

## Continuity and change: migrants' experiences of adult language education in Sweden

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At school  
everyone realizes  
that it takes more time  
than they thought  
you cannot learn in a year  
a language is a long-term project

But everyday life  
is a short-term project  
and it doesn't really fit together  
because you want to manage in life today  
right now

Extract 1, data set A<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*This article aims to explore continuity and change in adult migrants' experiences of Swedish for immigrants (SFI), a state-subsidised language programme for basic Swedish. The study has a longitudinal and comparative design, drawing on discourse analysis of qualitative interviews conducted with language learners in 2001/2002 and 2015/2016. This period was characterized by important societal shifts, defined by increased migration, growing tension between discourses on rights and obligations of adult migrants living in Sweden, and an intensified marketisation of the Swedish education system derived from neoliberal principles. The study describes how these changes affected SFI as well as the conceivable impact that restructuring the language programme had on the learners. Ultimately, the study highlights tensions between various state initiatives that impacted the language programme and the SFI participants' experiences of being adult language learners.*

**Keywords:** Adult language education; language competence; Swedish for immigrants; marketisation; neoliberalism, student experiences



## Introduction

In Sweden, adult migrants have the right to participate in state-subsidised basic language training, delivered within the language programme *Swedish for immigrants* (hereafter SFI). SFI is an educational setting characterized by diversity, and targets students from around the world with differing linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds and pedagogical needs. Adult migrants' language learning is associated with high expectations, not only from the individual learners but also from policymakers who link SFI to successful integration. However, as reflected by the quote above, learning an additional language as an adult can be a demanding process, with tension between immediate communicative needs and the insight that language learning is 'a long-term project' (Ahlgren, 2014; 2020). The tension between short-term and long-term goals, such as becoming employable as quickly as possible, versus personal and professional development, has been reinforced over time (Lindberg & Sandwall, 2017).

This study sets out to explore continuity and change in adult migrants' experiences of SFI from a longitudinal and comparative perspective. By drawing on two data sets consisting of qualitative interviews conducted in 2001/2002 and 2015/2016, respectively, the objective is to investigate how SFI students motivate their participation in the language programme, how they reflect on their language learning experiences in general, and how they relate to their experiences of being enrolled in SFI. The students' experiences are analysed against the backdrop of societal and institutional changes that have impacted on SFI.

The time period investigated – 2001–2016 – is interesting in several respects. It was characterized by increased migration; the rise of a right-wing populist party,<sup>2</sup> and growing tension between discourses on rights and obligations of adult migrants living in Sweden,<sup>3</sup> with a strong focus on the importance of and the duty to learn the Swedish language (Rydell, 2018b). Moreover, the Swedish education system underwent an intensified marketisation reflecting neoliberal principles that was particularly noticeable in adult education (Fejes & Holmquist, 2019).

In Sweden, as in most Western countries, discursive struggles over migration have become increasingly salient. This is, *inter alia*, noticeable in discourses on language and migration as well as calls for stricter policies on migrants (Kahn, 2016; Simpson & Whiteside, 2015). Adult migrants' language competence has gained increased symbolic value by indexing loyalty and belonging to the new country of residence (Blackledge, 2009; Rydell, 2018b). Recurrent suggestions to introduce language requirements for naturalization purposes in Sweden<sup>4</sup> (already implemented in most European countries) and the current suggestion of introducing a formal 'language duty' provide cases in point (Rydell & Milani, 2020). What is more, migrants' language knowledge is often discursively transformed into economic terms, as language competence becomes linked to economic success for both state and individuals (Flubacher, Duchêne & Coray, 2017).

Against this backdrop, Sweden provides an interesting context for exploring these issues, in particular because in 2015 the country had a historically high number of asylum seekers, which posed a challenge both to the Swedish state and to SFI. The present study makes the case that, in the wake of this increased migration, a new emphasis has been put on adult language education in contemporary society. Using a longitudinal and comparative design, the results point to tensions between different state initiatives impacting SFI and SFI participants' experiences of being adult language learners. Ultimately, the article highlights the complex role of adult language education.

