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Conceptualisations of Linguistic Diversity: Critical Multilingual Awareness in Swedish Teacher Education

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Linguistic diversity is a defining feature of Swedish schools, where a substantial proportion of pupils have a migration background, underscoring the need for teachers who can support pupils with diverse linguistic experiences. Teacher education programmes have nevertheless been criticized for insufficiently preparing student teachers for multilingual classrooms. This study examines how teacher educators in primary school teacher education programmes at three Swedish universities conceptualise language and multilingualism within their disciplines and how they express critical multilingual awareness (CMLA) in their teaching. The study is grounded in a critical and dynamic understanding of language(s), in which CMLA highlights the social, political, and economic conditions shaping linguistic diversity. The empirical material consists of individual interviews with 21 teacher educators. The findings show that although teacher educators generally



acknowledge the importance of linguistic diversity and often view multilingualism as a resource, their critical awareness of the wider conditions influencing it remains limited. Multilingualism is frequently framed as a challenge linked to subject-specific linguistic demands, while broader social and political dimensions of language are less visible. Overall, the findings indicate a need to strengthen critical perspectives on language in teacher education to better support linguistic diversity in schools.

Keywords: critical multilingual awareness, multilingualism, teacher educators

1 Introduction

Swedish society, like many others, is linguistically diverse. The Swedish Language Act (SFS 2009:600) stipulates that all residents should have the opportunity to learn, develop, and use Swedish, while individuals with another mother tongue should also be able to develop and use that language. The Language Act thus aims to protect both the Swedish language and linguistic diversity in Sweden, as well as the individuals' access to language. In the field of education, values and attitudes related to pluralism and diversity are embedded in the opportunities provided for pupils to develop both the majority language and additional languages (Cummins, 2017, 2000). The Swedish Education Act (SFS 2010:800) states that schools must take pupils' differing educational needs and work to compensate for variations in their prerequisites (§4). Nevertheless, national reports and PISA results (OECD, 2022, p. 30) show that Swedish schools are failing in this compensatory responsibility, which is reflected in the achievement gap between pupils with and without a migration background.

During the academic year 2023/2024, 27% of pupils in Swedish compulsory schools¹ had a migration background, meaning they were either born abroad or born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024). This demographic reality means that all teachers must be prepared to teach pupils with diverse linguistic backgrounds. According to Paulsrud and Lundberg (2021), teacher education programs demonstrate shortcomings in terms of preparing student teachers to work with groups of pupils characterized by linguistic heterogeneity

¹ Grades 1-9.

and supporting the pupils' varied linguistic needs. Despite the implementation of major government-funded initiatives to strengthen in-service teachers' expertise in terms of receiving and working with recently arrived and multilingual pupils, these initiatives have not encompassed teacher education (e.g., Hermansson et al., 2022; Nilsson, 2023). García (2017) argues that prevailing language norms should be questioned and that preservice teachers need to develop critical multilingual awareness (CMLA) to be better prepared for working in contemporary schools. Accordingly, student teachers should develop new attitudes and profoundly change monolingual and assimilatory practices. Simply acknowledging multilingualism is not enough; instead, a fundamental rethinking of how language(s) are conceptualised in education is required (García, 2017).

According to the Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100, Annex 2), student teachers in Sweden must develop and demonstrate an advanced ability to create the conditions necessary for all pupils' learning and development. They are also expected to draw on pupils' prior knowledge and experiences in their teaching. This article focuses on teacher education and teacher educators in primary school teacher programmes (*grundlärarprogram*) from preschool class to the 6th grade in Sweden. These university-level programmes are 4 years in length. The aim is to examine how teacher educators express CMLA, including its pedagogical, political, and personal dimensions, in relation to their teaching in various subject disciplines at three universities. The following research questions guide the study:

1. How do the teacher educators conceptualise language(s) and multilingualism in relation to their subject disciplines?
2. How is critical multilingual awareness made relevant by the teacher educators?

2 Linguistic Diversity in Teacher Education

Research on linguistic diversity in teacher education has a history of at least four decades (Grant & Gibson, 2011) with an interest in how it can prepare future teachers for culturally and linguistically diverse contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Although linguistic diversity is not a new phenomenon in many contexts, geographically and historically, education has played an important role in implementing monolingual ideologies at the expense of linguistic minorities. This has also been the case in Sweden, despite its reputation for inclusive and equitable education. Research on

linguistic diversity and teacher education therefore needs to attend to local historical, social, and cultural contexts. For this reason, we begin by situating our paper in the Nordic context.

Research on aspects of language in teacher education in a Nordic context has mainly focused on student teachers, teacher educators, and newly qualified teachers. A recently edited volume (Reath Warren et al., 2025) brings together studies examining how teacher education in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden prepares future teachers for linguistically diverse classrooms. The volume underscores the need for self-reflection in teacher education on aspects of linguistic diversity, to better prepare student teachers for work with heterogeneous pupil and student groups.²

In an earlier study, Paulsrud and Lundberg (2021) examined multilingualism in primary school teacher education at six universities in Sweden. They found that multilingualism was addressed only as a question for pupils using languages other than Swedish at home. They concluded that no standardised national guidelines exist for including multilingualism in primary school teacher education in Sweden and that “it is key that more explicit spaces in teacher education are created for multilingualism” (2021, p. 55). These findings are consistent with earlier research by Carlson and Rabo (2008) and Carlsson (2009), who researched general course content (*Utbildningsvetenskaplig kärna*) in teacher education. They found that when multilingual perspectives and second language (L2) learning were addressed, it was often through a deficit lens and positioned in relation to “the others”. Similarly, Paulsrud and Zilliacus (2018) reported that although both teacher educators and student teachers expressed inclusive and multilingual orientations, these perspectives were not implemented in practice. In the Norwegian context, Iversen (2020) showed that student teachers wished to use both their own and pupils’ multilingualism as a resource in education. At the policy level in higher education, Hermansson et al. (2022) investigated course syllabi for teacher education programs and found that content about multilingualism and linguistic diversity was marginal, except for the subjects Swedish and English. Similarly, a content analysis of syllabi for the courses in Swedish, English, and mathematics in primary teacher education (grades 4-6) in Sweden showed that didactic perspectives on multilingualism were addressed primarily within the Swedish courses (Bylund & Warnby, 2024).

