



“I think that I believe it’s a problem, that English takes over” – teachers’ concerns about learners’ language choices in a multilingual primary school context

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In Sweden, multilingualism is stipulated as an educational goal and primary education mandates support for learners’ development of both Swedish, English, and home languages through mother tongue instruction. In the lives of many young learners, however, English plays an increasingly pivotal role.

The current study was conducted at a multilingual suburban school in Sweden. Whereas several studies have investigated teachers’ attitudes towards minority language use (e. g., Uddling et al., 2023; Snoder, 2022), the current study was initiated as a response to teachers noticing that an increasing number of their multilingual learners in primary school choose to use English as their means of communication amongst each other. The study focuses on teachers’ deliberations and concerns with regard to their everyday school context, where they perceive that the language choices and habits among their learners is changing rapidly, in favor of English over Swedish and their home languages.

Qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) was conducted on focus group data involving the 27 teachers at the school. Findings suggest that the use of English among learners seems related to status, enjoyment, belonging and identity. From an ecological perspective (Christoffersen, 2013), it is clear that the linguistic environment of many young learners is in transition. The participating teachers want to maintain and encourage learners’ multilingual identities, and see the potential of English as a lingua franca. Nevertheless, they fear negative consequences for learners’ development in the majority language, and their home language, as well as for their identity, future education and integration in Swedish society. The current situation, where English is felt to compete with both the majority and the minority languages, is new territory that does not seem to fit within language policy and practice frameworks such as, e.g., Ruiz (1984).

Keywords: Multilingualism, English, Language choice

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