## Swedish for immigrants: towards a marketisation of the education system

The first courses in SFI took form in the mid-1960s starting as a pilot activity run by private study associations. In 1986, SFI became a permanent programme, targeting adult migrants over 16 years of age in need of tuition in basic Swedish. The aim of the programme is that students should develop ‘linguistic tools for communication and active participation in daily, societal and working life, and continuing studies’ (the Swedish National Agency of Education, 2017). The link between SFI and integration policies has always been strong but has changed character over time. In a study on SFI policy documents that regulated SFI from the 1960s to 2006, Rosén & Bagga-Gupta (2013, p. 82) point out how the discourses associated with SFI have shifted from a work-oriented focus with emphasis on what the state should do for newcomers to a focus on employability and ‘what the newcomers can and should do for the state’.

Since its inception, SFI has become institutionalised and the language programme is now an integrated part of the national education system. In 1994 and 1996, graded knowledge requirements and national tests, respectively, were introduced. Meanwhile, SFI has often been surrounded by discourses of deficiency (e.g. Carlson, 2002) mainly due to an alleged low efficiency. High dropout rates have symbolized the ‘failure’ of the Swedish integration policy, not least in the media debate (Lindberg & Sandwall, 2017). The year 2002 saw an important change in the organizational structure of SFI with the introduction of a new system intended to meet the needs of the highly diverse student group. This reorganization offered four courses and three study paths, depending on the students’ prior schooling and estimated study pace. The implementation of study paths has made it possible to achieve a grade in SFI at lower proficiency levels. This has been especially significant for learners with little or no prior formal education, for whom the learning trajectory can be long.

Since 1986, the municipalities have been the main principals for SFI, but nowadays they can outsource SFI using their own tendering criteria (Fejes & Holmquist, 2019). In 2001, outsourcing was starting to be implemented (e.g. Carlson & Jacobson, 2019), but the number of SFI participants was still rather low. In 2016, more than a third of SFI students were enrolled in tendered schools, but the percentage varies depending on the municipality (in some municipalities up to 80%). Hence, both students and educators have witnessed the entry of a new business logic in the education system, where competition and flexibility have become hallmarks (Carlson & Jacobson, 2019; Martín Rojo & Del Percio, 2019). This new logic implies short-term contracts, and that SFI providers (in many cases private) can generate profits by developing strategies for low-cost solutions for SFI courses. This, in turn, affects the quality of the education. Consequently, restructuring the education system according to neoliberal market principles, has created a competitive system with resultant instability for students and school providers (Fejes & Homquist, 2019; Martín Rojo & Del Percio, 2019).

Increased migration to Sweden together with the historically high number of asylum seekers in 2015 has increased considerably the number of students enrolled in SFI. In 2001, 39,000 students were enrolled in the language programme compared to 150,000 in 2016 (the Swedish National Agency of Education, 2017). One consequence of this is a lack of qualified teachers, a factor that has contributed to the discourses of deficiency on SFI. Currently, the teacher/student ratio, the percentage of qualified teachers, and the overall quality of the education vary greatly among providers (Lindberg & Sandwall, 2017).

However, the neoliberal rationality that has come to characterize adult education is not only a question of organizational structure. As argued by Martín Rojo & Del Percio

(2019, p. 3), this rationality ‘produces specific subjectivities, that is, specific ways of understanding the self’. Drawing on a discourse analysis of policy documents and interviews with teachers and students, Sandberg, Fejes, Dahlstedt and Olson (2016) argue that the ideal adult learner is constructed as a motivated, responsible, and goal-oriented student. Moreover, from a policy perspective, language learning is increasingly seen as an individual project where the learner can either fail or succeed, and as ‘a simple matter of personal choice’ (Cooke, 2006, p. 60). The ideal student is thus constructed as a ‘self-made speaker’, where language is considered a personal asset (Martín Rojo, 2019).

### Theoretical framework

This study relies on a discursive approach focusing on how adult migrants reflect on their language learning experiences. When subjects talk about their experiences, they simultaneously give meaning to them, and negotiate images of themselves (e.g. De Fina & Perrino, 2011). The meaning the participants attach to their experiences is interpreted in relation to the social context, which in this case is the educational setting of SFI, including educational policy documents and discourses on second language knowledge and language learning in Swedish society. From this perspective, the subject (e.g. the SFI participant) is constituted in and through discourse (e.g. Fejes, 2019; Foucault, 1972). As sociolinguists, we pay particular attention to the key role played by discourses on language competence in boundary making and shaping subjects, both how subjects are positioned by others and how they perceive and construct themselves accordingly (Busch, 2017; Rydell, 2018a).

