

# Plurilingualism vs the English Only Argument

*Swedish EFL Teachers' Interpretations of a Complex Syllabus*



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## **Abstract**

This project examined how two contradictory aims of the national syllabus for the teaching of English in upper secondary school in Sweden were interpreted and realized by two EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers. The aims state that English education should be conducted in English as far as possible, yet also promote plurilingualism and allow skills in different languages to interact and support each other. The study was conducted in the form of a case study, examining two teachers from one upper secondary school in the south of Sweden. The issue was examined through classroom observations, interviews and analysis of classroom material. The project found that amongst the two participant teachers, the “English Only argument” was perceived as the ideal, whereas the aim of plurilingualism was less reflected upon and seemed uncertain territory. The two teachers differed in their approach to first language (L1) presence in the English classroom: one teacher (with 22 years of experience) wholeheartedly adopted the English Only approach, whereas the other teacher (newly graduated from teacher training) involved the L1 more. The most dominant L1 in the classrooms was Swedish. The area where most consideration to linguistic backgrounds was found regarded understanding student difficulties and assessment, and the area where student backgrounds and culture were most prominent concerned classroom content and material. The L1 was used both strategically and incidentally, but was still mostly viewed as a last resort when maximum target language exposure was not possible. The project found that perceptions of the “right” balance of target language/L1 differed depending on the teacher, context and learners, and that the aim of plurilingualism seemed unclear.

**Keywords:** Plurilingualism, The English Only argument, Multilingualism, Educational policy, Case study

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# 1.Introduction

The aim of this project is to examine how two contradictory aims of the national syllabus for the teaching of English in upper secondary school in Sweden are interpreted and realized by two EFL teachers. The aims state that English education should be conducted in English as far as possible, yet promote plurilingualism and allow skills in different languages to support each other. The aims are concretized in the following quotes from Skolverket: “Teaching should encourage students' curiosity in language and culture, and give them the opportunity to develop plurilingualism where skills in different languages interact and support each other” and “Teaching should as far as possible be conducted in English” (Skolverket, 2011, “English: Aim of the subject”). I examine: How do the teachers interpret these aims from the syllabus? How does this interpretation affect their teaching? How much L1 is used by the teachers in the classroom, why and when?

This project was conducted in the form of a case study in one upper secondary school in the south of Sweden, with two EFL teachers participating in classroom observations and interviews. Thus, as in the nature of case study research, this project examines the issue at hand in a very small context, with the aim to shed light on how it is dealt with in this unique reality.

## **1.1 Theory - Differing Approaches to Language Education**

This project analyzes the empirical data by comparing it to two opposing theoretical grounds for language education: the monolingual approach (in English education also called “the English Only argument”), where the L1 is viewed as disturbing to the maximum target language exposure, and the plurilingual approach, where different languages are viewed as collaborative resources for target language learning (Cook, 2008, p.4; Kamwangamalu, 2010, p.117). This theoretical contrast is exemplified in the Swedish syllabus for upper secondary school, where aims of both the monolingual approach and the plurilingual approach can be found (Skolverket, 2011). An approach of either regarding different languages as separate compartments of knowledge, or as intersecting and supporting skills where collective effort may help target language learning, will impact the way teachers approach language teaching (Cook, 2008).

Cook (2001) defines the monolingual approach as a dominant language teaching style where the L1 is viewed as negative in the target language classroom, and where maximum target language exposure is the goal. Cook states that the most extreme version is to ban all usage of the L1, which Cook argues can only be done when the students have different L1s and/or the teacher does not speak the students’ L1s. The approach can be found in less extreme takes, in an aim to minimize usage of the L1, or maximize the usage of the target language. Either way, the two languages are not seen as collaborative – the goal is always to increase the target language, and to decrease the L1. Cook states that this dominant approach, popular through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has influenced many modern language teaching methods. According to Cook, many EFL teaching methods aim for a classroom with ideally as little L1 incorporation and presence as possible (Cook, 2001, p.404). Iannacci (2008, pp.107, 114) accordingly reports that some teachers deem usage of the L1 as prohibiting the students’ development in their English education, where other languages are considered

confusing or harmful.

One argument for adopting the monolingual approach is that it aims to come close to how children acquire their first language, with maximum target language exposure (Cook, 2001, p.406). The issue of learners with different mother tongues, or a teacher who does not speak the learners' L1s, are other arguments for this monolingual approach, labelling the avoidance of the L1 as a "practical necessity", where English serves as a more equal common ground (Cook, 2001, p.405). However, Cook sees dangers in this approach, arguing that dismissing the L1 might enhance the political and cultural dominance of English, and marginalize other languages and their strengths. However, plenty of recent research also competes with this approach, representing a change in language pedagogics and policy (Cook, 2008, p.4). Cook thus puts forward an alternative way of approaching target language education, where the argument is that "dismissing the L1 out of hand restricts the possibilities for language teaching" (Cook, 2001, p.405). This approach can be called a plurilingual approach, where linguistic repertoires are to be used as resources for target language learning, with benefits such as increased metalinguistic awareness aiding target language learning. This approach takes the view that connections between languages are significant in learning new languages, and are thus important to take into consideration in target language education (Haenni Hoti & Heinzmann, 2012; Ò Laoire & Singleton, 2009). Research accordingly shows that there are pedagogical benefits in students using their linguistic repertoires in their learning processes, for instance to overcome obstacles (Moore, 2016). However, the question of how this is to be done depends on the unique reality of each educational context, and Cook accordingly states that "the question of using the L1 may not have a single answer suitable to all teaching goals" (Cook, 2001, p.403). The plurilingual approach is thus not by any means straight forward, and is to many teachers a challenge without a clear solution (Boeckmann, 2012).



## **1.2 Previous Research – The Complexities and Possibilities of L1 Presence in EFL Education**

The issue of L1 presence in EFL education is complex, with multiple challenges as well as possibilities. Below are a few common themes in research regarding this matter.

