“We live in Sweden;
we use Swedish to understand”

A study on L1 functions and students’ attitudes toward L1 use in a Swedish L2 English learning environment

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Abstract

This study aims to explore Swedish upper secondary students’ attitudes toward first language (L1) use in a second language (L2) English learning environment. In addition, it aims to explore the functions of L1 use. Through a qualitative approach with both observations and interviews, a pattern of L1 use was noticed. The results corroborate prior research on student attitudes and show that students are positive toward L1 use. Swedish students tend to use their L1 through translanguaging and codeswitching as a tool for understanding, and as a way to establish relationships. In other words, L1 use needs to be considered a natural part of their L2 learning environment, even though they also understand the importance of exposure to and use of English in the classroom in order to become proficient in it. The students’ attitudes thus challenge the monolingual approach that is predominantly used in Swedish upper secondary schools today.

Keywords: Sweden, L1 use, L1 functions, English, L2 learning environment, student attitudes, codeswitching, translanguaging, monolingual learning environment, multilingual learning environment, bilingualism
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1. Introduction

The advocacy for maximal exposure to the targeted language in second language acquisition (SLA) has been strong for many years, and a monolingual approach to teaching has been the traditional way to achieve this (Hall & Cook, 2012, p. 271). However, recent studies have shown that a student’s first language (L1) can be used as a linguistic resource to deepen understanding and to create a more efficient teaching environment (Cummins, 2007, p. 233; Macaro, 2005, p. 80).

As a teacher-student, I noticed during my teacher practices how students tend to use Swedish during English class and then checked what the curriculum for English in upper secondary school has to say about L1 use. In Sweden there are three English courses in upper secondary school: English 5, English 6, and English 7. All three courses have a common aim for the subject, in which plurilingualism is mentioned; students are to be given the opportunity to use different languages as resources to improve their English. On the other hand, the curriculum also encourages teachers to teach predominantly in the target language (Skolverket, 2022), which to some extent supports the traditional monolingual, English-only way of teaching.

The mentioning of both a predominant use of English and using languages as resources adds to the idea that the L2 learning environment is undergoing a shift from the monolingual approach to a multilingual approach, which calls for further exploration. Prior research has focused on teachers’ attitudes toward L1 use in an L2 learning environment while students’ attitudes are relatively less explored, which is why this study focuses on students’ perception of L1 use in their English language teaching environment. In addition, there is a focus on the extent and functions of L1 use in the context mentioned. The research questions are:

1. What are the participating students’ attitudes toward L1 use in the L2 learning environment?
2. To what extent and for what functions do the students use their L1 in the L2 environment?
2. Background

This section presents relevant aspects of the Swedish curriculum as well as prior research on attitudes toward L1 use in L2 environments. In addition, research on monolingual teaching, multilingual teaching, codeswitching and translanguaging is presented since these are relevant aspects to consider when discussing L1 functions in L2 English teaching and learning environments.

2.1 Plurilingualism and the Swedish curriculum

The Swedish curriculum for English in upper secondary school states that “teaching should as far as possible be conducted in English” (Skolverket, 2022, par. 3). In addition, it says that students should be given the opportunity to develop plurilingualism and to use other languages as sources that interact with each other (Skolverket, 2022). Although other languages are not prohibited in the L2 English teaching environment, the tradition to predominantly use English is strong in Sweden (Hult, 2017, p. 276). Both English-only and monolingual teaching refer to an approach where avoidance of the students’ L1 is emphasized (Cummins, 2007, p.223).

Prior research by Hult (2012, pp. 239, 252) has established that the Swedish curriculum is undergoing a dynamic process since English is not only seen as a communicative language abroad but also as a discursive language in Sweden. In other words, English is not only taught to enhance students’ abilities to communicate globally, but also within professional environments at home where English is required. Hult (2012) explains how the shifting view of English as a foreign language to English as a second language in the Swedish society is reflected in Swedish educational policy since “English is represented as part and parcel of the Swedish modern life” (p. 239). Hult’s (2012, p. 252) idea of the impact that educational policies have on the English learning environment is a key aspect to consider when exploring further how the monolingual teaching environment is changing, especially since the Swedish curriculum is rather ambiguous when both mentioning plurilingualism and a teaching environment where English should be predominantly used.

2.2 From monolingual to multilingual learning environments

Even though the English education for a long time did not oppose L1 use in the L2 environment, the increasingly popular monolingual approach and the L2 teaching
environment emphasized L2 acquisition through exposure. Consequently, L1 was not commonly used in the L2 learning environment (Hall & Cook, 2012, p. 275). Hall and Cook (2012, p. 272) mention how the monolingual approach is challenged due to globalism and bilingualism, while García (2009) refers to students as “emergent bilinguals” (p. 118).

