

Language instruction and the integration of immigrants and refugees in the Nordic Region, especially Sweden

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## **Introduction**

Language instruction has always been regarded as a major means for the host society to “integrate” newcomers to the Nordic region. During much of the time since the mid-1970’s, when official immigration policies were formulated, learning the majority languages of the host countries has been emphasized as *the* major means for newcomers to become integrated members of the host societies. At various times, maintenance and development of immigrant minority languages has also been considered as benefiting the society as a whole and facilitating integration. At the present time, the four major Nordic countries have somewhat different principles and practices regarding instruction in the majority languages and immigrant minority languages. The purpose of this paper will be to present an overview of the situation in the four largest Nordic countries regarding language instruction and integration of migrants to and within the Nordic region, to present some results of a research project (from early 1990’s) on language maintenance of migrants to and within the Nordic region, and to present some examples of “good practice” in education of migrants and their children in Sweden. The relationship between instruction in the various relevant languages and integration is of course complex. What is evident at the moment in several of the Nordic countries is a retreat from a commitment to true bilingual education, but there are, at the same time, some good examples of local initiatives which deserve credit for promoting both multilingualism among migrants and minority members.

## **Overview of instruction in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark as regards children and adults, L1 and L2.**

A comparison of instruction in relevant languages for immigrants and their children in the four major Nordic countries reveals both similarities and differences among them. One major similarity concerns the general welfare policy, which tends to be universalistic. Ideally at least, social benefits are allocated to all residents, regardless of work experience, insurance, family background, earlier contributions to an insurance scheme etc. In a similar vein, the integration policy is also universalistic and requires and assumes permanent residence on the part of migrants. Once a migrant has been granted a residence permit, he or she is entitled to all the benefits (except certain voting rights) accorded to citizens. An intra-Nordic open labor market has been in effect since 1954. This allows for free movement of residents within the Nordic region and for residents to seek employment in all four countries without first acquiring a residence or work permit.

Each of the four major Nordic countries has slightly different policies regarding instruction of immigrants and their children. These policies are also constantly changing, but my hope is that the information below is fairly accurate and up-to-date for the moment. In even the near future, it will of course be necessary to consult the websites in the list of references to obtain current information.

In Denmark, approximately 9 percent of the total population of about 5.4 million is regarded as belonging to an immigrant minority (Statistisk Årbog 2004). The current government of Denmark includes one party which has had a xenophobic policy as one of its high profile issues. It was not only the case that this party had a strong influence on the other parties in the governing coalition. Even the socialistic opposition has adopted a markedly more anti-immigrant policy since losing power. The result is that less money has been allocated to instruction in Danish for immigrants and Danish as a second language during the past several years. (This government was re-elected the same week as the Bilbao conference took place.)

Instruction in Danish for adults has become more strongly tied to workplace introductions, i.e. the current thinking is that immigrants can learn Danish without much formal instruction, merely by participating in work life. This assumption has been seriously questioned by most language researchers in Denmark (Holmen & Sørgaard Sørensen 2004). Instruction in Danish as a second language is provided for children within the Danish schools. Denmark has a relatively de-centralized school system, compared for example to Sweden, so it is difficult to generalize about how this instruction is organized. Teaching guidelines have been in effect for Danish as a second language in school since 1995 and in adult education since even later in the 1990's (Holmen & Risager 2003). Instruction in immigrant children's L1 (i.e. the language of the parents) is available to some extent on a voluntary basis.

Finland is an officially bilingual country, with a well-established historical Swedish-speaking minority. This minority constitutes approximately 6% of the entire population of about 5.4 million persons. The Swedish-speaking minority is found mainly in the western coastal regions of Finland and to some extent in and around the capital, Helsinki. Sami and Romani are also recognized historical minority languages. Compared to the other Nordic and many other European countries, Finland has a relatively small number of immigrants. They constitute only about 1.7% of the population. Those that settle in Swedish-speaking parts of Finland are encouraged to learn Swedish. The majority of the immigrants settle in parts of Finland which are dominated by Finnish-speakers and they tend to learn Finnish. Instruction in Finnish or Swedish is provided as part of labor market training for immigrants to Finland. Literacy courses are also available for those that need them. Support for cultural activities in the L1 of the immigrants can also be applied for (Kyntäjä 2000). There are parallel education systems for children in Swedish and in Finnish and, until recently, all children were expected to learn the other language in school. Now, in many schools, English has replaced Swedish as the first language learned by Finnish speaking children. Immersion education is also available in various districts in Finland, primarily that Finnish children go to school in Swedish-medium schools. Children with immigrant parents are able to attend instruction in

Finnish or Swedish as a second language, depending on the language of the school. They can also attend voluntary instruction in their first language for 3-4 hours per week (Østern 2001).