² We use “pupils” for primary and secondary school pupils and “students” for student teachers and university students.

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In a South African context, Makalela (2017) showed that translanguaging practices enabled student teachers to draw on their multilingual repertoires and cross ethnolinguistic boundaries in their teaching. In contrast, research from teacher education for primary school teachers in Iraqi Kurdistan showed that, despite the linguistic diversity of the context, language was addressed in ways that made this diversity invisible and made students less inclined to recognize their future pupils' linguistic knowledge in languages other than the dominant English and Kurdish (Salman Haji et al., 2024). Smeins et al. (2022) reported from their study designed to make student teachers implement plurilingualism in their future teaching practices in primary school. By using digital tools and digital games, students developed knowledge about linguistic diversity and a higher level of linguistic awareness.

Critical perspectives on the role of power in relation to language and ethnicity in education have been developed by several scholars working in a North American context dominated by English and Spanish (e.g., Athanases et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Mojica et al., 2019; Haddix, 2008; Yang & Montgomery, 2013; Cinaglia & Costa, 2022). Both Haddix and Rodriguez-Mojica et al. highlight aspects of power regarding language and ethnicity within education. Haddix et al. argue for the importance of adopting a critical perspective to support student teachers in questioning their own linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Rodriguez-Mojica et al. demonstrate the challenges that may arise when prevailing ideologies within academic contexts are questioned. Yang and Montgomery (2013) show that it is possible to bridge the gaps between the attitudes of teacher educators and student teachers to advance multiculturalism in teacher education. Tian (2020) investigated how teacher educators in a TESOL program at a U.S. university integrated translanguaging, as well as how student teachers understood and incorporated translanguaging in their teaching practices. The student teachers developed a translingual orientation and employed a range of instructional strategies. The study showed that translanguaging can be incorporated into teacher education but that doing so requires attention to three interrelated dimensions: teaching about translanguaging, modelling translanguaging, and practicing translanguaging (Tian, 2020, p. 233). In a later study, Tian and Zhang-Wu (2022) investigated student teachers' understanding of translanguaging among five participants. They examined how – and to what extent – the participants integrated translanguaging into their teaching. The study showed that, through being exposed to translanguaging as both theory and pedagogy, the student teachers developed a translingual approach that included a dynamic perspective on language and an understanding of pupils'

linguistic repertoires as valuable resources. The student teachers also experimented with a translanguaging pedagogy to support multilingual pupils' needs in the subject content at hand.

Critical reflection and a crosslinguistic approach are called for in studies conducted in the Canadian context. Shank Lauwo et al. (2022) investigated a justice-oriented plurilingual approach in teacher education involving two preservice teachers. Their findings showed that the Chinese Canadian preservice teacher developed a perspective in which she viewed her own plurilingualism as a resource, whereas the White, English-dominant preservice teacher confronted her English-speaker privilege. Shank Lauwo et al. argue that their study points to a need for deeper critical reflection on racial and linguistic inequalities. They also call for more systematic critical engagement with questions of equity in relation to plurilingualism throughout teacher education programs. In a study from Quebec, Woll (2020) also examined the perceived benefits of a crosslinguistic approach to language teaching. This approach included promoting interaction that made use of all of the learner's languages. Crosslinguistic interaction was encouraged in this approach, in contrast to the monolingual policy of the Quebec Education Program. In another study reported by Wernicke (2021), the focus was on challenging previous assimilation policies to decolonize Indigenous peoples and counteract their marginalization as well as that of the French-speaking population. The study showed how the student teachers developed CMLA by changing their attitudes.

Li et al. (2021) relate issues of social justice in connection with linguistic diversity in teacher education to questions of transnationality, increasing mobility, and internationalization. Furthermore, García and Kleyn (2013) argue that student teachers need to meet and interact with recently arrived pupils and their families to develop the skills required to value and support the multiple identities and other resources that emerge from transnational experiences. They advocate forms of teacher education that build on what they refer to as a pedagogy for multilingualism. Such a pedagogy enables student teachers to develop their understanding of multilingual pupils and their families, as well as their knowledge about language, multilingualism, and language learning. Like Rodriguez-Mojica et al. (2019) and Haddix (2008), they highlight the importance of a critical approach in which student teachers reflect and question their own stereotypes and generalizations about language and ethnicity. In a special issue edited by Van Gorp and De Costa (2023), CMLA is examined and discussed in six empirical studies with a specific focus on teacher education. These studies demonstrate the importance of teachers' agency and identity work when engaging in CMLA

(Van Gorp & De Costa, 2023). Similarly, in the present study, we draw on García's (2017) concept of CMLA to investigate how teacher educators articulate multilingualism in their teaching at three Swedish universities.