**1.2.1 Arguments supporting the English Only approach.** Iannacci (2008, pp.107, 114) and Ekman (2015, p.17) found that teachers sometimes deem usage of the L1 as prohibiting the students' development in their EFL education, with other languages considered confusing or harmful. Cook (2001) found that to only use the target language can be a way of avoiding this confusion, since perceptions of L1s as harmful are often based on perceptions of languages as separate spheres of knowledge, which disturb each other's learning development. According to Cook (2008), through avoiding the L1, one thus avoids confusing the learners and instead makes them focus solely on the target language. Abiria, Early, & Kendrick (2013) also found that teachers express concerns about using other languages as aids when English is insufficient, from fear of not accommodating all pupils equally, due to lack of knowledge in all L1s. Ekman (2015, p.27) found that some teachers' inclination towards using English only could also be due to a perception of this approach as similar to acquiring a new language naturally, with teachers comparing it to moving to a new country, where the target language is the natural and only medium of communication.

**1.2.2 Arguments against the English Only approach.** Cook (2001, pp.407-408) and Cimbanga & Mokgwathi (2012, p.21) found that perceiving languages as separate compartments of learning might fail in recognizing students' abilities and previous knowledge, arguing that this might inhibit them in language learning, since they may not make use of all their skills. Instead, Cimbanga & Mokgwathi (2012, p.22) suggested that educators realize and use the supportive roles of different languages, and view these as tools for learning. From this point of view, practices involving the L1 could be consciously used in

multilingual classrooms. For instance, Ekman (2015, p.23) found that teachers can encourage students to draw parallels between their mother tongues and English in order to increase understanding of grammatical structures.

**1.2.3 Multilingualism, culture and identity.** Iannacci (2008, pp.111-113) found that classrooms are often multilingual contexts where students face different languages and different cultures, in which English is often associated with development, and indigenous languages with marginalization. Jiménez, López-Gopar & Morales (2014) argued that it is thus important to teach English critically with respect and understanding of local contexts and the mother tongues of the students. They suggested incorporating students' linguistic and cultural repertoires in using materials and inspiration from the students' lives, allowing the linguistic diversity to be respected and useful. They argued that students' languages and culture can serve as inspiration for subjects to teach in English, but can also allow English education to increase interest, focus and validity to local language and culture, and accordingly keep respectful regard of students' identities, where languages often play important roles (Jiménez, López-Gopar & Morales, 2014).

**1.2.4 Multilingualism and plurilingualism benefiting target language learning.** Ò Laoire & Singleton (2009) found that depending on structure, previously learned languages can serve as linguistic resources when the psychotypological similarities are distinct enough to that of the target language. Haenni Hoti, & Heinzmann (2012) similarly found that learning a target language as a L3 in comparison to learning it as a L2 can be aided by the metalinguistic understanding of languages that learning multiple languages provides, emphasizing that experience in learning a previous foreign language thus acts as a linguistic resource. However, they also found that the strengths of other languages need to be considered, or the advantages even out after a time, due to a lack of capitalizing on learners' linguistic toolboxes (Haenni Hoti, & Heinzmann, 2012). Their findings suggest that an

understanding of different linguistic structures of the mother tongues in a classroom can benefit the teacher. Similarly, Ekman (2015, p.25) discovered that some teachers find it to be beneficial to make students aware of the linguistic history and connections between languages, to aid students in for example recognizing vocabulary and grammatical features in the target language that are similar to those of other languages familiar to them.

**1.2.5 Educational policy.** Boeckmann (2012) found that many European language teachers are faced with challenges of policy aims of plurilingualism, with most of their training preparing them for monolingual rather than linguistically diverse classrooms. Boeckmann discovered that plurilingualism is sometimes amongst teachers perceived as a positive resource, but also as a challenge without a clear solution. Similarly, Ekman (2015, p.24) found that the Swedish syllabus' aim of the English education promoting students' development of plurilingualism was met with confusion, with teachers expressing feeling "lost". Despite of the challenges, Cenoz, Etxague, Gorter, & Zenotz (2014) found that educational policies promoting bi-or plurilingualism can lead to higher results in majority, minority and foreign language learning.

**1.2.6 The teacher – using linguistic diversity and developing pedagogical methods.** Abiria, Early & Kendrick (2013) found that teachers dealing with a complex balance between policy and reality are essential in creating innovative means of developing teaching methods. Milambiling (2011) additionally found that teachers developing methods for teaching with plurilingualism in mind can benefit student learning, for example through constructing classroom exercises adapted to draw upon strengths from different linguistic backgrounds. Pietikäinen & Pitkänen-Huhta (2014) found that one strategy of doing this is to let students create their own materials. This can lead to language students either using familiar spaces of language and culture, but also to them creating new heteroglossic language spaces. Pietikäinen & Pitkänen-Huhta argued that this way of working with language enables learners

to use all resources they have. They suggested that teachers focus on the linguistic dynamics of the classroom, and create platforms for learners to be creative with their linguistic resources. According to Ekman (2015, p.23), teachers can for example use L1s to kick start communication in the classroom.

**1.2.7 Issues when teachers lack knowledge in classroom-L1s.** Even though teachers can initiate opportunities to incorporate the students' L1s, Rosiers, Willaert, Van Avermaet, & Slembrouck (2016) found that one risk if the teacher does not know these L1s, is that the following interaction might be left in the hands of the students, with the teacher neither stimulating nor influencing the language learning. They found that this can lead to lack of control for the teachers, where potential learning outcomes depend on the students. They also found that to counter these issues, teachers can benefit from actively seeking knowledge about the linguistic environment of their classroom, through being engaged in participating with the students, and through facilitating opportunities for the students to discover their abilities to aid each other. Regarding the issue of learners with different L1s in the EFL classroom, Ekman (2015, pp.21, 27) found that some teachers believe that using the national majority language in addition to English could benefit students with other L1s as well, since this can aid in developing their communicative abilities in the majority language, thus stimulating linguistic skills in more than one language in the same learning environment.

