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# Language-in-education issues: Sweden as a case study

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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Language-in-education issues: Sweden as a case study**

Béatrice Cabau<sup>1</sup>

Abstract: From the beginning of the 1990s, the Swedish society has been affected by various changes at various levels. This modified social, political and economic context led to several reforms implemented in the educational arena. These reforms dealt with decentralisation, choice, use of market forces and privatisation. All these aspects had an impact on language education.

This article will focus upon the social, ideological/political and educational parameters having affected language-in-education policy in Sweden these last years. It will investigate the present-day position of languages – Swedish, minority languages, English and other foreign languages – in the Swedish educational milieu. It is based upon the following main assumption: an investigation into the position of these languages in education highlights the new trends observed in the educational sphere since the 1990s. These new trends themselves echo the various changes Sweden has been experiencing lately in several domains.

*Keywords: language-in-education policy, Sweden, English, Swedish as a second language, second foreign languages, minority languages*

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## Introduction

From the beginning of the 1990s, the Swedish society has been affected by various changes at various levels (Lundahl 2002; Trägårdh 2007; Wildt-Persson and Rosengren 2002). This modified social, political and economic context led to several reforms implemented in the educational arena. These reforms dealt with decentralisation, choice, use of market forces and privatisation (Miron 1998, 153). Miron (1993) exposed the change to a market-economy based educational policy, and all these aspects had an impact on language education.

At the same time, a debate has been taking place about linguistic diversity. In 2000, Sweden recognised five minority languages, and in late 2005, adopted a language policy (Regeringens proposition 2005/06:2). Nevertheless, language issues were further discussed, mainly because of the rejection by the previous (Social-Democrat) government of asserting Swedish as the official language of the country. This ideological and political choice prompted many comments and criticisms, nourished not surprisingly by the new right-wing coalition government formed after the 2006 general election. In the 2005 language policy document, the privileged position of English was reinforced in higher education (Regeringens proposition 2005/06:2) and little attention was given to second foreign language (FL) education, i.e. foreign languages other than English (Cabau-Lampa 2007). Then, in March 2008, a language act was proposed to the government to assert Swedish as the main (still not national or official) language in Sweden (SOU 2008:26<sup>1</sup>). The new law is supposed to enter into force on 1 July 2009. Some titles of articles published online in a recent issue of the “Language Defence” newsletter of the Swedish network *Språkförsvaret*, whose aim is to defend Swedish against the overwhelming presence of English, highlight that the debate about language planning and education is still lively: “Good night Sweden. Poor language knowledge entail billion loss”, “Don’t teach in English”, “Mother tongue best for learning”... (Språkförsvaret, *Newsletter*, Nr 6. 16 October 2007). But, of course, the recurrent topic of discussion was about what status will be granted Swedish in this forthcoming bill.

In the eyes of a foreigner, the Swedish questioning as for the position of the different languages present in Sweden doesn’t seem exceptional: what country is exempt of debates dealing with the growing importance of English, the status of the national language(s), the position to give to foreign language education, minority languages, etc. But what might appear as “new” in the Swedish context is the fact that the country retains abroad a traditionally excellent image on her achievements in language education (Enkvist 2005, 38): Swedes are reputed for their high proficiency in English, and Sweden’s generosity in the field of immigrant education comprising mother tongue instruction and Swedish as a second language for adults and children was often presented as the model to follow (Cabau-Lampa 1999). But the above-mentioned articles and agenda items seem to indicate that several questions are being raised.

This article is an updated development of previous research work (Cabau-Lampa 1998, 1999) and will focus upon the social, ideological/political and educational parameters having affected language-in-education policy in Sweden the last few years. It will investigate the present-day position of languages – Swedish, minority languages, English and other FLs – in the Swedish educational milieu. It is based upon the following main assumption: an investigation into the position of these languages in education highlights the new trends

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<sup>1</sup> SOU = Statens Offentliga Utredningar (Swedish Government Official Reports Series). Here, 26 refers to the number of the study in this series in 2008.

