

# English Only in Multilingual Classrooms?

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Many language teaching approaches, notably Communicative Language Teaching, rest on the belief that students learn more English if classrooms are exclusively English-medium. This ideology is often labeled ‘monolingual teaching’ or ‘English Only’. Strict English-Only lacks research support, however, and growing linguistic diversity calls for renewed consideration.

English classrooms in Sweden are by their very nature multilingual spaces as students speak at least one other language. Using these prior languages means engaging students’ prior knowledge while also achieving inclusion, both considered fundamental to education (cf. Cummins 2017; Skolverket 2013). Even though syllabi for English stress the importance of involving students’ prior knowledge (Skolverket 2011: 9), they provide ideological support for English Only (Skolverket 2011: 11). The use of students’ prior languages is not prohibited, but teachers are left to rely on their own professional judgement for when to do so (Hult 2017).

*MultiLingual Spaces? Language Practices in English Classrooms* – funded by the Swedish Research Council over four years (2017-2020) – focuses on the learning and teaching of English in linguistically diverse classrooms, recognizing the need to foster plurilingualism as well as proficiency in English among students. We test hypotheses shaped by research in psycholinguistics, language learning and education by collecting data in school years 7-9. In this paper, we present the research basis that *MultiLingual Spaces* builds on, and the questions we are seeking answers to. As a background, we begin by discussing English Only as applied in the Swedish context.

## English Only in Sweden

English Only is endorsed by educational policy (Hult 2017), the Swedish Schools Inspectorate

(Skolinspektionen 2011) and teacher educators (Lundahl 2012). English Only may indeed be realistic in Sweden due to a range of circumstances that contribute to people in Sweden having good English proficiency. One reason is typological: Swedish and English are closely related languages and therefore similar. Another reason is the ample exposure to English through different media; for example, English is not silenced by dubbing on Swedish TV and in cinemas, except for children’s programmes. Yet another reason is that the British Isles and Ireland are within close proximity, and regular travel to English-speaking countries is within financial reach for many. English language teaching is successful in the sense that Swedish students do well in comparison to students from other countries (Lundahl 2012) and English teachers in Sweden tend to speak more English during English lessons as compared to teachers in other European countries (Lundahl 2012).

A report from the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen 2011) on the teaching of English in school years 7-9 examined whether English Only was maintained in 293 English lessons at 22 different schools across Sweden. The report revealed that roughly 50 per cent of lessons were English Only. In the remaining 50 per cent of lessons, teachers enacted a bilingual English-Swedish policy. Approximately 50 per cent of the students reported that the students did not stick to English in English lessons. Roughly

20 per cent of the students reported in questionnaires that their teacher did not stick to English.

The bilingual English-Swedish policy is visible also in English textbooks (Lundahl 2012: 93). Lundahl raises the bilingual policy as problematic: “English-Swedish word lists often present difficulty for Swedish students, but for students with limited proficiency in Swedish, they stand in the way of learning” (2012: 93, our translation). Lundahl’s argument is straightforward, logical and important, but can we say for certain that English Only is the most efficient and equitable approach? To us this is an empirical question for which there currently is no research-based answer. Perhaps Swedish-English word lists are facilitative as students need to learn both Swedish and English in order to progress in Swedish education? Or would they be better served by vocabulary lists in which English words are juxtaposed with translations into their prior languages, for example Bosnian or Farsi? Or is English Only, i.e. definitions/explanations in English, a better alternative for the vast majority of students? Or are the individual differences and preferences so different that it is not possible to provide guidelines? Below, we review research that can shed some light on this.

### **The effect of students’ prior languages on learning an additional language (L2)**

Several studies have shown that L1 translation equivalents help to quickly develop the size of learners’ L2 vocabularies (Schmitt 2008). A study by Lee and Macaro (2013) is worthy of particular attention here as it focuses on young learners (age 12, with 3.7 years’ classroom instruction in English) in addition to adult learners of English (with 9.2 years’ classroom instruction in English). All were native speakers of Korean. In English lessons, both groups were exposed to teacher-fronted vocabulary explanations either in English (English-Only instruction) or by

code-switches into Korean (English-Korean). Results showed that teacher code-switches into Korean to explain and define the meaning of new English vocabulary led to significantly higher levels of learning for both student groups. This effect was greater for the 12-year-olds than for the adults. The study also revealed that using English Only to define/explain new English words was more time-consuming than providing Korean translation equivalents.

For the learning of L2 grammar, there are fewer published studies. Kupferberg and Olshtain (1996) tested the effect of providing students with contrastive linguistic input in their L1 on their learning of English L2. Participants were 16-year-old Hebrew-speaking students at a high school in Israel who had had classroom exposure to English for five years. They were divided into an experimental group (70 students) and a control group (67 students). In English lessons, the experimental group received statements in Hebrew that explained the difference between English and Hebrew on two different grammar features that have been shown to be difficult for Hebrew-speaking learners. The control group completed communicative tasks using texts that were rich in the two targeted structures, but they received no explicit statements explaining the grammatical differences. Post-tests revealed that students in the experimental group were significantly better at recognizing errors involving the two targeted structures, and at using the two target structures in a native-like way. Kupferberg and Olshtain argue that the contrastive linguistic input in Hebrew facilitated acquisition by making the differences between Hebrew and English salient. Another explanation for the beneficial effect of code-switching is provided by Rolin-Ianziti and Brownlie (2002), in their study of teacher code-switching between adult learners’ L1 and L2: code-switches provide repetition and redundancy in classroom input,

positing such redundancy as “a fundamental feature of teacher speech” that facilitates learning.

In sum, currently, research provides support for the strategic use of students’ L1 to help students expand their L2 vocabulary and to learn difficult grammar. Such limited, strategic use of students’ prior languages does not need to interfere with English otherwise being the medium of instruction in the classroom, as communication in L2 undoubtedly assists L2 learning.