**1.2.8 Students helping each other.** Milambiling (2011) and Cook (2001, p.418) found that students need guidance and support to draw upon their strengths from other languages, stating that through students reflecting on their own linguistic resources, as well as learning about each other's, students can gain insights into their own process of learning English. Milambiling (2011) found that teachers thus need to diagnose the strengths of the students, and actively create tasks and activities accordingly. Moore (2016) found that such practices can facilitate the students to serve as linguistic repertoires, helping each other when

the teacher cannot. Moore (2016) further stated that students may use their linguistic repertoires in their learning processes, for instance to find new strategies to deal with assignment difficulties.

## 2. Methodology

Previous research gives suggestions for dealing with multilingual educational contexts and for how language teachers might use plurilingualism as a tool for letting students' linguistic resources aid target language learning. It also suggests that educational policy which allows such development can benefit language learning, and that teachers are essential developers of such methods. Research also gives examples on contexts where either a monolingual approach or a plurilingual one may be best suited. But how do teachers deal with an educational policy which aims for *both* the plurilingual and the monolingual approach, in a country with one official language, five minority languages, as well as large groups of inhabitants with other linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Sveriges Riksdag, 2009, SFS 2009:600)? This is a question which I hope for my study to shed light on.

In this project, I drew upon previous research in comparing my empirical material to the prominent themes found in the research. This created a deductive methodology, but some themes emerged inductively from my material as well, which presented a result with some differences to previous findings. In addition to previous research in scholarly journals and published volumes, I also drew upon the findings of a previous teacher training student: Ekman (2015) examined the issue of Swedish in the English classroom as well as the mentioned aims from Skolverket, through interviews with three English teachers of a Swedish upper secondary school. Her findings showed that teachers use the L1 in different extents and for different purposes, for example for clarification, for aiding classroom relationships and for making sure that students understand classroom content. Ekman also found that the issue of L1 incorporation is very complex and that the interpretations of the syllabus vary extensively (Ekman, 2015). However, Ekman conducted this study solely through interviews, whereas I used classroom observations, interviews and classroom material. My scope is also extended from Ekman's main focus on Swedish, to opening up the questions for any and all L1s in the

classrooms. Thus, I aim for my study and its results to be additions to Ekman's findings, as well as to previous research.

## **2.1 Materials and Participants**

My project was made possible by the participation of two EFL teachers of a Swedish upper secondary school, here called Eva and Johanna (pseudonyms). I came in contact with the participants through reaching out to a school where I have conducted part of my practice based education, but I had never met the participating teachers prior to this project. First, the principals of the school were contacted, who in turn forwarded my interests to the English teachers of the school. Out of several English teachers contacted, Eva and Johanna were the ones who agreed to participate in the project. Since the aims from Skolverket examined in this study apply to all upper secondary school teachers of English in Sweden, no further requirements were expressed in the search for participants, except for them being from the same school (adequate for the case study nature of the project). The process of finding participants was thus directed by availability, but since the purpose of this project is to provide insight into one educational context (as in the nature of qualitative case study research), rather than aiming for a representative sample, this was not a major concern (Duff, 2008).

For this project, I observed three English lessons (two observations with Johanna and one with Eva). The observations were reported through the COLT observation scheme. The observations were followed by one interview each with Eva and Johanna, which were transcribed and coded. I opted for full transcriptions, since this, according to Zhang & Wildemuth, is the most useful (2009, p.3). Classroom material from each lesson was also compared to the classroom reports and interview transcripts. Through these three sources of material, I aimed for triangulation (Duff, 2008).

## **2.2 Case Study Research - Interviews, Context and Observation**

My project was conducted in the form of a case study, carried out through observing three lessons and two teachers, examining the content and materials used during these lessons, and by interviewing the teachers. A case study is a type of in depth qualitative research and analysis of one case or phenomenon in its natural context, depicted through in depth description and analysis from the researcher, with multiple sources of information, and where the participants' perspectives are in focus (Duff, 2008). In my study, I aimed to examine the teachers and their interpretations of the syllabus. An aim for thick description was incorporated in the description of the classroom contexts, in order to increase the transferability of the project and its results. I thus aimed to understand the classrooms and teachers studied through their unique context. However, due to the limitations in scope of this project, the description of the classroom context in the findings could not be too extensive. I also aimed to make use of the concept of triangulation. Triangulation is a strategy of reaching conclusion through multiple independent sources of information (Duff, 2008). I aimed to do this by approaching the issue studied through observation, through interviews, and through classroom material used.

In qualitative case study research, the purpose is to understand, explore and analyze the complex and dynamic reality of a unique entity (Duff, 2008). Thus, the teachers and school involved in my project cannot be said to be representative of how teachers in general interpret the mentioned aims of the syllabus, but can highlight one context in which the issue exists and how it is dealt with. King and Horrocks (2010) state that for this kind of research, interviewing is an appropriate method for allowing these perspectives to be shared (pp.18-20). Observation is also a common and significant part of qualitative case study research. It is important in qualitative research for the researcher to reflect on its own role in the context of the observed phenomenon (Duff, 2008). The presence of the researcher undoubtedly alters the



reality studied, but I aimed to be as unobtrusive to the natural context of the phenomenon as possible. It is for this reason that I conducted the classroom observations first, followed by the interviews, in order to not actively draw the teachers' attention to L1 presence and thus possibly changing the outcome. In terms of focus on context of the participants, it is also crucial for the researcher not to oversee any ethic boundaries. For instance, not using real names is one important consideration, which is why the participants in my study are called "Eva" and "Johanna" as pseudonyms, keeping their real names anonymous (Duff, 2008). King and Horrocks (2010, pp.43-45) also emphasize the importance of considering the means of recording the interview, and note that audio recording is of preference. My interviews were thus audio recorded and transcribed.