In general, migration entails a re-positioning of one’s social position and a re-evaluation of one’s social, linguistic, and economic capital. Hence, the social positioning of language learners can be impacted by the symbolic value of language competence in migratory contexts. Linguistic resources are distributed unequally in society (Heller, 2007) and language competences can serve as a mechanism of distinction, attributing social information to the speaker (Bourdieu, 1991). Perceptions and constructions of language competence are often based on a ‘native speaker model’ leading to a deficit perspective on second language speakers (Márquez Reiter & Martín Rojo, 2019). This view is often internalized by speakers themselves. Not being considered ‘a competent speaker’ as an adult can constitute a social stigma (Goffman, 1963), creating discord with the image of adults as competent speakers. Goffman defines a stigma symbol as ‘signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing consequent reduction on our valuation of the individual’ (1963, p. 59). Since people tend to internalize the views of others on what is considered normal and deviant, not being considered a legitimate speaker can reinforce and even legitimize exclusion (Bourdieu, 1991). Moreover, those who differ from the ‘native speaker model’ often inhabit social identities constructed as problematic, related to other forms of stigma associated with intersectional aspects such as country of origin, skin colour, social class, age, gender, etc.

It is beyond the scope of the present study to analyse how these intersectional aspects impact on language learning or to investigate the actual language learning of the participants. Rather, the focus is on the participants’ experiences of being adult language learners within a particular setting, the SFI programme. Language learning is conceptualised as a socialization process, i.e. an increased participation in different social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By extending the notion of motivation, Norton (2013) foregrounds *investment* – a social construct that focuses on learner identity and how learner identities are negotiated in social interaction. As the metaphor investment implies,

language learning is understood to be a way to acquire various kinds of capitals (i.e. linguistic, social) and links the learner's commitment to practice the target language to particular social contexts. In this vein, participation in communicative practices is contingent on situated negotiations of power, i.e. how the learner is positioned by others and perceives possibilities to use the language in an including environment (Norton, 2013).

## Data and method

The two data sets analysed in this study have been collected in earlier research projects and have been referred to in part in other studies, but for other purposes (Ahlgren, 2014, Rydell, 2018a). The data were collected after informed consent had been obtained from all participants.

### *Data set A*

The first data collection, here referred to as data set A, comprises 17 conversational interviews, and was collected in 2001/2002 (by Ahlgren). Some of the participants were on the final SFI course, while most had recently finished SFI and were enrolled in a continuing language course in municipal basic education. The learning centre was located in a smaller suburban municipality close to the capital. All participants had studied together in SFI in the same class with the same teacher, who was a qualified and appreciated teacher with long experience of teaching in SFI. Several of the participants had experience of shorter work placements. Most of them had at least 10 years of prior schooling, and a few had studied at university level before migrating to Sweden. They had all lived in Sweden for at least one year, with an average of two years. There were nine first languages reported, the most frequent being Arabic, Persian and Spanish. The youngest participant was 18 and the oldest was 44.

### *Data set B*

The second data collection, data set B, comprises 6 conversational group interviews with 31 students and was collected in 2015/2016 (by Rydell). At the time of the interviews, most of the participants were on the final course of SFI, and only a few had recently enrolled in a continuing language course in municipal basic education. The interviews were conducted at two learning centres with 5–7 participants in each group. Several of the participants had experienced a number of teachers since some of them had been enrolled in more than one learning center and some had interrupted their SFI studies and resumed them later. One learning center was located in the inner city of the capital and the other in a medium-sized town in Middle Sweden. Data set B represented the three different study paths, and the students' level of prior schooling varied from none to completed university degrees. They had all lived in Sweden for at least one year with an average of four years. Nine first languages were reported with Somali and Arabic being the most frequent, and the age distribution was 21 to 54 years.

## *Method*

The interviews were conducted in Swedish and can be described as semi-structured conversational interviews, organized around the participants' motivations for participating in SFI, and their experiences of language learning and language use in and outside the classroom. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for content analysis. To identify themes relevant for this study, the authors have returned to the recordings and transcriptions looking for significant patterns. The two data sets have then been interpreted in relation to emergent themes relevant for the aims of the study, and to earlier documented observations on the social and ideological context: the SFI language programme and discourses on migration and language in the Swedish society (cf. Heller, Pietikäinen & Pujolar, 2017).