Bilingualism refers to individuals that speak more than one language (p. 11), while plurilingualism is defined as “the individual’s ability to use several languages to varying degrees and for distinct purposes” (García & Wei, 2014, p. 11). Since English is a mandatory subject in Swedish schools, Swedish students are considered bilinguals (Hult, 2017, p. 266). In regard to bilingual teaching, several researchers have found that students tend to switch to their L1 in their L2 learning environment. The terms translanguaging and codeswitching are therefore relevant and will be explained further.

Translanguaging is a relatively new term, and according to García and Wei (2014, p. 20) scholars define the term differently. The term stems from Cen William’s research on bilingual teaching and was originally used to indicate a switch in languages between different teaching and learning modes (Goodman & Tastanbek (2021, p. 34). Williams states that there is room for translanguaging when two languages are used equally, and that one example of translanguaging is when a student is “reading in one language and writing in the other” (2000, p. 144). In a Swedish classroom, an example of translanguaging is when a student reads in English (L2) and then switches to Swedish (L1) when talking to a peer. García and Wei (2014, p. 21) refer to translanguaging as an intentional language practice where different languages are integrated in a system that allows an individual to switch back and forth between languages.

Codeswitching, on the other hand, is seen as included in translanguaging (García, 2009, p. 45), and is defined as “an individual’s use of two or more varieties in the same speech event or exchange” (Woolard, 2004, p. 73). An example of codeswitching is when a student turns to their L1 when not being able to produce a certain word in their L2 and then switches back to their L2. Although both can be used for pedagogical purposes as well as happen organically (Goodman & Tastanbek, 2021, p. 38), translanguaging in contrast to codeswitching stems from teaching since it “provided students with opportunities to develop their individual bilingual capabilities” (Williams, 2000, p. 139).

When it comes to bilingual communication, translanguaging practices enhance bilingualism since bilingualism enables several linguistic practices to engage with each other, especially since it goes beyond codeswitching (García, 2009, p. 45). The connection translanguaging has to the bilingual environment correlates with research that is suggesting
that students are finding it difficult to switch off their L1 in the L2 environment (Brown et al., 2022, p. 108). The advocacy for a more functional approach where the L1 should be seen as a part of a student’s linguistic knowledge (Macaro, 2005, p. 80; Piccardo, 2013 p. 610) is relevant and calls for an exploration of how the L1 can be used in an L2 learning environment. This is especially important since research also shows that there is a downside with too much L1 use since L2 exposure is beneficial for L2 acquisition (Cook, 2001, p. 409; Kim & Weng, 2022, p. 10). Hence, both L1 use and L2 exposure need to be considered when discussing L2 acquisition.

Another important aspect to consider when discussing monolingual versus multilingual teaching is the fact that research has shown how translanguaging establishes an inclusive learning environment when letting different discursive practices engage with each other (Kim & Weng, 2022, p. 9). After all, the curriculum clearly states that teachers should teach students to “use different strategies to support communication and to solve problems when language skills are inadequate” (Skolverket, 2022, par. 1). Kim and Weng’s (2022, pp. 8-9) research not only showed that translanguaging practices improved students’ participation and communication, but also that translanguaging helped create a learning environment where students’ prior linguistic resources was acknowledged and valued as a linguistic resource. The next section explores prior research on how translanguaging and codeswitching can be used educational environments.

2.3 The functions of translanguaging and codeswitching in L2 education

Research by García and Wei (2014, p. 20) suggests that translanguaging helps students enhance understanding, make meaning and gain knowledge through different languages. Similar results have been found in research on codeswitching (Macaro 2005, p. 67). This would mean that both translanguaging and codeswitching can be useful to enhance students’ linguistic knowledge.

According to Baker (2006, p. 297), translanguaging enables students to interact in both their L1 and their L2, which could prevent students from turning to their L1 only when having interactional troubles. Instead, translanguaging practices help students incorporate their L1 naturally in their L2 communication. This is in line with other research that found increased participation when L1 use was allowed (Kim & Weng, 2022, p. 9; Sobkowiak, 2022, p. 6) and Macaro (2005, p. 74) stresses how not allowing students to use their L1 can lead to communicative breakdown since it restricts their access to prior knowledge.
While Macaro focuses on codeswitching, translinguaging is also described as a strategic tool when having interactional troubles (Turnbull, 2018b, p. 1047). Meyer (2008, p. 148) explains how students’ L1 can be used as a tool for making the classroom a comprehensible space since they can use their L1 for clarification. L1 use has for instance been shown to be used when having difficulties with vocabulary (Copland & Neokleous, 2011, p. 277; Rosales & Gonzales, 2020, p. 6; Turnbull, 2018a, p. 113), as well as during instructions (Wang & Shen, 2023, p. 12). In fact, previous research has established that L1 use can be seen as a pedagogical strategy and as a way of scaffolding students (Kim & Weng, 2022, p. 5) when showing signs of insufficient knowledge.