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### ***Reorientation of discourse in the Swedish educational arena***

The 1990s represent one of the most interesting periods as for various debates about languages present not only within the Swedish society, but also in the school context (Cabau-Lampa 1998; 1999). To some extent, this is not a surprise since Sweden was then experiencing “fundamental challenges to the Swedish political consensus and the Swedish social contract” (Trägårdh 2007, 20-1). All the new trends observed in the Swedish society were obviously to have an impact on the education system and policy:

Society itself has changed rather dramatically during the last 10 years. Sweden is no longer a homogenous society with small differences between various groups and classes. Sweden is now a multicultural society, and class differences are increasing. These differences tend to effect variations within the education system. Variations or inequalities [...] in the education system are not necessarily effects of education reform; they could be the result of societal change (Wildt-Persson and Rosengren 2002, 318).

Some researchers go even further, when stating that the development observed these three last decades in Swedish education and education politics “may be related to both a critique of the functioning of the welfare state and a restructuring of Swedish economy and society” (Lundahl 2002, 688). At the beginning of the 1990s, the education system went through great changes. The school system was decentralized, with the idea that, the school system would become more receptive to change and more sensitive to its interest groups (Wildt-Persson and Rosengren 2002). The reforms which took place dealt with decentralisation, choice, use of market forces and privatisation (Miron 1998, 153). The emergence of individualism led to the phenomenon of choice:

Choice has been augmented by the reforms as well as by the new national curriculum. Students now have more chances than before to choose which subjects they wish to participate in or study in depth. The number of choices increases over the years. Schools now have more choice in the instruction they offer. The national curriculum specifies the goals in each subject, and the schools have more choice in deciding how they are going to attain that goal. Schools can also make choices in how they wish to distribute the specified number of hours of instruction per subject (Miron 1998, 154-5).

Furthermore, the 1990s have introduced a revolutionary element into the Swedish educational environment, i.e. the existence of independent schools which was made possible by the introduction of a new grant system in 1992. These schools – which must be approved by the National Agency for Education – receive a grant from the municipality where the pupil has his/her home. The municipalities are obliged to pay the independent school 75% of the average cost per pupil at a municipal compulsory school. In 1995/96, there were 238 independent schools set against 635 in 2007/08 (Skolverket 2008). In 2004/05, at the compulsory level, 29 of them adopted a linguistic/ethnic profile<sup>2</sup>. All these changes had an impact on language education opportunities and choices.

### **Languages in the school context**

First of all, let us turn first briefly to the various languages present in Sweden, before considering their position in the educational arena. Swedish is the principal mother tongue,

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<sup>2</sup> In 2006, the classification “ethnic/linguistic profile” disappeared to be included in the category “general education”.

which dominates the society at all levels. English, a compulsory school subject since 1962, is part of the daily life of most Swedes and enjoys high prestige (Josephson 2004, 14). Some world languages, such as Spanish and Arabic, are used by minority groups, with Spanish presenting the peculiarity of being the most popular second FL. The two other main FLs are German and French. The main minority mother tongue is Finnish, a neighbour language. In 2000, Sweden ratified the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* as well as the *Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities*. Finnish, Saami, Meänkieli (a language related to Finnish spoken in the Tornedal district in northern Sweden), Yiddish and Romani were granted the status of minority languages. There are between 15,000 and 20,000 Saami people, 40,000 Meänkieli speakers, 200,000 Finnish speakers (but 445,000 individuals born in Finland or their children), between 35,000 and 40,000 Roma people and 2,500 Yiddish speakers (SOU 2005:40).