In Norway, about 6.6% of the total population of 4.5 million have foreign background. There are two officially recognized historical minority languages in the country: Sami and Finnish in the north. Newly-arrived immigrants are required to participate in at least 30 hours of instruction in Norwegian as part of their introductory job training. Up to 3000 hours of instruction are available free of charge for those that wish to continue studying the language. For children, instruction in Norwegian as a second language is available, while the first language can be studied either as a voluntary subject in the compulsory school, or instead of a second foreign language in the upper secondary school (Kommunal- och regionaldepartementet 2004a & b).

Sweden has both the largest population in the Nordic region, close to 9 million, and the greatest proportion of persons with foreign background, 8.9% (Swedish integration board 2005). There are also five official minority languages: Sami, Finnish, Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish), Romani and Yiddish. Swedish for immigrants is provided free of charge to new arrivals. It is not obligatory, but is highly recommended for those wanting to enter the labor market (Regeringskansliet 2004). Literacy training is also available, mainly in Swedish, but there are also some experimental projects with literacy training available in other languages (see below). For children in school, Swedish as a second language is available as an alternative to “mother tongue” Swedish. The teacher is generally the one who decides if a pupil should follow instruction in Swedish as a second language or as a mother tongue. Previously, some bilingual instruction was available in certain languages in certain municipalities, but now most instruction in languages other than Swedish takes place after school on a voluntary basis. However, “study help” by teachers of other mother tongues is available in many schools. This is help with other subjects in the mother tongue of the student, either in the classroom during the ordinary lesson, or at

another time or place. Other instruction in languages other than Swedish takes place on a provisional basis (see below).

Bilingual education in Sweden has in large part moved to independent schools. One or more independent schools currently provide education partly or mainly in the following languages: Arabic, English, Estonian Finnish, French, German, Russian and Swedish sign language (Skolverket 2005). Similar forms of independently run, state-supported education are probably also available in independent schools in the other Nordic countries to varying extents.

### **Language maintenance and shift among four groups in the Nordic region: results of a project.**

I usually describe the history of migration to the Nordic region as relatively short, compared to that of “traditional” host countries such as Canada, the US or Australia. In the context of this conference, however, one could regard the history of migration to the region as relatively long. In the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, about twenty years after migration had its initial upswing in the region, a comparative project on language maintenance and shift among migrant groups was carried out in the four major Nordic countries (Boyd et al 1994, Boyd & Latomaa 1996). The rate of language maintenance and shift in four migrant groups was studied in each group in at least two locations in the region. The groups and locations were as follows:

English-speaking North Americans: Copenhagen, Denmark  
Göteborg, Sweden  
Helsinki, Finland

Finnish-speaking Finns: Finnmark, Norway  
Göteborg, Sweden

Turkish-speaking Turks: Göteborg, Sweden

Køge, Denmark

Vietnamese-speaking Vietnamese: Bergen, Norway

Helsinki, Finland

Since that time, migration has continued and to some extent changed character, as has policy toward immigrants in several countries, but the results of the project are hopefully still of interest. Migration from more distant parts of the world as well as from the Balkan area has increased, while migration from Finland to Sweden, which was important from 1960 to the mid 1980's, has decreased dramatically. All four countries have restricted their migration and refugee policies during the 1990's, partly in response to the rise of right wing populist and more or less openly xenophobic political parties and movements.

The purpose of the project was to study patterns of language maintenance and shift in four migrant groups to and within the Nordic region and to explain differences in these patterns in different groups and in different locations. A particular focus of the study was language use and the transmission of immigrant minority languages from migrants to their children.

The graphs below present a very simple overview of the language use among the adult migrants and their children in each group and location. The diagrams below summarize, in terms of an index of overall language use, the degree to which respondents in each group use the majority language, the minority language or both languages. The higher the value on each index, the more the respondents in each group use the majority language of the host country. The lower the value, the more the language of the parents was used.