3 Theoretical Framework

The study builds upon a critical understanding of multilingualism (García, 2009; May, 2014; Van Avermaet et al., 2018) as well as on scholarship concerning education and school development (Edwards-Groves et al., 2018; Kemmis et al., 2014). To analyse how teacher educators conceptualise linguistic diversity across subject disciplines, we use the concept of *critical multilingual awareness* (CMLA) (García, 2017). The field of language awareness has a long tradition, having been developed in the 1980s by Hawkins (1984), who envisioned “a more literate, more multilingual and more tolerant and inclusive society” (cited in Hélot et al., 2018, p. 2). A prevalent definition of language awareness describes it as a “person’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of language and its role in human life” (Donmall, 1985, quoted in James, 1999, p. 95). However, this understanding has been criticized because it treats language, along with language norms and hierarchies, as natural rather than as socially constructed and changeable (Clark et al., 1990). Clark et al. (1990) suggest that schools should aspire to create critical language awareness rather than integrating students into dominant norms of *linguaging*, to emancipate students, and to challenge and transform those norms. The notion of critical language awareness was further developed by Fairclough (1992), who suggested that its purpose was to empower and emancipate language users and challenge power relations.

While the objective of language awareness is to increase students’ cognitive awareness of language and the function of language, critical language awareness includes social and political awareness and activism for change (e.g., Alim, 2010). García (2017) emphasises the importance of shifting focus from awareness of language per se to awareness of language use and language users, as well as to the ideologies that shape their possibilities for action. This includes awareness of the social, political, and economic conditions for linguistic diversity (García, 2017). Thus, CMLA is not merely about acknowledging linguistic diversity; rather, it requires a rethinking of dominant assumptions about language(s) in education (García, 2017). García and Kleyn (2013) identify three key components that are essential in a curriculum for multilingual teacher education: i) an understanding of bilingual pupils and their families, especially pupils from minority language

backgrounds; (ii) knowledge of language and bilingualism/multilingualism; and (iii) awareness of how to deliver a pedagogy for multilingualism (pp. 1-2).

According to García (2017), student teachers should be confronted with issues concerning language oppression, intolerance, and social injustices to develop a critical understanding of language. However, teachers also need to be aware of the rich multilingualism in their classroom. Accordingly, García orients towards speakers (students) as language users rather than the language itself. A translanguaging pedagogy involves teachers reflecting on language ideologies and the intersection(s) between language, power, and race. Drawing on previous scholarship on both language awareness and critical language awareness, García introduces the concept of CMLA. She suggests that all teachers need to develop “1) an awareness of plurilingualism and appreciation of linguistic tolerance, and its merits for democratic citizenship and 2) an awareness of the histories of colonial and imperialistic oppression that has produced the plurilingualism in society” (p. 268).

Thus, a CMLA framework includes:

- 1) Knowledge of (proficiency)
- 2) Knowledge about (subject-matter)
- 3) Pedagogical practice
- 4) Awareness of plurilingualism and merits for democratic citizenship
- 5) Awareness of histories of colonial and imperialistic oppression
- 6) Awareness that language is socially created, and thus socially changeable

In this study, aspects 1-3 are used to answer research question one, and aspects 4-6, with some extensions, are used in the analysis for research question two. According to Seltzer (2022), teachers’ development should include three interrelated elements: personal stance, political stance, and pedagogical stance. Personal stance concerns individual teachers’ and student teachers’ reflections on their own language experiences and how these influence their views on pupils’ language use. Political stance concerns reflections on how language and teaching are embedded in structures of power and the teacher’s role in challenging linguistic hierarchies that marginalize students’ language use. Finally, pedagogical stance involves teachers’ reconceptualization of what language is and the purpose of acknowledging and using pupils’ complete linguistic repertoire in education. Seltzer (2023) addresses the complexity and possible distress associated with teachers engaging in CMLA from a decolonial and anti-racist perspective within educational institutions (p. 579). Such a stance

could move beyond awareness towards “activism and advocacy for and with minoritized language users” (Prasad & Bettney, 2023, p. 618; Seltzer, 2023). Accordingly, student teachers should be aware of and challenge the privilege of dominant language speakers and develop an identity as multilingual listeners. From a decolonial perspective, Windle et al. (2023) argue that, in many contexts, students have extensive knowledge and experience of multilingualism, which teachers may lack, and educators should therefore listen more carefully to students and communities. They introduce the notion of reciprocal multilingual awareness as a process situated within a specific time, place, and ideology (Windle et al., 2023; Cummins, 2023). Thus, CMLA needs to be situated in language and ideologies in the local context.

4 Method

This study is part of a larger investigation into multilingualism and linguistic diversity in teacher education programs at three Swedish universities, here referred to as A, B, and C. The study focuses on the teacher education programmes for preschool to year 3 and for years 4-6 (corresponding to primary schooling for pupils aged 6-13). The study adopted an action research design, and the participating teacher educators were interviewed as part of the process. The sample participants were recruited through voluntary participation: teacher educators at the three universities were invited to participate, and 21 agreed to do so. The teacher educators were compensated with time for participating in the project.

In line with our interest in researching the complexities and nuances in teacher educators’ views on multilingualism and subject-specific language demands, the interviews followed the principles of qualitative research interviews (e.g., Holstein & Gubrium, 2012; Kvale & Brinkman, 2014). Teacher educators from a range of subjects including science, social sciences, Swedish as a second language, educational work, English, art, and Swedish were interviewed. All teacher educators were informed about the nature of the study and provided written consent, and all data were handled in accordance with the GDPR and the data protection policies and regulations at the three respective universities.