Interviews are viewed as a social event and an interactional achievement (Talmy, 2011). In oral interviews, the told experience and aspirations of the participants often have a narrative character and are always to be seen as jointly constructed by the interviewer and the participants (De Fina & Perrino, 2011). Although the interviews have been conducted differently (individually for data set A and in groups for data set B) the outcomes have a similar structure in many respects in the form of shorter accounts of experiences, perceptions and emotions. In data set A, these sequences tended to be longer and performed more independently, while in data set B the group dynamic gave room for more interaction between students. Hence, the main difference between data set A and B is that the participants in data set B had several addressees – both the interviewer and each other – and they constructed not only individual but also joint accounts in the interviews. Since both interviewers have work experience from SFI, our 'insider' perspective has been useful in all phases of the research process. However, we have been aware that it requires a high degree of *reflexivity* (Bourdieu, 1992) in order 'to see the point from which you see what you see' (Salö, 2018, p. 24).

Our aim is to depict general tendencies in the data, so the extracts in the analysis have been selected to illustrate the findings. All extracts have been translated adhering closely to the participants' way of speaking Swedish, which often means a linguistic form that indexes non-nativeness.

## **Analysis**

In the following, we analyse 'continuity and change', e.g. similarities and differences observable over time, based on the following significant themes that emerged with respect to the participants' language learning experiences: 1) expressed motivation to participate in SFI and rationalisations for learning Swedish, 2) language use as a perceived key to language learning 3) experiences of the changing organizational structure of SFI and 4) the gatekeeping function of SFI.

### *Motivations for participating in SFI and reasons for learning Swedish*

One of the most striking similarities across the data sets is the expressed motivation of participating in SFI in the form of statements about the importance of learning Swedish as well as gaining knowledge about Swedish society. The participants also shared the view of language learning as a 'door opener' to present and future life opportunities, as illustrated in the following extract:

- MR            Why do you study SFI?
- Student      I want to contact people and I want to speak with my son...  
I want to get a job.

## Extract 2, data set B

As can be read from Extract 2, SFI is not primarily associated with a school subject or even formal education. Rather, the claimed rationale for studying SFI is linked to the speaker's current and future life world. In both data sets, learning the language of the majority society was constructed as crucial for the participants' capacity of 'managing on one's own' (data set A and B) in everyday life. Not 'needing an interpreter' (data set B) was also formulated as an objective in relation to more formal encounters with authorities and in healthcare settings. In this sense, language learning was motivated by immediate communicative needs in order to participate in different social contexts. In addition, SFI should prepare for a future position where one is able to have social relations, enter the labour market and function as a parent (see similar findings in Carlson, 2002; Cooke, 2006; Norton, 2013; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). The emphasis on being a parent and providing good opportunities for one's children contributes to a relational aspect of language learning, exemplified by the following quotation: 'If we don't know the language and can't help them how will they succeed in the future?' (data set B).

Other participants referred to SFI as a 'first step' in a process of 'validate a former education' (data set A) to be able to return to previous professional activities. Gaining knowledge about Swedish society was another common rationale, as expressed in the following extract where the student also expressed a need to develop everyday language:

I need to know more about culture... how Swedish people think. Not only Swedish traditions Christmas... Midsummer... How to do and think in every day... how young people talk... slang and so...

## Extract 3, Data set A

Overall, the participants' claimed motivation for participating in SFI and learning Swedish match the aim of SFI, which mainly situates the targets' domains outside the classroom (e.g. to develop a 'functional language' and to be able to participate in 'daily, societal, work and study life') and the political intentions framing adult migrants' language education as a 'process of integration' (Kahn, 2016; Lindberg & Sandwall, 2017). The participants from both data sets constructed language learning as *relational*, pertaining to *present-* as well as *future-*oriented goals. Hence, the language learning aspirations were seen as an investment in a better future (cf. Norton, 2013). These findings resonate well with previous studies on how adult language learners talk about their language learning trajectories (Abdulla, 2017; Carlson, 2002; Cooke, 2006) and how language competence is discursively constructed as a personal asset (Martín Rojo, 2019) and key for entering the labour market and a catalyst for social inclusion.

### *Social interaction as a perceived key and constraint to language learning*

The syllabus of SFI is based on a communicative approach. A central tenet in the communicative teaching paradigm is the objective for students to be able to use the target language efficiently in different social contexts (Rydell, 2018b). This view, where language use is key to language learning, was present in both data sets. However, in the interviews the formal language instruction within SFI was constructed as insufficient to

fully develop one's linguistic repertoire in Swedish. As stated by the participants: 'SFI is not enough' (data set B) and 'we only talk with the teacher or with each other... but we always make mistakes... if you talk to Swedes it gets better' (data set A).