For interviews, King & Horrocks (2010) highlight the point of avoiding using leading questions (pp.33-32). Further, King and Horrocks state that flexibility is of the essence in conducting interviews. It is certainly important to have a clear aim in mind, but being flexible in the questions asked allows the interviewees' perspectives to come forward, and also allows unexpected answers to become meaningful data. Based on this, semi-structured interviews are appropriate for much qualitative case study research. My interviews were thus semi-structured with core questions, but opening for the interviewees to take active part. It should however be noted that by having set questions, you as the researcher determine the truth that gets elicited. Duff (2008) accordingly states that the interviewer must be aware that the outcome of the interview is always a co-construction between the interviewer and the interviewee. For my interview questions, I drew inspiration from certain question-categories mentioned by King and Horrocks (2010): background questions, experience questions, opinion questions, feeling questions, and knowledge questions. The questions were also based on previous research, as well as on my research aims. My interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.

## **2.3 The COLT-scheme**

In order for classroom observations to be used as data for analysis, a systematic approach is needed. I opted for an observation scheme called the COLT-scheme; the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching- scheme. Using an observation scheme makes it possible to compare classroom observations, to focus on a set of categories and questions, and to aid close description of the classroom practices observed (Nunan, 1992, p.97-99). I have used the simplified version of the COLT-scheme in Nunan (1992, p.99), since the original is excessive for my limited project, but have incorporated a slight adaptation with focus on usage of the L1 in the classroom. My observation scheme can be found in Appendix 2.

## **2.4 Qualitative Analysis of Content**

I analyzed my material through qualitative content analysis. The analysis was conducted by coding, both deductively and inductively - I looked for the themes of the English Only approach and of the plurilingual approach, as well as for themes emerged from previous research, but also allowed themes to emerge through my observations, interviews, and analysis of classroom material. This is in accordance with Zhang & Wildemuth (2009, p.3), who state that themes can be obtained from theory, previous research and the empirical data. More specifically, I used directed content analysis. This method uses theory and previous research as a basis and starting point for defining the codes and themes to be analyzed in the material, but allows for the data to determine the themes as well (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). This way, I aimed to keep my focus on the two mentioned teaching approaches, but also aimed to allow room for the teachers' experiences to be represented. The point of using a combination of a deductive and an inductive approach is to build on previous research and knowledge, yet also allow new results to be found, and thus aims at developing research

further. Comparing empirical material and its findings to previous research and developed theories is also a way of increasing trustworthiness, along with using triangulation (Thomas, 2006, pp.239-240).

Zhang and Wildemut (2009, p.4) state that for both deductive and inductive approaches, coding manuals should be created, where category names, definitions of codes and examples of codes are used to interpret and analyze the material in a consistent manner. The presentation of the material is then conducted through a balance between description and interpretation (Zhang & Wildemut, 2009, p.5). More specifically, I analyzed my material in accordance with Thomas' (2006, pp.240-242) principles of qualitative content analysis: through close reading of my material, identifying meaning units of my material, creating category names and category definitions for meaning units either derived from my material or from previous research and theory, and dividing the material through these categories. Thomas explains that the researcher is to select meaningful quotes that can represent the chosen category, but also to search for points of views which can contribute to new insights into the matter at hand. The final presentation should contain summary categories of the material, which represent the essence of the most important themes derived from the data in relation to the research aims of the project (Thomas, 2006, pp.240-242). Thus, the material was read several times, and the data was compared to themes from the described theory and from the previous research. When the data deviated from these themes, new themes were identified inductively. The data was then read again, searching for these themes. The data was then grouped to the themes, and read as part of each category.

### 3. Results

In accordance with the significance of context in case study research, the background of the teachers and the classroom context which I observed are firstly described. After this, the key themes are presented.

#### 3.1 Teacher Background

**3.1.1 Eva.** Eva has worked as a teacher since 1994, and teaches English and psychology. Eva ascribed both her teacher training and her long professional experience as significant to her opinions on the presence of the L1 in the classroom. Talking about how her teacher training has affected her, she recalled that when her tutor from the teacher education came to observe her as a trainee student, she had a lesson in which she felt like she had to use some words in Swedish. She explained: “my tutor from the teaching college said ‘you should *NOT* do that’ – ‘never, *ever!*’”. Eva said that this made a strong impression on her, stating: “that sort of (...) lodged somewhere in my head” - “it’s always been there”. Her basis for decisions on L1 presence in the English classroom seemed thus partly a result of the time of her teacher education (late 20<sup>th</sup> century), in which Cook found that the English Only argument was dominant (Cook, 2001). But she said that how she deals with L1 presence in the classroom is also based on her long experience as a teacher. She stated that it is the teacher’s job to find a good balance between Swedish and English, and that it is due to her experience that she can find that balance. This thus indicated that experience is essential to finding such a balance in the classroom, supporting Cook’s findings indicating that there is no universal rule on how much L1 presence this balance allows for (Cook, 2001).

**3.1.2 Johanna.** Johanna is new to the teaching profession, and has worked as a teacher for three months. She teaches Swedish and English. She affirmed Eva's opinion that successfully dealing with the balance of Swedish and English in the classroom is very much dependent on a teacher's experience. With regards to the syllabus' aim of the education being conducted as much as possible in English, she reflected: "how much is 'as much as possible', where is that line?", and said that she thinks it takes practice from the teacher to know how much is appropriate. She said that because she is new, she is afraid of failure, and fears that if she speaks too much English, some students will fall behind: "you don't want anyone to come and say 'things are not going well for me, I don't understand because you only speak English'". She strongly emphasized the importance of teacher communication and collaboration, stating: "I think that it is important that you as new have the *courage* to speak to others". Such collaboration could be a way of teachers creating innovative means of developing methods for complex educational contexts (Abiria, Early, & Kendrick, 2013).

## **3.2 Classroom Environment**

**3.2.1 Johanna.** I observed two lessons of English 6 with Johanna. During the first lesson, the class worked on writing speech manuscripts for argumentative speeches. The students were also to give feedback on each other's speech manuscripts. The topics of the speeches were of their own choice.