The past and present-day importance of language teaching of various kinds in the Swedish school system has been recognised (Eurydice 2005, 76). Olle Josephson, Director of the Language Council, uses the stage of the teacher room to illustrate the issue of language status: the English and Swedish teachers are heard and listened to by other teachers; the Spanish, German and French teachers are under pressure but occupy a respected position; teachers of Swedish as a second language are often viewed as the ones who are not able to cope with larger classes, even if their teaching task is challenging because of the diversity of needs and preliminary knowledge in Swedish; finally, teachers of immigrant/minority languages are nowhere to be seen, be it in the teacher room or in the whole school (Josephson 2004, 128).

### *English*

English was introduced as the first compulsory FL as early as 1962. Official documents assert the “central role” (Skolverket 2001, 88) played by English in the Swedish school, presenting it as the “common frame of reference and of basic education equal for all citizens” (Skolöverstyrelsen 1980, 15). This central role is explained by the fact that compulsory English learning has long been seen as the perfect combination of the objective of democracy with the concept of market economy, and as a tool of active citizenship. And the multidimensional stake of English learning/teaching, specifically the importance of strengthening the international competitiveness, not only in the labour force, but also in higher education was earlier demonstrated (Cabau-Lampa 1998; Cabau forthcoming).

English is the most frequent language of instruction in the Content and Language Integrated Learning programmes (CLIL or SPRINT in Swedish), which are considered “a means by which upper secondary schools can raise their profile and attract more students” (Eurydice 2005, 4). They are often criticised (Hyltenstam 2002) and even accused of being an instrument of segregation, where no pupils with immigrant backgrounds are to be found, but only motivated Swedish middle-class pupils aiming at international careers. Furthermore, academic achievements are somewhat lower in these classes, compared to the achievements of pupils with Swedish as tool of instruction, especially in intellectually demanding or culturally related subjects, such as social sciences or physics (Josephson 2004).

At university, a large part of the course literature, particularly in doctoral programmes, is in English. But if students may speak excellent English, growing numbers have poor written skills (*The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 22 April 2006). They are not able to carry on a discussion (about their research) in Swedish accessible to the general public anymore (Teleman 1992; Gunnarsson 2001), and in certain disciplines Swedish is dead (*Dagens Nyheter*, 17 June 2005). Not being able to use Swedish in their study/research activities sets unfavourable conditions for Swedish students, since it will be more difficult for them to grasp complicated intellectual problems in a language which is not their mother tongue. Furthermore, they will not be able to communicate with the community at large to expose

their research because of their lack of knowledge of Swedish terminology in their domain. Finally, these students jeopardize the possibility to pass knowledge to future students: who is going to write high school text books in scientific subjects in Swedish? (Josephson 2004, 133). Together with the concern about diglossia and democracy, the problem of thinking behaviour, i.e. unilateral thinking is also mentioned, as the consequence of Anglo-American imperialism in the higher education setting. What is worrying is the link established between quality and the use of English to promote quality of research which entailed the strengthened role of English in higher education in the 2005 language bill, whereas already 80% of PhD dissertations are written in English (Regeringens proposition 2005/06:2, 46).

#### *Swedish as a second language for adults*

Whereas Swedish for immigrants (or *sfi*, abbreviation for *svenska för invandrare*) has been admired by foreign observers who see in it one of the main assets of the Swedish model, it has been recurrently criticised since its introduction in the early 1970s. In 1991, *sfi*-teaching ceased to be ruled by a specific law and was included in the more general School Law. In 1993, the grant specially allotted to this teaching was abolished and in 1994, the teaching plan for this subject was even cancelled (Cabau-Lampa 1998), to be reintroduced some years later. More recently, a series of discussions was launched after the Liberal party (Folkpartiet) proposal to introduce a language test for future Swedish citizens in 2002 (Milani 2007). Acceptable knowledge of the Swedish language was a condition to obtain Swedish nationality, and it was not to be viewed as the will to belittle the minorities' rights (Folkpartiet 2002). This proposition allegedly helped the party win 13.3% of the votes cast in the 2002 parliamentary elections, compared to 8.7% in 1998. A similar document was published in 2006 (Folkpartiet 2006).