In both data sets, the participants expressed a desire to interact more with 'native' speakers of Swedish in order to acquire what they perceived as the legitimate language. However, this was not described as an easy task because Sweden was perceived as a 'closed society'. One of the participants suggested that interaction with Swedes should be scheduled in SFI: 'my suggestion is... to have one or two lessons a week when [Swedes] are invited' (data set B). Several of the participants in both data sets had experience of participating in communication training organized by NGOs, churches and public libraries (i.e. language cafés) and appreciated the opportunities to meet 'native' speakers. However, some participants evoked frustration due to the lack of progression in the discussions: 'they repeat the same thing: where do you live, what's your name?' (data set B).

In both data sets, communicative experiences were central in shaping how the participants perceived themselves as speakers and their possibilities to participate in social interaction with native speakers of Swedish. The participants' experience that they were subjugated to evaluation by others was frequently brought to the fore during the interviews, and was constructed as a constraint to participation in social interaction. Their awareness of 'speaking Swedish with error' (data set A) or 'broken Swedish' (data set B) were in the interviews constructed as a discrediting feature (cf. Goffman, 1963). Several of the participants reported choosing to be silent rather than revealing their proficiency level in different social contexts, which is expressed below:

When they talk at my job and say something interesting... I not understand all... I can't find the worlds... I get nervous. I get ashamed. Then I prefer to be quiet.

Extract 4, data set A

These kinds of internalized linguistic surveillance were commonly reported in both data sets. Hence, the reported self-censorship was due to a recognition of the symbolic value of linguistic correctness (Bourdieu, 1991), ultimately impacting the participants' participation in communicative practices and their investment in the learning process (cf. Norton, 2013). In that sense, perceptions of language competence played a role both in the participants' self-perception and their evaluation of their language learning. Becoming a speaker of 'good Swedish' was in both data sets constructed as a desired subject position. Desired subject positions confer a vulnerability on those trying to achieve it, and a feeling of constant frustration and failure for those not able to live up to their expectations (Rydell, 2018a). This dilemma is reflected in the following quotation, where language learning is constructed as a condition for social inclusion:

Sometimes you think... I can't speak Swedish... I have to study more to integrate here you have to talk perfectly... there is no other way...

Extract 5, data set A

Another common feature is that learning the receiving country's language was constructed as a form of *respectability* in relation to the majority population since the participants witnessed that 'people accept you more if you talk Swedish' (data set A). At the time of the interviews, the participants had started to realise that the learning process was much more 'time consuming' (data set A) than first expected, since 'language comes slowly slowly' (data set B). Accordingly, learning Swedish was considered a 'long-term



project' (data set A, see also the quotation at the beginning of this article) and 'a struggle at least for the next five years' (data set A, see Abdulla, 2017 for similar accounts). Following this line of thought, the *lived experience of time* becomes central in the adult language learners' perceptions of their learning trajectories (Pujolar, 2019). While it was widely accepted that language learning can be difficult and time consuming, taking too long or not showing signs of progression was considered problematic, as expressed in the following:

I don't think it's good if you stay at a level... and I think Swedish people don't like it very much. If you live here for ten years... then it's important to speak good... but not perfect... it is not possible...

Extract 6, data set A

As stated in Extract 6, several participants (from both data sets) considered it to be important to 'speak good', especially after living in Sweden for a longer period. And the expectations of attainment are negotiated in relation to a native monolingual norm. Thus, the comment on the impossibility to speak 'perfect' in Extract 6 points to a frequently expressed need of negotiating one's linguistic acceptance and speakerhood in relation to Swedish society (Marquez Reiter & Martín Rojo, 2019). The participants from both data sets frequently allude to such alternative and more achievable models of speakerhood.

In sum, on the one hand SFI was considered insufficient for the participants to develop their linguistic repertoires in Swedish. On the other hand, involvement in communicative practices outside the classroom was characterized by limited participation or by a sense of not leading to language progression. This, in turn, reinforced the role of formal language instruction.

### *Students' changing experiences of SFI: from a 'stable space' to an 'area of confusion'*

While many similarities across the data sets pertained to how the participants rationalised their motivation to participate in SFI and their expressed experience of language learning, significant differences were found in relation to how the participants perceived the SFI organizational structure and classroom. One noteworthy organizational change in SFI is the introduction of three study paths in 2002, which was implemented right after the collection of data set A. Another significant change is the restructuring of SFI and the proliferation of SFI providers, which has enabled the municipalities to outsource the provision of SFI to a greater extent (Carlson & Jacobson, 2019). These changes have affected the students in different ways.