During the second observation with Johanna, the activity type was writing a job leaflet in small groups, this is to be a part of a "job project". Prior to writing the leaflet, the students were brain storming ideas, looking for inspiration on the internet, and being creative with their ideas about their job-advertisements.

**3.2.2 Eva.** I observed one lesson of English 7 with Eva. The first activity type was listening to a political podcast. The next activity was reading a political article and selecting key sentences from the article, in groups. Both the podcast and the article concerned the US election and US politics, and were chosen by the teacher.

### **3.3 The English Only Approach**

The English Only approach was most prominent with Eva. During the lesson, she used English all the time. She directed the students to speak English all the time, and instructed them to help each other not to speak any Swedish. As soon as the students arrived in the classroom, they were expected to only speak English. All instructions were in English only. All talk outside of the official task was also in English, for example when Eva corrected the students or made small comments. Eva at some points clarified the content, explained words, asked and answered questions – all in English. After the lesson, some students stayed to get assessment results, and even then, Eva only spoke English to them, and expected them to respond in English as well. During this lesson, there was thus complete target language exposure. To further highlight this approach, Eva even joked to the students that she wakes up in the middle of the night wondering why the learning platform “Skolportalen” is in Swedish and not in English.

This strong take of the English Only approach was also evident in my interview with Eva, where she explained her position on the matter, emphasizing: “you heard me in class, I want them to speak the *target language*”. When asked about Skolverket’s aim of using English as much as possible, Eva said that this is very present in her mind during her work. Eva stated that if she uses Swedish, her students will not make the effort of focusing on the target language: “they will just ignore what I say in English (...) because they know it’s just gonna come in Swedish soon”. Eva thus affirmed Iannacci’s (2008 pp.107, 114) findings,

showing that some teachers deem usage of the L1 as prohibiting the students' development in their English education. These findings are also similar to opinions expressed by a teacher from Ekman's study (2015, p.18), who expressed difficulties in moving forward with English if the students were too comfortable in using Swedish, finding that this could prohibit their ability to develop communicative strategies in English.

Eva compared language education to a situation when you move to a new country and would be forced to speak the target language: "in a situation where you would come to another country where nobody speaks your language, you have to [speak the target language] (...) you *have* to, to survive..." . She thus affirmed one argument of the English Only approach, claiming that it is similar to how one would acquire a new language organically (Cook, 2001; Cook, 2008).

Eva also said that she thinks that English can be a common ground if you have a linguistically diverse classroom context. She mentioned that some of her vocational students have an exchange program with France, and that with the French students, the common ground is English: "if they do find some common ground, it would be in English (...), that's where we can meet". This is also a common argument for the English only approach - one reason for avoiding the L1 in can be that the target language may be a common medium of instruction and communication, making the education more equal, if students and teachers have different L1s (Cook, 2001, p.405).

During my observations with Johanna, the English Only approach was less dominant, but present at times. Johanna instructed the students to write in English, to conduct the speeches in English and to provide the written feedback in English. She often gave instructions in English, but repeated them in Swedish for clarification. However, the usage of English was mostly in an "official" manner regarding the specific tasks, and the "unofficial" speech of the lesson was mostly in Swedish. Johanna did not comment on this, nor encourage

English as a medium of communication in the classroom. Thus, English was mostly the task-language, but not the language of communication, neither to the students nor the teacher. In contrast to Eva's lesson, there was not focus on maximum target language exposure. It thus seemed as if Johanna did not take the English Only approach to a purist extent. During the interview, she seemed to feel a dilemma between wanting to speak as much English as possible, but fearing that this would be too difficult for her students, thus resulting in her involving Swedish. She said: "you *want* to do it as much as possible in English, but at the same time, you don't want anybody to sit there and misunderstand or not understand at all". This supports Cook's claims about the English Only approach – that even though it might be taken into different extents, maximum target exposure is the ideal, and L1 involvement is often a necessary evil (Cook, 2001). For Johanna, it thus seemed as using linguistic resources from other languages was something needed occasionally, but not particularly desired. This is in accordance with research of Abiria, Early, & Kendrick (2013), who found that many teachers are influenced by the English Only argument, but find this insufficient to accommodate the needs of the classroom, and as a result involve the mother tongue.

### **3.4 The Plurilingual Approach**

During the observation in Eva's class, the usage of any other linguistic resources except for the target language was very limited. When small utterances in Swedish arose from the students, it was strongly discouraged by the Eva, who instantly said something along the lines of: "I heard Swedish, use English!". This attitude towards the presence of L1s in the classroom was prominent in the interview with Eva as well. When asked if the mother tongue could be beneficial in the classroom for learning English, Eva seemed a bit hesitant, saying: "I think that's hard to say (...) I can't say that I've actively thought about it". She said that she



thought more of the impact of the L1 when she worked in another school, where she had more linguistically diverse classrooms:

I remember that I had to think about it very much (...) almost none in the groups spoke fluent Swedish so we only had like English to communicate with (...) and all the different mother tongues sort of created (...) they were *there* .

Hence, in that linguistically diverse environment, English was yet again the common ground, but there was an awareness of the presence of different mother tongues. Even though her current class is not as linguistically diverse, she did however talk about how learning new languages can have positive effects on the language(s) you already know, saying: “we speak a lot about languages and how it’s important to learn new languages to be able to express yourself in you know new situations and (...) how your own language gets better”. But the purpose of the L1 for Eva seemed more existential, rather than a strategy benefiting target language learning, and she reflected that she doesn’t know how something like that should be done. This supports Boeckmann’s (2012) findings which showed that teachers don’t always know how to deal with aims of plurilingualism.

