There is a need to clarify borders between the subjects SSL and Swedish, as well as the borders for teachers in SSL. There is also a need for creating routines to handle the heterogeneity in SSL, which includes students on a continuum from beginner levels to advanced levels, as well to handle dilemmas in relation to second and third-generation immigrants perceived of as in need of support in Swedish. Thus, support for schools to decide which students should study each subject needs to be developed, and SSL curricula need to be adapted in order to suit both beginner and advanced levels which needs to be strengthened. There is an urgent need for higher demands on education for SSL teachers, particularly in primary school (P-6) and adult education for newly arrived individuals, Swedish for Immigrants, as well as for education for all teachers on conditions for learning among second language and newly arrived students. This implies that there should be a demand on all principals and other school leaders, as well as all teachers, to have such education. Thus, although the support for L2 students in Sweden, of which SSL is a crucial part, may seem ambitious, there is still a need for improvement. Questions about language and about L2 students' conditions for learning need to permeate the whole educational system.

This Special Issue is one contribution to the knowledge about SSL as a subject, and our hope is that it will result in more research in this important area. When it comes to future research, we see a need for studies that further consider relations between the two subjects Swedish and SSL from both the teachers' and pupils' perspectives, and particularly the case when the two subjects are taught in the same classroom. It would also be fruitful to look into the question of criteria used to decide whether individual students should study Swedish or SSL.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7570193> (accessed on 26 April 2022).

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