Harsh comments are heard by the right-wing government: "alarming" deficiencies in the current *Svenska för Invandrare* system seriously hinder the job prospects of new arrivals". [...] It is also entirely possible to use *sfi* as a form of income year after year, without actually gaining any language skills or producing any results". Whereas there is still no linguistic prerequisite to acquire Swedish nationality, compulsory national testing is to be introduced from 1 January 2009 for all *sfi* courses (*The Local*, 18 February 2008).

#### *Swedish as a second language for pupils with immigrant background (SSL)*

At the school level, the existence of Swedish as a second language (or Swedish as a FL, as it was named until 1985) was also threatened as a subject of its own. It became a fully-fledged school subject in 1980 at compulsory schools and in 1990 at upper secondary schools. In 1993, the right-wing coalition proposed, against the opinion of the committee in charge of drafting the study plans of various school subjects, to delete the study plan of SSL (Regeringens proposition 1992/93:220, 56-7). This proposal was accepted by the Parliament, but the Social-Democrats and the Left Party were opposed to it. The position of the Liberal Party illustrated again the importance of the political stake in (language) education: whereas in three petitions addressed to the Parliament, some of its members had expressed their disagreement about the suppression of the study plan of SSL, the Liberal Party decided that since they belonged to the government coalition, their interest was to support the government proposal (Cabau-Lampa 1998). This was considered an attack on the status of SSL. Back in power, the Social-Democrats reintroduced the study plan in the summer of 1995. In 2007/08, 7% of compulsory school pupils attended SSL classes (Skolverket 2008), but it is worth mentioning that in 2006/07, 20% of last compulsory school year (i.e. Form 9) pupils learning SSL didn't reach the learning objective, i.e. they failed (Skolverket 2007).

In January 2007, the school and administration management in Landskrona (a city in Scania, south of the country) decided that pupils should speak only Swedish during lessons and pauses (half of the pupils have an immigrant background). The reasoning was the following: no one should be able to insult anybody else in a language not understood by the personnel and no one should be misunderstood and no one should think she/he is insulted. The decision was harshly criticised by the child ombudsman, and the discrimination ombudsman decided to restrict the language rule (*Dagens Nyheter*, 20 and 25 January 2007).

### *Mother tongue instruction (MTI)*

In the 1990s, the deterioration of the economy combined with the phenomenon of communalisation led to severe budget restrictions, since the specific state grants for MTI and SSL were abolished, leaving the municipalities free to decide how much of their budget to allot to these educational opportunities. The ongoing problems encountered in MTI are the lack of teachers and the time restriction, i.e. (from 40 to 120 minutes per week (Skolverket 2005, 43), classes often being held outside the time table and in another school than the pupil's (Hyltenstam and Milani 2004, 33). The national minorities are also complaining about the lack of specific and active dissemination of information to parents about the existing MTI opportunities and about the lack of qualified teachers, as well as teaching material and guidelines for the production of such materials. Nevertheless, the Saami, the Jews and the Tornedalians consider that the situation of their minority education significantly improved since the recognition of their languages (Skolverket 2005, 37).

In 2006, the Council of Europe published its evaluation about the application of the *European Charter for regional or minority languages* in Sweden:

In the mainstream education system, provision for regional or minority languages is made almost exclusively through "mother-tongue" education. However, this model has clear shortcomings [...], and in any event, its availability remains patchy. The Committee of Experts has doubts as to whether this model in its current form is sufficient to ensure compliance with Sweden's Part III [of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages] obligations in the field of education (Council of Europe 2006, 57).

And before 2008, Swedish legislation related to the education situation of national minorities didn't stand on all points in harmony with the Swedish minority policy and the *Framework Convention for the protection of national minorities* of the Council of Europe. For two minorities, the pupil's language had to be his/her language of daily communication at home. This was also not intended in the Convention. The requirement of a five-pupil minimum wishing to have such instruction was detrimental for Yiddish-speaking and Finnish pupils (Skolverket 2005, 38-9).