Johanna took a different approach regarding the presence of the L1 in the classroom. In her classroom, there was no negative attitude towards usage of Swedish. Usage of Swedish was not discouraged or reprimanded. Swedish was used for repeating instructions, for clarification and translation, and often seemed the natural language choice for questions and answers. Sometimes Johanna used Swedish for classroom management, for example asking: “jobbar ni ihop idag?” to get the work in pairs going. She emphasized that Swedish can be effective when the students are not listening very attentively: “even if I think ‘they have probably listened’, and then they still have not done that, and then I think, but now we emphasize this, so, in Swedish ‘Har ni förstått?’ ‘eh va.. just det!’”. Sometimes she also switched to Swedish for individual instructions. There thus seemed to be opportunities for

development of plurilingualism, with instances when the L1 was consciously used in aid for learning the target language, but also instances when both the teacher and the students seemed to fall back into Swedish without thought or strategy. On this issue, More (2016) found that to encourage plurilingual learning spaces, the classroom climate must be open towards using the L1 as a tool, but also found that such practices must be used strategically.

The results showed a significant difference between Johanna and Eva in their approach to using the L1, supporting Ekman's (2015) findings that the views on and interpretations of plurilingualism in the classroom vary extensively between different teachers, as well as Boeckmann's (2012) research showing that plurilingualism is sometimes perceived by teachers as a possible positive resource, but also as a challenge without a clear solution.

### **3.5 Interest in and Perceived Importance of Students' Linguistic Backgrounds**

Rosiers, Willaert, Van Avermaet, & Slembrouck (2016) found that teachers benefit from actively seeking knowledge about the linguistic environment of their classroom. Accordingly, Milambiling (2011) and Cook (2001) suggested that teachers diagnose the strengths of the students, and actively create tasks and activities where those strengths can be considered. These findings are somewhat in contrast to the perceived importance of linguistic backgrounds amongst my participant teachers. When asked about her knowledge of her students' linguistic backgrounds, Eva said: "I know a little bit, not maybe because I ask direct questions, but because of it has .. um .. come up in in different situations". This was thus perhaps not perceived to be of essential importance. She said that her students' linguistic backgrounds do not especially affect her teaching, more than in marking and assessment. Thus, taking linguistic backgrounds and linguistic repertoires into consideration was not a prominent priority. However, she explained that this was due to the high level of English of

her students (English 7) where she explained that the English is advanced enough not to have to rely on a mother tongue.

Similarly, Johanna did not seem to explicitly focus or draw upon student backgrounds or linguistic diversity in her classroom. When asked about the linguistic backgrounds of her students, she was not completely certain of what these were, saying:

We have [student X], but she is... yes from where is she, I am not quite sure, but I think that she knows some other [language], I am actually not quite sure of it, but the others, as far as I know, speak ... or only have ... Swedish.

When asked if this affects her teaching, she said that for the sake of the student she mentioned, she feels that she must incorporate more Swedish, because this student has more difficulties in understanding English than the others – she however aided this student through Swedish, and not through incorporating the student’s L1. Johanna was not sure of whether she believed that different linguistic backgrounds affect learning English to a great effect, saying: “I do not think that it has to do with another mother tongue, but rather with how you acquire languages generally”. However, after reflecting upon the subject further, she said: “well, perhaps it depends on what other mother tongue you have, how it is constructed and how it looks (...) so yes, perhaps” . She continued to reflect on it, and finally said: “maybe, yes (...) it is possible”. It seemed that she changed her opinion on the matter a bit as she reflected on her answer, but that she had not put a great deal of thought or emphasis on this in her teaching.

### **3.6 L1 Consideration in Assessment**

If the teachers seemed not to put a lot of significance to their students’ linguistic backgrounds during their teaching, the area where they put more consideration into this was in their assessment. Eva said that L1 consideration is there when she corrects and assesses student

work, for example when assessing an oral performance of a student with pronunciation difficulties: “her accent has a Swedish tinge to it (...) due to her mother tongue because it (...) colors her intonation and her pronunciation in English, and, the question is (...) if we should sort of assess it”. She thus took the L1 into consideration in assessment and marking, emphasizing: “so in my marking, eh *yes* (...) that could be a factor”. She also said that, with different mother tongues, there could be difficulties in structure and grammar, which she said she also takes into consideration when assessing or correcting, since this can help her understand why certain issues appear: “it could give me an indication of where the problem is and how we can solve it (...) because I know of the other language structures (...), so I know why they make these mistakes”.

Johanna also agreed that understanding the grammatical structure of the L1 may give insight into student difficulties. Their views on this matter thus supported findings showing that connections between languages are important for teachers to take into consideration (Haenni Hoti, & Heinzmann, 2012; Ò Laoire & Singleton, 2009). Similarly, Ekman (2015, pp.23-25) found that some teachers believe it to be beneficial to draw parallels between different mother tongues and English in order to increase understanding of grammatical structures.

### **3.7 Students Helping Each Other**

Moore (2016) found that students use their linguistic repertoires in their learning processes, and use multiple plurilingual resources available in target language learning. The teacher must thus allow and facilitate student collaboration, where different linguistic resources can be used. Some student collaboration was present in the first observation with Johanna, where the students were giving each other peer feedback and helping each other construct speech manuscripts. On this issue, through initiating student collaboration, Milambiling (2011) found

that teachers can make students become more aware of their own language learning process while aiding each other. During Johanna's lesson, no restrictions were made on use of language of communication between students, and they were free to use whatever language they wanted. Pietikäinen & Pitkänen-Huhta (2014) found that through such freedom, students can explore communicative strategies. However, the learners in Johanna's class rarely initiated any discourse in English, and thus the open climate for discourse did not benefit the target language learning. Johanna expressed some concern about this, saying that allowing the students to use their L1 (Swedish) to help each other during class, but still encourage them to communicate through the target language, is difficult. She reflected:

That is almost the biggest challenge, because (...) it is difficult to get them to *speak*... and many say '(...) it feels so ridiculous, we can speak Swedish with each other (...), we do *write* in English', but to get them to understand, and like use the language... in every way, not only when they write and read and listen, but actually also the oral... that is difficult, it is a challenge.

During my observation with Eva, the speaking environment was much different. Most discourse was initiated by the teacher. Eva gave the students "the word" – right to speak- when they were to answer questions. In the group work, the learners were free to initiate discourse with each other, but only English was allowed. There was thus not much room for students to use their linguistic repertoires other than from the target language. In contrast, Moore (2016) found that in order for linguistic tools to be available for learners, teachers and policy must allow usage of multiple languages, making plurilingual practices legitimate.