In 2001, the participants of data set A were referred to the geographically nearest SFI and had few opportunities to switch to another learning centre. In contrast, in 2015, the municipalities investigated for data set B contracted providers among which the students could choose from. Moreover, the SFI open enrolment policy had been implemented to a higher degree to minimize the waiting time for aspiring students. At the time of data collection B, this policy had become a form of 'competitive advantage' for SFI providers, and consequently some learning centres received new students every week. One consequence of the open enrolment policy in SFI is unstable student groups. In a recent survey, teachers pointed out that this was the main pedagogical challenge in adult education (Swedish Teachers' Union, 2017).

Hence, a major difference between data set A and data set B is that the participants in data set A were a heterogeneous group that remained stable over the academic year. The

participants' in data set A had a permanent classroom and a permanent teacher who followed them throughout the SFI education. Some of the participants articulated the classroom as a 'home' a 'friendly and stable space', and the teacher (in humoristic tone) was called 'mother' since she was at the students' disposal with help, sometimes even outside the classroom. However, the continuity and stability reported in the experiences of being enrolled in SFI in data set A sometimes led to participants referring to each other in fixed terms, for instance 'the talkative', 'the clever' or 'the silent one', constraining classroom participation by imposed fixed positions. Moreover, teaching at that time was not differentiated through study paths. Hence, some participants referred to the classroom as 'problematic' because of the students' different education backgrounds and, thus, different needs. Consequently, some participants asked for 'quicker progression' while others required a 'slow tempo'. The following quote illustrates this dilemma:

In our school they mix levels... almost no education with university educated...  
Nobody has perfect level. That is problem here... maybe better in big schools.

Extract 7, data set A

By contrast, the participants in data set B had the possibility to choose between different SFI providers. This was something several of the participants could relate to, either because they had participated in SFI organized by different providers or they had friends or relatives who had attended different learning centres. However, for some students, choosing 'the right school' was not always described as an easy task. Towards the end of one of the group interviews in data set B, the students started to ask the moderator questions, such as beliefs on best practices to learn a language. One of the participants explicitly asked the moderator about her perception of SFI and what could be considered a 'good SFI teaching':

Student I want to ask what do you think of SFI?

MR Laughs...

Student Because I study in different SFI. So it depends on the school teacher. Much differences from eh... different method...

MR Method?

Student Method good or not so good. Sometimes teachers come too late after thirty minutes. Pauses over thirty minutes.

MR No that's not so good.

Student Boring course boring teacher. But I understand it's free but eh I don't know... Repetitions... Which SFI is better, good for you, suits you. I can change... but I can't change every week and every month so...

Extract 8, data set B

This discussion took place in a learning centre in the inner city of the capital where a majority of SFI is run through private tendering, with fixed-term contracts. The students are thus presented a variety of learning centres and are expected to choose which school they wish to attend. As shown in Extract 8, the student is aware of this right to 'freedom of choice', but a too-frequent change of school is not considered a viable strategy in the long run ('I can change but I can't change every month'). One of the consequences of

changing schools is the experience of different ‘methods’ associated with different teachers, that may be ‘good or not so good’. In addition, in Extract 8 the fact that SFI is free of charge is associated with an uncertainty about what kind of quality standards the students can expect.

According to the Education Act, SFI schools are not allowed to take fees. It follows that the learning centres should provide students with teaching materials. In data set A, each participant had their own textbook with integrated grammar exercises that they could keep after completing the course. However, the book was not always referred to in positive terms since it was considered to be of limited help in developing a functional language. As one of the participants said: ‘one book only, we need to read newspaper and other material’. In data set B, providing students with photocopies (copied from different sources) instead of books seemed to be common practice in the investigated learning centres. Possible reasons for this are the increased number of students and the instability in the student groups and/or the fact that textbooks are a cost that can be reduced. From the students’ perspective, being provided with numerous photocopies presented a challenge when trying to grasp the expected learning outcomes. As can be read in Extract 9, the textbook had become a symbol of coherence:

Like you see we never have books. We just have like papers. Everyday paper, paper, paper... After I’m finished I’m gonna throw it ’cause I don’t need so many papers. Like today we’re taking this kind of lesson. Tomorrow another thing. It’s confusing.