The interview guide was informed by the CMLA framework and included prompts designed to elicit teacher educators’ awareness of linguistic hierarchies, language as a social construct, and their pedagogical stances toward multilingualism. It covered four main topics: (a) teacher educators’ general views and understanding of what language, linguistic diversity, and multilingualism may be; (b) subject-specific issues regarding language in the teaching; (c) aspects related to linguistic

diversity in the teaching; and (d) student teachers’ knowledge of pupils’ languages. Each theme contained a set of sub-questions that allowed for more in-depth exploration. The interview guide allowed for a semi-structured design, giving a general overview of the interviewees’ experiences related to language, linguistic diversity, and multilingualism in teaching in teacher education programs, as well as allowing each interviewee to express their thoughts. Each author was responsible for a group of participants and conducted all the interviews with them. The interviews varied in length between 21 and 56 minutes (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Interviewed teacher educators

Teacher	Teaching subject	Teacher Education Program
A1	Swedish	P-3, 4-6
A2	Swedish	P-3, 4-6
A3	English	P-3, 4-6
A4	Swedish as L2	P-3, 4-6
B1	Art	P-6
B2	Science	P-6
B3	Science	P-6
B4	Mathematics	P-6
B5	Mathematics	P-6
B6	Social sciences	P-6
B7	Swedish	P-6
B8	Swedish as L2	P-6
B9	Swedish	P-6
C1	Swedish	P-3, 4-6
C2	Swedish as L2	P-3, 4-6
C3	Swedish as L2	P-3, 4-6
C4	Science	P-3, 4-6
C5	English	P-3, 4-6
C6	Educational work	P-3, 4-6
C7	Educational work	P-3
C8	Educational work	P-3

The material used here comes from audio-recorded semi-structured individual interviews with 21 teacher educators. All interviews were conducted in Swedish. We analysed the material using qualitative directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2022) in which the

EDUCARE

approach of CMLA (García, 2017) guided the coding categories and structure. This involved abductive coding containing both deductive elements based on relevant concepts and an inductive process based on recurring patterns that emerged in the material. The following schematic description of the steps of the analytical process (Mayring, 2022, pp. 82, 90) provides an overview of the process, although in practice it was not as linear as the description suggests.

First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim in Swedish. Then, passages that related to the interviewees' understanding of linguistic diversity and multilingualism were identified, both in general and in relation to their respective subjects. Segments unrelated to linguistic diversity or multilingualism were excluded from further analysis. Second, the transcripts were coded using a coding scheme derived from the CMLA framework (García, 2017). The transcribed interviews were read repeatedly, and at each such reading, relevant excerpts were systematically linked to the following analytical categories associated with language, its teaching, and its learning in the framework:

1. Knowledge of (proficiency)
2. Knowledge about (subject-matter)
3. Pedagogical practice
4. Awareness of plurilingualism as a merit for democratic citizenship (the plurilingualism in their midst)
5. Awareness of histories of colonial and imperialistic oppression (the histories of the speakers and their struggles)
6. Awareness that language is socially created, and thus socially changeable (the social construction of the language of school to keep privilege in the hands of a few).

The iterative reading involved alternating between close and distance readings, enabling opportunities to both validate the analysis and discover patterns in and variations between aspects related to linguistic diversity and multilingualism.

Thereafter, anchor examples were identified, i.e., excerpts that illustrated the nature of the concepts. The identification of anchor examples sometimes required returning to earlier coding stages to refine definitions and category boundaries. This meant that definitions and guidelines for coding were gradually clarified during the analytical process. Interview excerpts presented in this article were translated into English by the authors for publication purposes. To preserve meaning

and nuance, translations were discussed among the research team, and particular attention was paid to maintaining the original intent and context of the participants' statements.

Initially, the four researchers analysed part of the interviews individually, before comparing and discussing the analysis together. This cycle was repeated several times. Following the initial analysis, we concluded that García's original framework did not fully capture all aspects of linguistic diversity and multilingualism that we identified in the data. We therefore expanded component 4, plurilingualism as merits for democratic citizenship, to include agency, voice, and multilingualism as resources. We also refined component 6, awareness that languages are socially created, to include awareness of language and multilingualism. In addition, we added a new seventh component: awareness of language as embodied and as a way of being human. The expansion of the framework was necessary to conduct a more nuanced analysis and to account more fully for the characteristics of the material.

These understandings of knowledge were then used to answer the research questions: themes 1-3 to answer RQ1 and themes 4-7 to answer RQ 2.

5 Results

5.1 Teacher Educators' Conceptualizations of Language and Multilingualism in Relation to Their Subject Disciplines

The teacher educators speak about the importance of language in their subjects and their courses, providing examples of how this is dealt with pedagogically in relation to both their student teachers' own learning and their future classroom practice. At the same time, the focus on language proficiency is closely intertwined with subject content and pedagogical approaches. Thus, the content related to themes 1-3 is intertwined with each other in what they say. They also express concern both about the learning of the student teachers and that of their future teachers, both highlighting a positive attitude toward multilingualism and at the same time focusing on proficiency in Swedish.

The teacher educators linked language knowledge – particularly Swedish proficiency – to subject-specific linguistic demands. One social sciences teacher educator (C4) highlights the challenges

EDUCARE

posed by abstract disciplinary language, noting the support needed for students' reading. Mathematics and science teacher educators stress the importance of discipline-specific concepts, arguing that students need to grasp these to "open up their conceptual understanding" (B2). The science teacher educators also stress proficiency in writing lab reports, while the mathematics teacher educators stress the importance of proficiency in representing mathematical concepts logically, algebraically, verbally, and through pictures. Similarly, another science teacher educator (C4) highlights the importance of understanding concepts, emphasizing that students need to be able to choose the correct concepts, which can be a challenge for students who lack vocabulary in the subject.