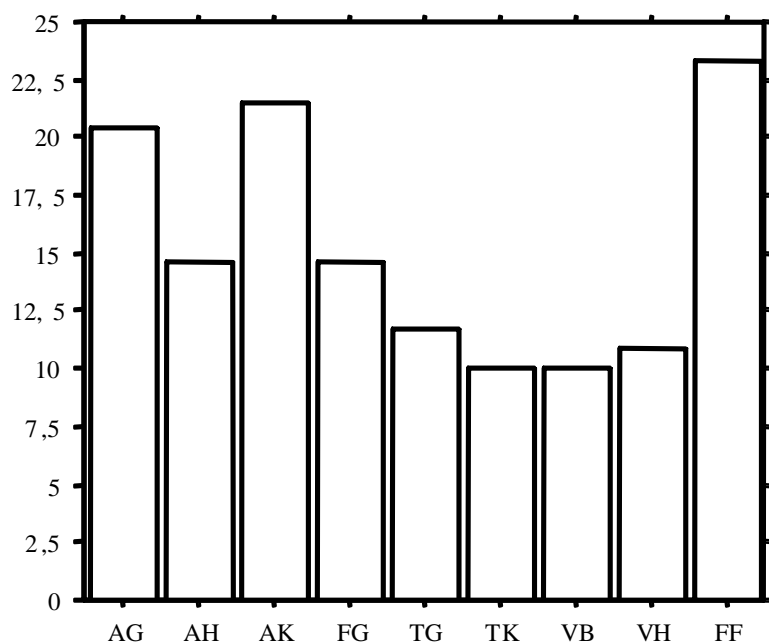


Figure 1: Parents' total language use. Mean value of language use index for informant groups. AG= Americans in Göteborg; AH= Americans in Helsinki; AK= Americans in Copenhagen, FG= Finns in Göteborg etc.

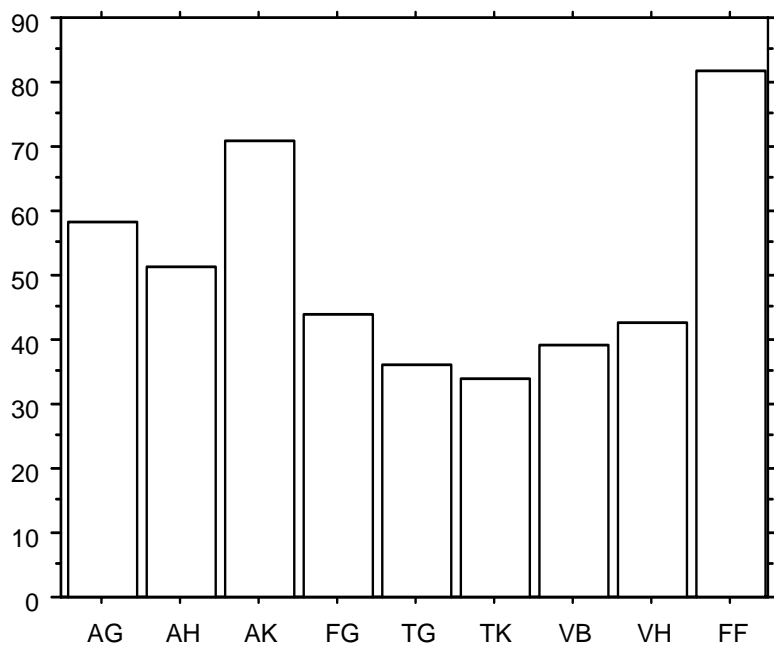


Fig. 2 Children's total language use. Mean value of language use index for informant groups. AG = Americans in Göteborg, AH = Americans in Helsinki, AK = Americans in Copenhagen. FG= Finns in Göteborg etc.

The graphs show first of all that the adults in the Turkish and Vietnamese groups use their L1's to a higher extent than the Americans and Finns use their respective languages. These differences were explained largely in terms of family-building patterns, education and admittance to (or discrimination within) the local labor market. A similar difference was also found for language use among the children, but there the differences tended to be smaller between the various respondent groups.

It is also evident in these diagrams that there are some interesting differences between groups coming from the same country of origin, but residing in different Nordic countries. The two groups originating in Finland were found to use Finnish to quite different extents. This difference was attributed to the fact that the Finnish group residing in Norway was living in an extremely sparsely populated area of northeastern Norway, where contacts with others were more difficult compared to the situation in Göteborg, a city of about a half million inhabitants. In the latter environment, it was easier to have contact with other Finnish speakers and to establish Finnish institutions of various kinds, although not all respondents were interested in doing so.

In the North American group, English was used more frequently in Helsinki than in Göteborg or Copenhagen. This difference could probably be attributed at least in part to the fact that Finnish is a non-Indo-European language, and is considered more difficult to learn for English speakers than Swedish and Danish, both Germanic languages. There were also better provisions for teaching these languages to new arrivals, due to the higher levels of migration to these countries than to Finland.