Extract 9, data set B

A similar struggle for coherence is noticeable in a group interview from another learning center:

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Student 1 | We don’t need many books but we cannot do without a single book. We need a book for the whole SFI. When I start I can explain to my student...  |
| MR        | My friend.  |
| Student 2 | Yes and he can explain to others. We can’t just have a teacher.   |
| Student 3 | I agree.  |
| Student 1 | I can explain to others... I can help my friend. But I don’t know what is happening in his class.   |
| Student 3 | Yes.  |
| Student 1 | Maybe they will be discussing news, maybe about other countries... After the course, all information is different. And I can’t explain and I can’t help. This is not good. If we just had a book I could explain what will be next. |

Extract 10, data set B

Extract 10 also points to a significant difference between the data sets, namely that the participants in data set B to a larger extent underscored the need to learn Swedish in order to help other newly arrived migrants. This can possibly be explained by the recent high numbers of migrants entering Sweden in 2015 or to migration patterns where one family member settles first before the rest of the family arrives. Being able to help others linguistically can be seen as a sign of one’s own proficiency and social position (Rydell, 2018a). However, in Extract 10 above, Student 1 points out the frustration because the

content in SFI classes is perceived as unpredictable, which makes it difficult to know what the expected learning outcomes are and how to help others with their studies.

These observations illustrate how restructuring SFI has affected the language learners. According to our data, in 2001/2002 the SFI classroom was constructed as a ‘stable space’, even though this stability had its constraints (heterogeneous student groups, less variation, little possibility to change school, fixed roles in the classroom). Conversely, in 2015/2016 the classroom was articulated as an ‘area of confusion’, and the students have become ‘clients’ entitled to switch learning centre and responsible for finding ‘good education’ on the education ‘market’ (cf. Marín Rojo & Del Percio, 2019, Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2019). However, the image of the ‘entrepreneurial self’ responsible for one’s education (Martín Rojo, 2019) can be difficult to live up to.

### *The gatekeeping function of SFI and increased testing practices*

So far, we have seen how the participants in both data sets assigned SFI great importance for enhancing language learning, despite different perceived experiences of the language programme. Furthermore, SFI was frequently described as an important gate-keeping function, in terms of a ‘barrier’ [Sw. *spärr*] (data set A) [Sw. *bom*] (data set B), in particular in relation to the labour market. As stated by one of the participants:

When you try to apply for a job, the first thing they ask: Have you finished SFI?  
Do you have a grade?

Extract 11, data set B

The fact that SFI is part of a nexus of agencies (the National Agency of Education, the Employment Agency, and the Social Security Agency) adds to the institutional character of the language programme and the symbolic value of passing SFI. Students who are dependent on social benefits are subject to government control, and the learning centres report their attendance to different state agencies. Thus, the gatekeeping and boundary making function of SFI is multifaceted (Carlson, 2002). These tendencies characterize both data sets. What has changed over time, is the increased control system materialised in standardised testing.

When the national test was introduced in the final course of SFI (intermediate level) in 1996, the objective was to support an equal and fair assessment nationwide. Over the years, the test apparatus has grown, with the introduction of national tests in 2009 for another two SFI courses, thereby covering three proficiency levels. In addition, the status of the national test has gained significance and been institutionalised during the investigated period, changing from being voluntary and advisory to mandatory in 2009 and, pursuant to a change in the Education Act in 2018, decisive for the final grade in each course that it is given. The national test in SFI is not officially an exit exam, but in practice it is treated as such (Lindberg & Sandwall, 2007).

As a consequence of the increased test regime in SFI, the participants in this study related differently to the national test. All of the participants from data set A had obtained the SFI grade and most of them had also passed the national test (with more or less good results). Some of them commented on the content of the test, arguing that it was ‘very different’ from what they had learned in the classroom:

In class we do not work with these things... what comes in the test is something else... listen for example we never listen to news in school or never we write a form.

Extract 12, data set A

In 2001, this discrepancy was not seen as a major problem since the test was optional and had no decisive impact on whether the students could obtain a grade. Fifteen years later, when data set B was collected, the national tests had become obligatory and were assigned greater importance. Not one of the students in data set B mentioned that the test content did not correspond to the teaching in the classroom.

Due to the open enrolment policy, the national tests are administrated on a recurrent basis, up to once a month in some municipalities. As it is up to the teachers to decide when each student is ready to take the test, many SFI providers have now developed their own ‘pre-testing’ system that students must pass before taking the ‘high stakes’ national test. Preparing students for tests and administrating the test has thus become a major part of the organization of SFI teaching. Accordingly, there is a growing market for ‘training for the test’ textbooks (e.g. Bernhardtson & Tarras, 2012). Another tendency related to the importance given to standardized testing is a growing illegal spread on the Internet of national tests under secrecy (the Swedish National Agency of Education, 2019).