However, Eva did say that students can sometimes share their linguistic skills and help each other, saying: "I could for instance have a situation where somebody is explaining something (...) in their own language, when they don't understand something (...) so that

could be like a.. you know, a getting rid of the obstacles”. However, she also mentioned some dangers in this, if either she or the other students don’t know what is being said:

If students spoke their language, so that it became very obvious to the other students (...) it would be.. not good, (...) because then the others wouldn’t understand it (...) so they would feel that they were saying something stupid blablabla you know, so them being shut out.

In such a scenario, the teacher might not be able to follow the language learning process (Rosiers, Willaert, Van Avermaet & Slembrouck , 2016).

### **3.8 Multilingualism, Culture and Identity**

Jiménez, López-Gopar & Morales (2014) found that language and culture are important aspects of one’s identity, and are thus aspects a teacher must take into consideration. While Eva did not incorporate a lot of L1 into her lessons, she thought, just as Jiménez, López-Gopar & Morales, that your mother tongue and culture are important to your identity, and assigned this interest in identity to her also being a psychology teacher, saying: “being a teacher in psychology, it interests me *very* much”. She said that she also talks about this with her students:

I had a girl coming from South America someplace and her mother tongue came up in a discussion about globalization (...) and how your own language is very important to you (...). We talked about how your language defines you and your identity is sort of ... you know, attached to your language.

Eva said that she tries to think about culture a lot, especially in content matter. On the topic of culture in content, Jiménez, López-Gopar & Morales (2014) found that incorporating

culture into English lessons can be a way to increase validity to student backgrounds, which are also often bound to languages. Eva said that she tries to increase students' attention to such matters, stating that it is important to "try to use their own experiences, their own ideas, and also to reflect upon other people". She said that she also tries to emphasize to her students the practical importance of having an understanding of different languages: "we speak about the importance of knowing [languages], because I'm teaching students who will be driving trucks through Europe, maybe (...) some of them will venture across the borders". She thus emphasized both the practical and the existential importance of having understanding of different languages and cultures.

Johanna seemed a little more thoughtful about the role of culture in the classroom, saying: "well it... it is not something that I have thought (...) a lot about", but brought up the aim from the syllabus about teaching about different cultures, and that she is aware of that. She brought up another class (which I did not observe), in which she has students with different cultural backgrounds. She explained her plans to initiate a project called "project Australia", where she believed that the students will have the opportunity to incorporate their own experiences, saying: "they will get to connect it to... well to their own experiences". She also said that since, in the class that I observed, most of her students come from a Swedish background, it is not a topic that seems to be a very present issue in the classroom. She reflected that it would possibly have been different if her classrooms were more linguistically diverse, saying: "had it been *more* [students from other cultures], it would have of course been ... something bigger (...) and you would have, well, thought about it more". Nevertheless, the opportunity for students to incorporate their own interests was present in my first observation with Johanna, where students got to choose topics of their argumentative speeches themselves. Jiménez, López-Gopar, & Morales (2014) accordingly found that by allowing

students to work with content of their own choice, their linguistic identity and cultural background can be allowed to be resourcefully capitalized on and acknowledged.

### **3.9 Educational Policy**

The aim of plurilingualism from the 2011 syllabus seemed to not have been considered upon greatly. The aim of using English as much as possible was clearly an explicit goal amongst the teachers, whereas plurilingualism as a concept was met with more caution, as well as with some confusion. The findings are similar to those of Ekman (2015, p.24), who found that the syllabus' aim of plurilingualism was met with confusion, with teachers expressing feeling "lost". When asked about Skolverket's plurilingualism-aim, Eva asked: "is it from the 2011 syllabus?". Is thus did not seem as an explicit consideration in her teaching. She said:

To be brutally honest, I must say that [the aim of plurilingualism] is not something that comes up very much in my head... so maybe I need to... think about that (...) I need to look into that exactly what it says how we are supposed to do that.

Talking about the syllabus, Johanna recognized the complexity of the matter: "it is difficult to balance, you want to... you have to follow what is...well... what Skolverket says, but at the same time, you have to adapt it (...) it is really difficult, it *really* is difficult". Skolverket's aims hence did not seem very straightforward to these teachers. Boeckmann (2012) accordingly found that perceptions of plurilingualism differ depending on the context, and that there is an uncertainty amongst teachers on exactly how to deal with policy aims of plurilingualism. Similarly, Ekman's (2015) findings also showed that the outcome of interpretations of policy aims can depend on the individual teachers.



### **3.10 Materials and Content – English Only & Incorporating Culture in Content**

At Eva's lesson, content and material were "authentic", with focus on true English speaking culture and society. The lesson focused on US politics, with an authentic podcast from the US, and the article was likewise authentic; from the NY times. Eva said that this could bring more real life importance of the target language to the students, and also said that it is a way of making use of cultural aspects in the education: "to venture out from the textbook material is also very important (...) especially in the aspect that you are talking about [incorporating student background and culture], to bring it in more, to make it sort of more visible". Eva thus pointed out that incorporating authentic material can be a way of taking culture into consideration in the classroom. However, based on the material and content that I observed, this was focused on the US culture, rather than for example students' cultures, and would thus strengthen the English Only argument, with strong English cultural dominance (Cook, 2001). Since it was also Eva who chose the materials, there was little opportunity during this lesson for students to incorporate their culture into the content.

At my second observation with Johanna, the focus of the lesson was the "job-project". Johanna decided the overarching theme, which was for the students' leaflets to represent jobs in Great Britain or the USA, but the students got to be creative and make up the actual jobs themselves. This could be a way of incorporating student culture into a classroom exercise, but since the students were supposed to represent jobs in the UK or the USA, those opportunities might have been limited. On this issue, Jiménez, López-Gopar, & Morales (2014) found that English education could be a place where interest in and focus on local culture could be appreciated, thus challenging linguistic power hegemonies.