The differences in the pattern of language use in the Turkish and Vietnamese groups were smaller. The Vietnamese group in Norway had a somewhat better opportunity

to maintain Vietnamese than the corresponding group in Finland, despite the fact that the refugee group in Norway was established earlier than in Finland. The differences were attributed to small differences in the pre-school and school systems in the two countries. In Finland, children go to pre-school at an earlier age, and were not able, at least at that time, to receive much instruction in Finnish as a second language in school. These and other factors may have speeded up language shift in Finland compared to Norway. Another factor may be the fact that the children in the two groups were not age-matched: the children Helsinki group turned out not to have older siblings to the same extent as those in Bergen, which resulted in an apparently higher rate of language shift in Helsinki, as older siblings, partly raised in the country of origin, tended to support the maintenance the parents' language in the family.

The two Turkish groups maintained their language almost equally well, the small difference that emerged was explained mainly in terms of a stronger emphasis on L1 maintenance in Sweden and a stronger emphasis on the majority language in Denmark. Interestingly, the adult Turkish respondents in each country reflected the official thinking in their countries in answer to questions of attitudes to their languages. This group, of the four studied, was the one with the greatest number of dense and multiplex networks, dominated by other members of the same origin group. This group was the one experiencing the greatest social and economic difficulty of the groups studied.

A general conclusion drawn in this study was that language maintenance and shift depend not only on characteristics of the migrant groups in language contact, but also on the conditions that they come to and to the social networks they are able to build up in the host country. The American and Finnish migrant groups were able to integrate into the host societies much more easily than the Turkish and Vietnamese groups. Many of the informants in the former groups had partners in the majority groups, which significantly facilitated, even necessitated linguistic integration. Conditions within the host countries and the slightly different policies that were

carried out regarding language instruction at the time, had an important impact on language maintenance and shift in all four groups studied.

## **Some examples of “good practice” from Sweden**

As mentioned before, bilingual education in Sweden, which was carried out in some municipalities and for some immigrant language minorities in the late 1970's and 1980's has largely been discontinued. What remains of bilingual education, i.e. education where instruction takes place with more than one language as media of instruction in subjects other than the target languages, is mainly confined to independent schools. There are, however, some good examples of experimental bilingual education within municipal schools in various parts of Sweden. I will also describe briefly below a literacy project using the mother tongue of the participants as medium of instruction within adult educations.

### **The language school in Haparanda**

Haparanda is located on the west side of the Torne River, which forms the boundary between Finland and Sweden at the north end of the Gulf of Bothnia. This is one of the municipalities which is officially multilingual, i.e. where both Finnish and Meänkieli have official status as minority languages.

In the “language school” of Haparanda, pupils from both Haparanda and Torneå (Finland) attend the same school. The school (kindergarten – year 9) follows the Swedish school regulations, but the curriculum is a compromise between a Swedish and a Finnish curriculum. The teachers in the school are trained in either Sweden or Finland, and are all bilingual.

The school's goals are that the pupils should become bilingual in both Swedish and Finnish, which gives them the opportunity to pursue further education or employment in either country. Other goals include the pupils' learning about the

Torne valley history and culture, their learning to take responsibility for the local environment and to develop an international perspective leading to mutual understanding, co-operation and peace. Instruction begins mainly in the L1 of the child, while the other language is introduced mainly in more practical subjects such as music, art and physical education. By the time the child leaves school, she or he is attending about half her/his classes in each language. The school offers instruction in all the basic subjects, including English, German and French (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2004).

A similar project has been started in the Swedish and Finnish village(s) of Pello, on either side of the Torne river north of Haparanda. The Swedish side of the village houses about 300 inhabitants, while the Finnish side is larger, with about 2000 inhabitants. In each school, L1 and mathematics are taught in the child's first language. English is taught partly on each side of the river, while the children study all the other subjects together, either in Swedish or Finnish or a combination. EU money supports this project. (Pettersson 2003)

### **(Transitional) bilingual education in Göteborg**

In one of the northeastern suburbs of Göteborg, the International School has started a special Sorani group. The international School is a K-9 school with over 600 pupils. The school program for each pupil begins with a language planning meeting between the parents and the school to plan for the language instruction of each child. For how much of the school day is the child ready to learn through the medium of Swedish and how much support is necessary in the child's mother tongue? Until the child is ready to learn other subjects in Swedish, he or she receives study guidance in her/his stronger language. When the level of Swedish is adequate for learning in other subjects, Swedish as a second language and mother tongue instruction continue. In other words, the bilingual programs offered have a primarily transitional character.