What I first think about is writing lab manuals. How to describe what to do, that it is crucial to choose exactly the right concepts in the correct order to be able to convey how to do something, then in what order something should be done. But then I think that we try, we want, or I often want to reason with the students, and they may lack the same vocabulary I possess, which can make their descriptions less precise or incomplete when they have to describe something. (C4)

The teacher educator points out that specific subject language is essential to enable participation in reasoning and meaning-making. Language proficiency is also brought up in relation to the definition of multilingualism by three language teacher educators at University A. They underline the close connection between language, teaching content, and learning. One English teacher educator (A3) partly focuses on proficiency in many languages when she articulates her understanding of multilingualism. She refers to multilingualism as a resource and connections between multilingualism, culture, and identity, and describes multilingualism as "an enormous advantage". She also says that "if you master many languages, then perhaps you have an even broader cultural competence as well, so that is an enormous advantage of multilingualism". One of the Swedish teacher educators (A1) discusses whether she herself is a multilingual person when she articulates her understanding of multilingualism. She also says that multilingualism, Swedish as a second language, and linguistic diversity are difficult to grasp.

The teacher educators in Swedish highlight the students' level of proficiency in Swedish and the "correctness" of their language. Other parts of teaching content that the language teacher educators describe are knowledge of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, literature, societies, and cultures in the countries where the English language is used, reading and writing strategies, study techniques, and the difference between everyday language and academic language. For the language teacher educators, articulating subject matter often implies that a metalinguistic perspective overlaps with

a focus on pedagogical practices. This can be seen, for example, when articulating theoretical perspectives on language development. One English teacher educator, for example, addresses the merits of building on previous languages in the development of a new language: “the base is to see languages as an advantage and the more languages the better” (C2). In these examples, the focus is on the perspective that student teachers’ linguistic repertoires are a resource.

The theme of student teachers’ own language development during their studies is brought up by language teachers. The Swedish teacher educator A1 argues that when student teachers have struggled with the Swedish language but subsequently overcome linguistic challenges, this experience can be of use in their future teaching career. Regarding students who struggle with the Swedish language, the teacher educators express different perspectives. A1 focuses on the differences between students who have studied theoretical versus practical programs at secondary school. Another, who also teaches Swedish, instead mentions students who have first languages other than Swedish and who do not have sufficient proficiency in Swedish.

Several other teacher educators also describe how they work to strengthen student teachers’ language skills, especially academic writing. A teacher educator in art (B1) explains that students in their courses are expected to gradually strengthen their academic language skills both orally and in writing to enable them to instruct pupils in the classroom. She also addresses her experience of having a student with limited proficiency in Swedish and how they use English, and to some extent German. Her experience is that these students learn Swedish during the course and develop pedagogical knowledge, despite their limited Swedish skills. Furthermore, one teacher educator of Swedish expresses how she was worried when she had a student who mixed a lot of English into her speech. She stresses the importance of not only noting the mistakes in Swedish but also making sure the student has access to the educational content.

When defining language, several teacher educators mention multimodality and a broadened understanding of text as an important part of the subject language(s). For example, B2 states, “I also think that perhaps diversity of language, that it can be perhaps also spoken, written, imagery also, that it is important specifically in the natural science subjects, that we often work multimodally.” This science teacher further claims that the multimodal content language in science can both support pupils and become an obstacle. A multimodal perspective can also be identified

EDUCARE

in relation to the teacher educators' discussion of pedagogical practices. A teacher educator of Swedish (A1) mentions the importance of teacher educators having an explicit body language in their role as leaders, and that what they say verbally needs to be consistent with their body language.

Concerning multilingualism as a resource, one teacher educator argues that as a teacher educator, it is difficult to have knowledge of student teachers' various languages and language use, that teacher educators do not have the time for that, but that only in a tangible situation may they learn what a certain concept is in other languages. This can then be used as a resource to understand the subject from different perspectives, something that is exemplified by one teacher educator in mathematics (B4) through the example of a triangle. The Swedish synonym for triangle, *trekant*, can be misleading, and then, through a discussion of concepts in other languages known by the student teachers, the diversity may add to the understanding of the concept.

The dual focus on both the learning of student teachers and that of their future pupils sometimes takes the form of speech about how to provide the students with models they can use in their own future teaching. For example, one Swedish teacher educator expresses an understanding of language as a central aspect of learning and therefore integrates this focus on language into her own teaching as a model. Two teacher educators, A1 and A2, who cooperate closely in their teaching, express similar thoughts. According to A2, the Swedish courses for future F-3 and 4-6 teachers at their university are inclusive in the sense that all students should be able to include all pupils in their future teaching. In the same vein, A1 says that students need to be able to ensure that language in texts that are being read is made accessible for the pupils and that they build natural scaffolds in their teaching of writing and reading. She argues that this is important, irrespective of whether there are pupils who have Swedish as L2 in the classroom or not. However, A2 says that they stress that students should "use their future pupils' mother tongues in their teaching", but that this is not something that the students get to practice. Furthermore, other teacher educators mention examples of how they try to give students tools for including students' various languages in their teaching, while several claim that their students complain that they do not learn enough about the teaching of students with first languages other than Swedish.