A pupil is entitled to mother tongue instruction if one or both parents have another language than Swedish as mother tongue and if he/she possesses some basic knowledge of this language. A municipality must offer MTI if there is a qualified teacher and if five pupils wish to have such instruction. From 2008 on, the last mentioned restriction doesn't apply for pupils belonging to one of the five recognised minorities (SFS 2008:97). MTI is available within the framework of personal choice (one or two hours per week) or language choice (among them FLs are to be found as well as remedial classes of Swedish and English); as activity organised by the school, i.e. 410 hours altogether, to be freely spread over the nine school years; or outside timetabling, in which case, FL instruction is restricted to seven school years. Once again, this time restriction is not to be applied to recognised minorities' pupils. Saami pupils can attend a Saami school during their first six school years. The same rules are applied at high schools, with the restriction that pupils must have a good (and not basic) knowledge of the language chosen for MTI, as well as at independent schools.



According to a Swedish Government Official Report (SOU 2005:40), minority languages are on the way to disappearing: minority children don't learn their languages at home, because of the language shift to Swedish. Even parents don't actively use their languages. It is the older generation that possesses linguistic knowledge. So, if the state can't provide MTI, there is a great risk that minority languages will die (SOU 2005:40, 21-2). In 2007/08, more than 16% of compulsory school pupils were entitled to MTI, but only half of them used this opportunity (Skolverket 2008). The number in bilingual Finnish-Swedish classes diminished from the beginning of the 1990s from 4,500 down to 450 (Hyltenstam and Milani 2004, 36-7). The almost complete absence of bilingual education is a major concern for most minorities. In 2005, there were three schools offering MTI in Yiddish and two offering MTI in Meänkieli (Skolverket 2005, 45). A survey taken in 2001 showed that the best conditions to be able to develop one's language and one's cultural identity are offered to pupils enrolled in the six Saami schools, in the eight independent Sweden Finnish schools<sup>3</sup> and in the multilingual classes (Skolverket 2005, 47).

In the mid 1960s, the creation of independent schools with bilingual education was deemed as unacceptable, except for the Estonians, as well as for English, French and German speaking pupils (Municio 2000, 20). Nowadays, minority schools still represent the antithesis of the spirit of community, of the collective goal and of the principle of equal opportunities: in 2007, the education board of the city of Södertälje (30 km south from Stockholm), which includes members of the Social-Democrats, the Green Party and the Centre Party, protested against the establishment of Sweden Finnish school, because it would allegedly increase the segregation of ethnic groups (*Eurolang*, 23 November 2007).

The acceptance of the idea that minorities could be entitled to take responsibility for the education of minority pupils may be considered an acknowledgement of failure from the Swedish school authorities: the goal of bilingualism cannot be achieved in a unique school framework and the municipalities have far from encouraged MTI.

### *French, German and Spanish*

In 1994/95, a linguistic option, hopefully a second FL, was made a mandatory school subject. In 2008/09, 13.5% of Form 9 pupils were learning French, 29% Spanish and 18% German (Skolverket 2009), which is below the Swedish decision makers' expectations (SOU 1992:94, 273). The figures observed during these last years indicate a steady decline of German accompanied by a growing popularity of Spanish: Spanish learners outnumbered French learners for the first time in 2003/04; two years later, they even outnumbered German learners. German had been the primary second FL since the creation of the compulsory school in 1962, with popularity peaking in 1997 when it was studied by more than 40% of Form 9 pupils. As for French, the figures have remained stable in the past few years, with only a slight decline. The low number of upper secondary school pupils and the percentage of students who got a final grade in German, French or Spanish (stage 4, or fourth year of study) amounted to around 30% in previous years as against less than 15% today (Skolverket, Statistical series *Utbildningsresultat-Riksnivå*, 1999-2008).