In the interviews in 2015/2016, tests were constructed as an acknowledgment of one’s proficiency. ‘Passing a test’ came up on several occasions as an answer to the question ‘How does one know whether one is good in a language or not?’ in data set B. By passing tests, students could claim competency and legitimacy. No such observations were made in data set A.

We can thus observe that even though the gate keeping function of SFI was foregrounded in both data sets, this aspect seems to have been reinforced over time. This is, *inter alia*, materialized in increased testing practices impacting the organization of the SFI teaching.

### Concluding remarks: Continuity and change

Following increased migration, adult language education has become a central element in Sweden’s integration politics and is seen as a space for ‘forming the citizen of tomorrow’ (Olson & Dahlstedt, 2014, p. 200). High expectations are placed on SFI and language learning, from the perspective of migrants who perceive language competence as a ‘door opener’ to the majority society, as well as from a social and political perspective where language learning should enhance economic and social integration (cf. Fejes, 2019). In this study, we have observed tensions between those high expectations in relation to language learning and the participants’ struggle for coherence and for opportunities to develop their language proficiency in contexts outside the classroom.

Despite the limited number of participants and differences in the composition of the two data sets examined, this study shows some clear tendencies. Primarily, we have found striking similarities with respect to how the participants construct their motivation for participating in SFI and language learning as *relational*, both present- and future-oriented. The necessity to participate in social interaction outside the SFI classroom was in both data sets constructed as crucial for language learning. In this vein, SFI was constructed in a complex way; both as necessary – but not sufficient – to fully develop one’s linguistic repertoire in Swedish. At the same time, the students’ experiences pointed to how participation in communicative practices outside the classroom were limited, thus reinforcing the importance of SFI. As argued by Kerfoot (2009), the adult language classroom is often one of few spaces where adult language learners are seen as legitimate speakers.

The observed main differences concerned the restructuring of adult education according to neoliberal market principles which has increased over time and resulted in

SFI changing character (Carlson & Jacobsson, 2019). In 2015/2016, in municipalities with several SFI providers, students had more possibilities to choose which school to attend. Consequently, they had become ‘clients’ with the responsibility of finding a ‘good education’ but also the possibility to change school if it did not live up to their expectations. By providing free language courses, the state enables learning, but the responsibility for learning lies with the student (Fejes, 2010). This focus on responsibility is not new (Carlson, 2002), but has been emphasised and changed character over time. Having the opportunity to change school for various reasons is a positive effect of the marketisation, but it has also led to a situation where the participants described SFI as fragmented and pointed to difficulty in navigating among different providers. This should be interpreted in the light of the gatekeeping function of SFI, *inter alia* materialized in increased testing practices. Thus, the symbolic and institutional importance of passing (national) tests and official policies emphasizing ‘the duty’ of migrants to become competent speakers of Swedish (Rydell, 2018b) has been reinforced.

In 2018, the Swedish government has proposed an official language duty for adult migrants, stating that they can lose their social benefits if they do not take part in assigned language instruction. The reason for this is to ‘increase the incentive’ for migrants to learn Swedish (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2019). These kinds of suggestions construct language learning as an individual project that can be ‘pushed’ (Rydell & Milani, 2020). More and more, adult education has been politicized and there is a tendency in the Swedish society (as in many other Western countries) to use educational programmes such as SFI to ‘control’ migration (Khan, 2016). In our study, we do not find support for the assumption that migrants lack motivation to learn Swedish, or that this would have changed over time and thus would motivate increased requirements. Instead, as discussed in this paper, the participants construct language learning as essential for better life prospects.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This extract (using a poetic transcription practice) has been published earlier (Ahlgren, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> In the 2010 elections, the Sweden Democrats entered parliament (with 5,7% of votes) and since then the party has increased their scores in elections, such as 12.9% in 2014, and 17.5% in 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Following a historically high number of asylum seekers in 2015, an important turn in public and political discourse occurred and a temporary law was urgently implemented intended to decrease the ‘immigration flows’ by targeting an EU minimal level with temporary residence and constraints on family reunification.

<sup>4</sup> Language requirements for naturalization purposes have been repeatedly discussed in Sweden since the electoral campaign in 2002 (Milani 2008) and a decision was taken in 2018 (to be implemented in the coming years).

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