A teacher educator of English (A3) brings up a tendency in Swedish schools to teach English via Swedish. She underlines the importance of teachers using English as the language of instruction to immerse the pupils in the language (*språkduscha* is the term used in Swedish). She also says that in

her teaching, the students get to work with the European Language Portfolio, which is meant to make pupils aware of aspects such as what languages they have a mastery of, in which contexts they use different languages, and what languages they want to learn. She also states that she has a comparative perspective in her teaching, allowing students to work with digital teaching materials, which helps them compare features such as vocabulary, stress, and intonation between languages.

In summary, the teacher educators express how language has a critical role in their subjects and courses for both their students' learning and their future teaching careers. They discuss how language proficiency in the majority language is intertwined with teaching content and pedagogies, stressing, for example, the need for students to understand specific concepts and develop skills in areas like writing lab reports, argumentative texts, and representing mathematical concepts. Social sciences educators highlight, for example, the challenges of abstract language and understanding specific concepts, while language educators focus on language competence and discuss the importance of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. The teacher educators also discuss the difficulties faced by students with limited proficiency in Swedish and the strategies used to support their language development. Thus, even though teacher educators were explicitly asked about multilingualism and linguistic diversity, their focus was on the students' proficiency in Swedish academic language in general and the language content specific to their subject.

The teacher educators express a perception that multilingualism is both a challenge and an advantage. Some find the concept of multilingualism complex and difficult to define, while others frame it as a significant pedagogical asset that enhances cultural competence and broadens perspectives. Although the teacher educators reported integrating multilingual issues into their teaching, they noted that student teachers often felt insufficiently prepared to address multilingualism in their future teaching.

Overall, the teacher educators address their subject disciplines, and they advocate integrating language development into their own teaching practices as well as into their students' future teaching. In this way, the teacher educators use their own teaching as a model for future teachers, emphasizing the need to support students' language skills, particularly in academic writing, and to view linguistic diversity as a resource for understanding subjects from different perspectives.

However, a tension emerged between teacher educators' positive attitudes towards multilingualism and their focus on Swedish language skills.

5.2 How critical multilingual awareness is made relevant by the teacher educators

In this section, we turn our attention, using García's CMLA framework, to whether and how teacher educators express CMLA during the interviews.

Regarding the *awareness of plurilingualism among teacher educators* that highlights significant merits for fostering democratic citizenship, some of the teacher educators express the need for a compensatory and inclusive approach in education to address the diverse linguistic backgrounds of pupils. They stress the importance of creating an educational setting where all pupils, regardless of their linguistic background, can access and engage with the curriculum. They also bring to the fore the difference in status between different languages, for example, the high status of English, thus expressing a critical perspective on their teaching. This perspective not only supports academic success but also promotes democratic values by ensuring that all pupils are able to participate fully in their education.

One teacher educator (B9) positions herself as an L2 speaker of the majority language, Swedish, bringing into focus the challenges she herself had encountered as a schoolteacher. She shares an episode from her early teaching experience in a Swedish lower secondary school and recalls how a pupil, surprised by her role as a teacher in Swedish, had explained:

'Are you going to be my Swedish teacher?' I said, 'Yes.' While the pupil continued, 'then I'll get MVG [highest grade]!' in front of the class of 30 students. 'Well,' I said, 'why?' 'I know Swedish better than you.' I didn't get angry or sad but said, 'Well, we'll see' (laughter). (B9)

This interaction underscores the challenges and opportunities faced by teachers who position themselves and/or are positioned as L2 speakers when asserting their linguistic competence and authority.

One teacher of Swedish as L2 (A4) addresses the merits of drawing on pupils' linguistic repertoires but also problematizes translanguaging pedagogies. She tells her students that it is necessary to think through what tasks to use and not just to tell the students to use Google Translate. She also addresses the need to situate translanguaging in the Swedish context, where students and teachers often do not have the same languages, so that there may be ten different languages in a group of

students. She argues that, as a teacher, you cannot take it for granted that a pupil's mother tongue is their strongest language, which highlights the nuances and linguistic diversity in classrooms.

A3 argues that she and many other Swedes are monolingual, and she contrasts this to a global dominance of multilingualism: “but from a global perspective the majority are multilingual, which you can perhaps easily forget in a country where many have only mastered one language” (A3). Another teacher educator claimed that many students had more knowledge about and experience of multilingualism than she had:

I think, I think that in general, the students, they come from a school that is very different from the school I went to. Many students come from a school context where linguistic diversity has been something completely different. It has existed throughout their schooling, and it is so obvious to them. (B7)

Here, B7 positions the student teachers as more knowledgeable regarding multilingual educational school contexts than she is, thus creating an opening for a situation where the teacher educator can draw on student teachers' knowledge.

A4 links language to power and agency, suggesting that mastering languages enables individuals to take control of their lives and effect change. She states:

For me, language is really a means to take control of your life, and that is what I feel, or I see. I don't think when I see language, I don't think about any specific language, but more language; if you master languages, and that can be one or many, that doesn't make any difference, you have the opportunity to take control of your life and change your life. So, I associate it very much with agency. (A4)

She also emphasizes the societal aspect of language, viewing it as a collective effort involving various actors, such as society, family, and school. She suggests that teachers should learn a language from their students' repertoires, listing Dari, Mandarin, Persian, Arabic, or a Slavic language as examples, to better understand the challenges of being an L2 learner. This experiential learning could, according to her, foster empathy and improve teaching practices.