## 4. Discussion

This project found that the English Only approach seems to be viewed as the ideal – Eva took this approach fully, and while Johanna was involving the L1 more, she still talked about this approach as the goal. In the classroom, Johanna did not reprimand students using the L1 to help and explain to each other, whereas Eva would discourage all L1 usage in the classroom. Johanna sometimes used the L1 strategically, but the usage of the L1 seemed to also appear incidentally at times. Neither Eva nor Johanna seemed to have thought extensively about the aim of plurilingualism, which seemed to be found a complex matter without a clear answer. In contrast, the English Only argument seemed more straight forward to both Eva and Johanna. Thus, English Only was clearly the goal, and plurilingualism as a method for reaching that goal seemed confusing at times, even though they found that L1 aid could sometimes be necessary. Eva’s approach seemed to stem from the beginning of her own teacher training as well as from her 22 years of professional experience, and made her decisions on L1 use based on that. Johanna, with only three months of experience, emphasized the importance of using your colleagues as resources for advice on such complex matters. Both believed that experience, in combination to knowing your students, helps you find the right balance between the L1 and the target language.

Both teachers seemed to think that the aspects of plurilingualism and multiculturalism were easier to incorporate in the classroom content or material they used, rather than in the classroom interaction. There was not a great focus on the students’ linguistic backgrounds, but there were considerations made on the existential aspect of one’s language, as well as some practical ones. Most consideration to linguistic backgrounds was found in aims of understanding student difficulties and in assessment. The project found that perceptions of the “right” balance of target language and L1 differed depending on the

teacher, context and learners, and that even though the L1 was sometimes used as a linguistic resource, the aim of plurilingualism seemed somewhat unclear.

#### **4.1 Limitations and Implications for Further Research**

With case study research, validity is ought to be aimed for through triangulation and thick description. While I have aimed to make use of these concepts, the restrictions of this study limited the room for extensive description of the classroom context. The conditions for the classroom observations were also not completely comparable: with Johanna, I was invited to observe two lessons of English 6, while I with Eva attended one lesson of English 7. It is also difficult to say that the occasions I observed are telling of what usually goes on in the classroom, and perhaps the results would be different had I observed more lessons. Given that the study was limited to only two participant teachers, the conclusions drawn from this study must be considered in relation to the limited nature of the study, and would ideally need more participants and observations. For further research, this issue would thus benefit from being examined on a larger scale, with more teachers and classroom observations, and with the same level of English being compared. It would also be interesting to approach the issue from the students' point of views, examining how they feel about L1 involvement.

#### **4.2 Conclusion**

The results show that the English Only approach is dominant, and that the concept of plurilingualism is thought of as very complex. The two teachers differed in their approach to L1 involvement – one adopted the English Only approach fully, whereas the other involved the L1 more. They had in common that although L1 involvement was mostly seen as a last resort, both found that it could be helpful at times. The interest in the linguistic backgrounds of the students was not major, but both teachers saw possibilities of incorporating student resources in material and content, and found that consideration of linguistic backgrounds

could be important in understanding student difficulties. The project concludes that while experience seems crucial in finding the right balance between the L1 and the target language, teachers would benefit from more guidance on the matter of plurilingualism as a concept. Through this project, I hope to have shed light on a complex reality of Swedish EFL teachers, which might hopefully prepare future teachers for some of the challenges, as well as possibilities, of the profession.

## Appendix 1 - Interview Questions

- How long have you worked as a teacher?
- Which other subject(s) do you teach?
- Which languages do you speak?
- What are the language backgrounds of your students? How do the students' language backgrounds affect the way you teach? (= How do you approach different linguistic backgrounds in the classroom?)
- Which language backgrounds are the most prominent in your class??
- How do different linguistic backgrounds affect the students' learning of English?
- Are there instances when usage of the L1 is beneficial in the English classroom?  
Instances when it is not beneficial?
- What is the role of the L1 in the classroom material you use?
- Tell me about the language choices you made during the lesson?
- The syllabus states: "Teaching should encourage students' curiosity in language and culture, and give them the opportunity to develop plurilingual where skills in different languages interact and support each other" and "Teaching should as far as possible be conducted in English". How do you interpret these aims in your approach to teaching English?
- What advice do you have for future teachers about the presence of the L1 in the English classroom?

## Appendix 2 – The COLT-scheme

Feature	Questions
<b>Part A: classroom activities</b>	
1a) Activity type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is the activity type?</li> </ul>
2a) Participant organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is the teacher working with the whole class or not?</li> <li>- Are students working in groups or individually?</li> <li>- If group work, how is it organized?</li> </ul>
3a) Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Is the focus on classroom management, language (form, focus, discourse, sociolinguistics), or other?</li> <li>- Is the range of topics broad or narrow?</li> <li>- Who selects the topic – teacher, students, or both?</li> </ul>
4a) Student modality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are students involved in listening, speaking, reading, writing, or combinations of these?</li> </ul>

5a) Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What types of materials are used?</li> <li>- What is the source/purpose of the materials?</li> <li>- How controlled is their use?</li> </ul>
<b>Part B: classroom language</b>	
1b) Use of target language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To what extent is the target language used?</li> </ul>
2b) Use of L1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To what extent is/are first language(s) used? If used, how and when?</li> <li>- To what extent is/are first language(s) encouraged or discouraged?</li> <li>- Is there a difference between the presence of Swedish compared to other possible first languages in the classroom?</li> </ul>

3b) Sustained speech	- Is discourse extended or restricted to a single sentence, clause or word?
4b) reaction to code or message	- Does the interlocutor react to code or message?
5b) Incorporation of preceding utterance	- Does the speaker incorporate the preceding utterance into his or her contribution?
6b) Discourse initiation	- Do learners have opportunities to initiate discourse?
7b) Relative restriction of linguistic form	- Does the teacher expect a specific form, or is there no expectation of a particular linguistic form?



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