In independent schools as well as in international schools, second FL learning is very popular: in the former ones, 85% of the pupils are studying a language other than English and the figures are even higher in international schools (which is not really surprising) with 96%. And in these international schools, once again, German is defeated by Spanish and French: in

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<sup>3</sup> In the early 1980s, the identification among Finnish-speakers with both Sweden/Swedishness and Finland/Finnishness, pressed for a new ethnonym to be created, *Sweden Finn* and *Sweden Finnish* (Lainio 2004, 1).

2007/08, 22% of Form 9 students were learning the Germanic language against 26% for Spanish and 21% for French (Skolverket 2008).

At compulsory schools, one pupil in five abandons second FL learning (Sörensen 2000, 3). The declining interest in second FL learning which is tantamount to a “crisis” or a “catastrophic situation” for second FL teachers (Cabau-Lampa 2007, 334) is due to several factors: the fact that pupils may opt for remedial Swedish/English classes; the declining importance given to second FLs compared to English; the idea that learning French, German, or Spanish is too demanding and time-consuming; the absence of a sense of necessity to be proficient in these languages in their professional lives; the negative images of French and German, etc.

Even if the government expressed its concern about the declining popularity of second FL learning in its language policy bill (Regeringens proposition 2005/06:2, 43), priority was given to the status of Swedish in the light of the growing importance of English. In fact, the overt choice to reinforce second FL teaching in the mid-1990s took place without specific popular support. Hence, pupils opt for the alternative choice, remedial classes in English and Swedish, and abandon advanced studies in German, French or Spanish and begin *ab initio* FL classes at upper secondary school level. In order to thwart the pupils’ single choice, i.e. English only, advanced courses in modern languages will be given extra credit when rating merits for admission to higher education (*Dagens Nyheter*, 21 February 2007). This measure will be introduced in 2010 (Högskoleverket 2007).

### **Concluding remarks**

In the 1990s, the modification of the constituent features of the Swedish educational milieu had an impact upon the position of languages in the educational arena. The wind of neo-liberal ideology incorporated the shift from state responsibility to individual responsibility. The then new concept of freedom of choice where the citizen has become a client entailed a lot of consequences as for language education: it results in English only learning behaviour together with a declining interest in second FL learning. At the same time, the failed attempt to enhance the status of MTI at public schools led to the emergence of ethnic/linguistic independent schools. And recently, the emphasis put on the use of Swedish in the school arena echoes the debate as regards national language policy and planning.

When reading official documents and press articles about language issues, challenges facing the Swedish decision-makers appear clear: the impossible crossing of the Rubicon to introduce Swedish as the official or national language of the country; the increasing focus on acquisition of Swedish inside and outside school (for adults and children from foreign backgrounds); the discrepancy between the apparent goodwill of the authorities and the resistance on the field to implement sustainable teaching of minority languages; and last but not least, the seemingly restricted manoeuvre room of the government whatever the political colour as for the strengthening position of the teaching of languages other than English, the latter being sacrosanct. The present study also illustrates the impact of ideological/political values in the educational arena as for language education as a whole. Status and linguistic hierarchy are usually determined in a long term process as a product of popular choice in a democratic society. This is the reason why the dominant position of English can only be mildly counterattacked because of its strong support of social consensus.

The Swedish case points to the difficulties in reaching the goal of the Council of Europe, i.e. the enhancement of linguistic diversity in education (Council of Europe 2007). Nevertheless, a new awareness seems to gain importance in Sweden as in several European countries: first of all, in the corporate and business field, the acknowledgement that there is too high a

reliance upon English and that a significant amount of business is being lost to enterprise as a result of lack of language skills (CILT 2006). Second of all, it is interesting to note that the European Union multilingualism strategy encouraging European citizens to learn two FLs is expected to “have a *political* aspect whereby the Commission would attempt to bring cultural, national identity, and business issues – as well as those related to the integration of migrants – together into a comprehensive ‘policy’” (*EurActiv*, 19 February 2008). These two public statements may entail some positive development in language-in-education policy in Sweden as in other European countries.

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