Moreover, situations that student teachers encountered during their practicum could, according to teacher educators, become important in raising awareness of prevailing monolingual norms in schools. This awareness also implies a critical perspective on the teaching content, for example, in discussions of the different status of languages. A significant example involved a teacher educator

EDUCARE

(A2) who, during one of her visits to a practicum school, had observed a primary school teacher who had dismissed a recently arrived pupil's participation in class due to their perceived lack of language proficiency. The pupil had been placed at the back of the classroom and given a non-academic task.

I was visiting a student in practicum at a school, and I encountered exactly this: one pupil had recently arrived in the class some weeks ago. When I entered the classroom, the teacher said that this pupil 'had no language', so he wasn't going to be taking part in the lesson taught by the student teacher. Instead, the pupil was going to stay at the back of the classroom with the visiting teacher educator. So, this pupil sat in the back, working on some colouring exercise while the student teacher taught the rest of the class. (A2)

This example highlights a common issue where pupils' linguistic capabilities are underestimated. In contrast, the teacher educator retells another example when a teacher had taken a proactive approach by using digital tools to support a recently arrived pupil, enabling them to participate fully in the lesson. This comparison underscores the varying attitudes and practices among teachers and their significant impact on pupils' self-esteem.

Several teacher educators also emphasize the detrimental effects of monolingual teaching on pupils' democratic participation. When pupils are not given opportunities to use their linguistic repertoires, it can lead to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. A couple of the teacher educators advocate a more inclusive approach that recognizes and utilizes students' (and pupils') plurilingual abilities. This includes encouraging metalinguistic awareness and providing tasks that allow, for example, student teachers to draw on their linguistic resources, thereby fostering a more inclusive and democratic classroom environment.

Others focused more on the importance of giving student teachers, as well as all pupils in school, access to the majority language Swedish, especially academic writing skills, to enable participation in a democratic society. Teacher educators in the subject of Swedish emphasize the democratic imperative of providing students with access to various linguistic registers. They highlight the importance of improving academic writing skills and fostering a democratic connection, enabling students to participate in diverse contexts, express opinions, and influence various settings.

Thus, some of the teacher educators express a consciousness of the critical role of plurilingualism in promoting democratic citizenship. Some of the teacher educators advocate a broader recognition of the importance of language in democracy and participation, emphasizing that linguistic skills are

crucial tools for societal engagement. This awareness is essential to fostering inclusive and democratic educational environments.

Few teacher educators demonstrate an explicit *awareness of histories of colonial and imperialistic oppression* in relation to language learning. Some contrasted the contemporary, multilingual Swedish society and school system with a previous monolingual society, building on a narrative in which Sweden is historically monolingual and does not include the oppression of minorities. However, unlike at Universities B and C, the role of national minorities and their languages was highlighted at University A by two of the teacher educators. A3 refers to giving priority to teaching about this. She describes her own strategy as a former English and social sciences teacher in secondary school, where she integrated these two subjects to allow her time to teach about national minority languages. She sees this as both a question of attitude and of what teachers prioritize. She also mentions the importance of collaboration between language teachers and social sciences teachers to effectively address this subject.

The teacher educators at University A also bring up the subject of national minority languages from a student perspective. One Swedish teacher educator (A2) addresses experiences recounted by one of her students in one of the courses common to all student teachers. In a seminar, a text on language, identity, and learning had been discussed, and the discussions centred on multilingual education and a multilingual norm. One student had then mentioned experiences of not being included in teaching as a pupil and not being able to use his minority language at school. However, expressions of awareness about colonial and imperialistic oppression were rare.

García's CMLA framework (2017) embraces an *understanding of language as socially created and therefore also socially changeable*. While the teacher educators express an understanding that languages are dynamic, including not only named national languages but also gestures, models, and arts, few discuss in more depth how languages are socially created and socially changeable. One teacher educator (B8) describes how, when she introduced students to a dynamic perspective on multilingualism, student teachers transformed and became more aware of why and how pupils' various languages could be a resource in the classroom.

EDUCARE

Moreover, teacher educator A3 highlights how she perceives language as “the foundation of humanity” and argues that “without a language, one would not truly be human.” This underscores the belief that language is intrinsic to one’s identity and that multilingualism broadens this identity. In an interview, she says:

Language is the foundation of humanity. It is how people communicate with each other, conveying messages, expressing emotions, and sharing thoughts. Language can be very factual, but it is often much more than that. Without language, one would not truly be human. It is the foundation of one’s personality and everything one undertakes. Language encompasses both words and how they are spoken, including body language and tone, giving it a very broad meaning. (A3)

When asked about linguistic diversity, the same teacher educator highlights how this involves not just multiple languages but also significant variations within languages and that this linguistic variation thus contributes to a broader identity.

The teacher educators also highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing students’ mother tongues in the classroom. They underline the need for future teachers to have intercultural competence and an understanding of different cultural norms, which can significantly impact communication and learning. According to one of them (A4), this would help student teachers understand how it feels to start from the beginning all over again, and to learn a language where you cannot use the languages you already know because the new language is too different. She says that there is a lot of stress involved in that situation, when you are learning a language not for fun but to be able to “live in this language” and to be able to work and be a part of society in this language.

To summarize, the teacher educators in their discussions highlight connections between language and identity. They emphasize that language is not only a medium for communication but also a crucial element of human identity and agency. The recognition of linguistic diversity and the value of multilingualism are seen as essential to fostering inclusive and effective educational environments.