### **The effect of students’ prior languages on communication in English**

A number of studies have revealed that the L1 can serve cognitive as well as social functions that facilitate completion of L2 tasks. In terms of the amount of communication in L2 English, one of our own studies (Källkvist 2013) showed that university students communicated significantly more in English when difficult grammar was explicitly compared to translation-equivalent Swedish structures than when English Only was adhered to. We explained this finding by drawing on the concepts of student agency and student prior knowledge of their L1. We argue that comparison with translation-equivalent structures in Swedish provided students with opportunities to enact their identities as Swedish-English bilinguals, which led to them communicating more in English about the grammar they were being taught.

Turning now to L2 writing, research shows that many students naturally resort to their prior languages as tools for thinking when writing texts in L2 English, particularly for generating ideas for the content of the texts and for deliberating over vocabulary (see review in Gunnarsson et al. 2015). This tendency among multilinguals to naturally draw on their entire linguistic repertoires can be explained by memories being encoded in contexts where a prior language was

spoken, and by research on language activation, to which we now turn.

### **Language activation in multilingual individuals**

Using new digital technologies, studies have shown that bilinguals cannot completely “turn off” one language while speaking the other (see review in Wu et al. 2013). Extrapolating to Swedish schools where Swedish is the medium of instruction for most subjects and the means of communication in schools, students cannot be expected to deactivate Swedish on command. Likewise, students who are bilingual users of, say, Arabic and Swedish may have trouble suppressing these languages as they enter the English classroom. Therefore, imposing a strict classroom English-Only language policy may be working against the human mind.

### **The ‘multilingual turn’, translanguaging, and English Mainly as opposed to English Only**

Research such as that presented here has led to a multilingual turn among many leading researchers, and to English Mainly rather than English Only (Corcoll López & González-Davies 2016). An important recent contribution to multilingual education is the translanguaging framework (García & Wei 2014), which is currently receiving ideological as well as empirical support. Its focus is students who are users of a minority language in a society that requires the use of a majority language at school – such as students in Sweden who started their lives elsewhere and therefore are regular users of languages in addition to Swedish, for example Arabic or Somali. In translanguaging pedagogy, language-minoritized students are positioned as competent in the classroom as their prior languages are built on as prior knowledge just like any other prior knowledge an individual may have. Evidence from translanguaging classrooms is now emerging, showing that communication in the L2 increases when students’ prior

languages are used as a resource (García & Wei 2014), which is in line with Källkvist's (2013) results. This research basis informed our design of MultiLingual Spaces.

### **MultiLingual Spaces: research questions and methodology**

MultiLingual Spaces studies communication in English classrooms, students' learning of English vocabulary as an effect of classroom language policy, and the role of ideologies on teachers' and students' practices. MultiLingual Spaces assumes that students do not de-activate their prior languages as they enter the English classroom, and that permitting reference and comparison to prior languages can facilitate learning and yield more student communication. As teachers have valuable professional expertise (often referred to as 'best practice') that often goes undocumented, in the initial phase of MultiLingual Spaces we document language practices used by English teachers and their students in classrooms where there is linguistic diversity. Typically, the teacher is an L1 Swedish speaker and so are some of the students, whereas others have different geographical origins and are therefore bilingual users of Swedish and another language such as Dari, Turkish etc. In these multilingual spaces, we examine whether teachers achieve inclusion and try to maximize learning by drawing on students' prior languages, or whether, in their best practice, they adhere to English Only. We also examine the extent to which students naturally draw on their entire multilingual repertoires in their efforts to learn English, and whether choice of language(s) depends on their level of English proficiency and/or ideologies about language learning and teaching that are held by the school, teachers or students.

As gaining command of L2 vocabulary is one of the major tasks that L2 learners face, the second phase of MultiLingual Spaces focuses on students' learning of English vocabulary. We

examine to what extent a strict English-Only approach to learning new English vocabulary in the classroom compares to a strict English + Swedish approach like that offered by many textbooks, and to an approach involving English + Swedish + other prior languages. For example, we do not know whether a Somali-Swedish bilingual student is hindered or helped by translation equivalents in Swedish or Somali or both. We have anecdotal evidence from international colleagues who are native speakers of a non-Germanic language and who are having to use both English and Swedish at work saying that juxtaposing English and Swedish vocabulary helps them learn both English and Swedish.

When addressing these questions, we adopt a mixed-method design, using qualitative and quantitative data to understand the complex phenomena of language teaching and learning in multilingual education. We are looking to develop an informed, research-based approach to teacher and student balanced use of their language repertoires that serves cognitive and social functions that enhance learning. We are not expecting simple answers as the benefits of using students' prior languages may depend on a range of factors such as learning context and task complexity (see review in García Mayo & Hidalgo 2017) as well as on individual factors such as age, target language proficiency level, motivation and language learning aptitude.

We begin data collection by administering a web-based questionnaire to English teachers nation-wide before collecting data in classrooms.

We look forward to keeping *Lingua* readers updated on our progress. Our first opportunity to report results will be at the ASLA Symposium at Karlstad University ([www.kau.se/csl/asla-2018](http://www.kau.se/csl/asla-2018)) on Classroom Research and Language/Languaging in April 2018. We hope to see some of you there – please come talk to us!

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<sup>1</sup> *Prior languages* is used in this paper as a cover term for languages encountered by a student prior to learning English at school, for example Arabic and Swedish for a student who regularly uses these languages. For such students, it may not be possible to assign one of the languages as the native language (L1). L1 is used to refer to a student's native language when it is possible to determine which language is the L1, for example for students who were exposed to only one language from birth. L2 refers to a language encountered after the L1 or the prior languages.