The Sorani group is led by a mother tongue teacher, Gona Kamal. She teaches not only Sorani (a south Kurdish language) as a subject to pupils with Sorani background, but also mathematics in Sorani. She helps the Sorani-speaking pupils with their studies in subjects such as natural science and geography as well. The pupils' books are usually in Swedish, but Kamal is available to help them understand the texts using bilingual methods. (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2004)

### **Öresund's Upper secondary school**

The Öresund upper secondary school is located in the city of Malmö. It is a school with a majority of pupils with parents born abroad. The school runs on the normal Swedish curriculum for the upper secondary school. One thing that is different is that the school has a study workshop called "the greenhouse". There, four mother tongue teachers are stationed to help students who need assistance with their studies in any subject. Between them the mother tongue teachers are proficient in: English, Somali, Arabic, Pashto, Dari, Farsi, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian and Turkish as well as Swedish. These teachers can also be called in to assist the regular teachers in the classroom. They are also responsible for many of the contacts between parents and the school.

There are also two social pedagogues employed at the school, whose job it is to lead various integration projects in the school and to facilitate a good learning environment there. One way the school leadership and the teachers have been working is with explicit goals and procedures for school success and improving relations between the home and the school. The school has reactivated its student council and is developing a more active parents' advisory board.

The school has won a number of awards for excellence and for promoting integration in the city of Malmö. (Larsson 2004)

### **Literacy program in L1 in Malmö**

In a neighborhood in Malmö, a program was started in 2000 to provide basic literacy instruction in languages other than Swedish. The first group to study consisted of 12 women with Pashto as mother tongue and one woman with Dari (all originating in Afghanistan). In 2001, two new groups were started with Arabic and Albanian as languages of instruction. The instruction takes place in a “folk high school”, an adult education institution located with a branch located in the area where the students reside. In 2004, over 100 persons, including men, participated in instruction in basic literacy with these four languages as media of instruction. The basic literacy education is in two steps. During the second step, part of the instruction is in Swedish, in groups that include speakers of different other languages. The instruction includes information about Swedish society and the rights and obligations of citizens and permanent residents.

This instruction can be followed up by a series of further “steps”, which include instruction primarily in Swedish. Students can remain as long as they wish at any of the stages or can move up to a new stage, if that is deemed suitable by both pupil and teacher, at any time during the term. All the students participate in instruction in basic mathematics, computer skills and physical exercise in a nearby sports center. The folk high school is located within easy walking distance from the neighborhood where the students live. (Mörnerud 2004)

The four examples above share several qualities, which in my view qualify them to be considered as true bilingual education, and as examples of “good practice”. First, the goal of the instruction is bi- or multilingualism, not only learning the majority language (Swedish) or integration. Second, the initiative comes at least in part from the participants and their community. They are locally run projects with the aim of involving the local community in decision-making. Third, they involve members of the community as bi- or multilingual teachers. Many educational initiatives, as well as other initiatives to improve conditions in multicultural areas,

are organized by and employ primarily members of the monolingual majority. Particularly in an educational context, it is important that children see that skills in their languages are valued and that the languages can be used as languages of instruction in the school. Finally, all these programs include the teaching of other subjects, in addition to language, in languages other than the host language/target language. This further increases the status of the other languages and develops the pupils' and students' skill in these languages at the same time as they learn other subject matter.

## **Conclusion**

The policy of universalistic social welfare in the Nordic region provides good basis for the inclusion and integration of newcomers and their children in many respects. Everyone is treated the same. But in fact segregation of migrants in separate, low status residential areas and in particular job categories is a problem in all four countries. The universalistic welfare policy at the same time makes it difficult to start and maintain programs which are aimed only at bi- or multilinguals, unless the main goal of the program is to integrate foreigners or their children into mainstream society.

During recent years, there has been a trend in all the Nordic countries toward a less generous policy toward immigrant minority languages. Despite the examples above, the main tendency, even in Sweden, (which has at least in recent years been spared the effects of a successful xenophobic party or movement,) has been to emphasize the importance of integration, often equated with assimilation, and the learning the majority language. More and more of the responsibility for integration is placed on the shoulders of the immigrants, while the value of migrants' other languages is at times mentioned, but in practice, given little notice. Nevertheless, when the rhetoric of minority languages as resources for all citizens is implemented in good educational practice, positive effects can be achieved.

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