6 Discussion and conclusions

The objective of this article is to examine how teacher educators at three universities express CMLA in relation to their teaching in various subject disciplines. As highlighted by several scholars (Alim, 2010; García, 2017), CMLA encompasses awareness of social, political, and economic conditions that shape linguistic diversity, as well as a commitment to challenging inequitable language ideologies. Consequently, CMLA is not just about acknowledging linguistic diversity but also involves rethinking perceptions about language(s) in education (García, 2017). As Sweden is a multilingual country, all teachers can expect to encounter pupils with diverse linguistic backgrounds and should be able to support their learning of diverse subjects.

By analysing interviews with teacher educators, we have explored their awareness of critical multilingual aspects of their teaching in their respective subject disciplines. First, it is important to acknowledge that the participating teacher educators in the project may have been more positively disposed towards linguistic diversity. Second, they were explicitly asked about their views on this topic and, therefore, may have been more likely to highlight the role of language when addressing their subjects and courses.

A general awareness of disciplinary language and the interdependence between subject knowledge and language became clear as all the teacher educators highlighted specific linguistic issues in relation to their respective subjects. These results diverge from previous studies (Hermansson et al., 2022), which indicated that linguistic diversity was addressed primarily within language subjects or the Swedish subject (Bylund & Warnby, 2024). In the current study, a few of the interview teacher educators stressed the plurality of language in the form of both linguistic variation and multimodality. Unlike findings in Carlson and Rabo (2008), Carlsson (2009), and Paulsrud and Lundberg (2021), these teacher educators did not simply treat multilingualism as an issue only for students who speak languages other than Swedish at home, but as important knowledge for all student teachers. However, a positive attitude towards multilingualism and inclusive education might not bring any change to the actual teaching or practical training in teacher education (see also Paulsrud & Zilliacus, 2018; Iversen, 2020). Although the questions focused on multilingualism, the importance of skills in academic Swedish among their students was particularly highlighted. Accordingly, the majority language, Swedish, specifically written academic Swedish, is mainly emphasised as something the students must master, and thus as something rather fixed and

EDUCARE

unchangeable. This view stands in contrast to the view on language as “socially created and thus socially changeable” (García 2017, p. 269), which is one of the components of CMLA.

Critical aspects of language awareness were largely implicit with relatively few teacher educators demonstrating explicit political or ideological engagement with language as has been highlighted as necessary for teacher education by, among others, Cinaglia and De Costa (2022), García and Kleyn (2013), Haddix (2008), Li et al. (2021), Rodriguez-Mojica et al. (2019), and Yang and Montgomery (2013). Many framed multilingualism as a resource, but also as a challenge, while political and social awareness of language was less apparent. A few teacher educators positioned the students as more experienced and knowledgeable regarding multilingualism than themselves, and some, according to our analysis, advocated for a reciprocal CMLA in which the student teachers’ linguistic experience enables them to act as co-constructors of knowledge.

A few teacher educators suggested that language and communication are essential to being human and thus related to identity and fundamental values in education and society. Still, the value of multilingualism to inclusion and effective education was only highlighted by some of the language teachers, as was found by Hermansson et al. (2022). In a similar vein, it is striking that explicit awareness about colonial and imperialistic oppression appeared only at one university and only in relation to national minority languages. Unlike other contexts, where a decolonial perspective is more emphasized in education and society (e.g., Shank Lauwo et al., 2022; Van Gorp et al., 2023 & Windle et al., 2023), there is a general lack of expressions of awareness of the colonial history and coloniality in Sweden.

The lived experience of being an L2 speaker and being multilingual in Sweden is becoming important for the development of awareness, both among individual teacher educators and among student teachers. This is something that can be made explicit in teaching practices to raise awareness among all future primary school teachers. CMLA is not just learning about language(s) and linguistic diversity, but also challenging the prevailing monolingual norm. This requires that linguistic diversity is acknowledged as a value both for the individual and for a democratic and just society. The Swedish Education Act (chapter 14§) states that education should teach and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values that constitute the Swedish society. We strongly believe that linguistic diversity is integral to these objectives.

The findings in this study underscore the relevance of CMLA as a transformative framework in teacher education that enables a shift from merely acknowledging linguistic diversity to actively engaging with its pedagogical, political, and personal dimensions. Importantly, the study reveals that multilingualism is not confined to language subjects; rather, many teacher educators perceive it as integral to the core of their disciplines, including science, mathematics, social sciences, and art. This challenges traditional compartmentalized views and opens possibilities for cross-disciplinary language pedagogies.

Despite this recognition, the study also highlights tensions. While multilingualism is often described as a resource, the dominant focus remains on proficiency in academic Swedish, potentially reinforcing monolingual norms. This suggests a need for reconceptualizing language proficiency in teacher education — not as mastery of a fixed standard, but as dynamic, multimodal, and socially situated.

These findings indicate a need to integrate CMLA across all subject areas. This can involve securing institutional support and time for teacher educators, developing modules that address language ideologies and translanguaging beyond language-focused courses, and positioning student teachers as co-constructors of knowledge who build on their multilingual repertoires.

This study contributes to the theoretical development of CMLA by extending García's framework to include an additional dimension that treats language as embodied and as a way of being human. It shows how disciplinary language practices intersect with multilingual awareness and points to the need for subject-specific CMLA pedagogies. The study also underscores the significance of teacher educators' own linguistic identities and experiences in shaping their pedagogical stance.

In considering the results of this study, future research should explore longitudinal development of CMLA across different stages of teacher education as well as compare universities and national contexts to examine how institutional conditions shape multilingual pedagogies.

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