L1 use as a communicative strategy is an indication of how languages are a part of a student’s cognitive resources. Ellis and Shintani (2014, p. 232) mention how students’ L1 can help them elaborate and organize ideas, while Wei (2016, p. 536) emphasizes on the natural ability of humans to use different sources for different purposes. Wei (2016) refers to the ability as a “translanguaging instinct” (p. 541) and mentions how humans have a natural instinct to use as many resources as possible to convey meaning. For that reason, bilingualism needs to be considered when discussing Swedish L2 English learning contexts.

There is, however, research that points out aspects of L1 use beyond meaning making and comprehension. Sampson (2012) has for instance found that L1 “appears to serve as a socializing function” (p. 300). L1 use for the purpose of building relationships has also been found in other studies (Sobkowiak, 2022, p. 6; Wang & Shen, 2023, p. 11). Other research has shown how students turn to their L1 when having personal, informal conversations (Brown et al., 2022, p. 108; Tsagari & Giannikas, 2020, p. 169). Furthermore, there is research that shows how translanguaging helps students to feel natural and more secure in their identity when using both L1 and L2 (Sobkowiak, 2022, p. 6). The connection between identity and language is thus established, which supports the idea that students’ attitudes towards L1 use in the L2 learning contexts deserves to be investigated.

2.4 Attitudes toward L1 use in an L2 English learning context

There is relatively little research done on attitudes toward L1 use in an L2 environment. Research by Anderson and Lightfoot (2021, p. 1220) showed how teachers have varying attitudes toward L1 use, and although they may see L1 as an aid for students to enhance their learning, their opinions vary on whether L1 is an obstacle to L2 exposure, or if a teacher should make use of the L1 in order to incorporate all linguistic knowledge in the
classroom. Other research shows that a monolingual approach is preferred and that the L1 is mostly used when instructing or discussing administrative issues (Burton & Rajendram, 2019, p.34).

The preference for a monolingual approach is a sign that exposure to L2 is seen as important. Although several studies have found that students are positive towards L1 use as it enhances learning, as well as ensuring understanding of the targeted language (Neokleous, 2017, p. 324; Rosales & Gonzales, 2020, p. 6), some suggest that students connect L1 use with low proficiency (Fang & Liu, 2020, p. 10; Wang & Shen, 2023, p. 13), and several have shown that students are not opposed to a monolingual approach since they understand the importance of L2 exposure (Brown et al., 2022, p. 91; Neokleous, 2017, p. 332; Rosales & Gonzales, 2020, p. 5; Sampson, 2012, p. 301).

Even so, Brown et al. (2022, p. 93), for example, found that students see L1 use as a resource for further development in the L2, especially when discussing a task with a peer. The L1 can function as an aid where aspects such as grammar and vocabulary are involved (Rosales & Gonzales, 2020, p. 3; Tsagari & Giannikas, 2020, p. 158).

In studies on differences between students’ and teachers’ attitudes toward translanguaging, students were found to be more positive towards translanguaging than teachers (Turnbull, 2018a, p. 117). Correlating with attitudes towards L1 use, students’ attitudes toward translanguaging include an emphasis on L1 as a tool for clarification and understanding (Turnbull, 2018a, p. 117; Wang & Shen, 2023, p. 12). However, research by Wang and Shen (2023, p. 12) also illustrate that students have a tendency to switch between languages when being bilingual and consider this as a natural, normal behavior. Previous research has thus shown positive attitudes toward both L1 and L2 use in the L2 learning environments.

3. Method

This section comprises five subsections where 3.1 describes Methodology, 3.2 provides information of the participants in the study, 3.3 describes the data collection procedure, 3.4 describes the analytical procedure, and 3.5 explains ethical concerns when conducting this study.
3.1 Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative approach to collect data from upper secondary English students in one Swedish school. According to Denscombe, a combination of methods can display more accurate and valid results (2009, p. 152), which is why a combination of observations and interviews was applied. The observations made it possible to observe the students’ actual speech acts in their natural learning environment, whereas the interviews made it possible for the students to express their attitudes toward L1 use and how they use their L1 in the L2 environment. In addition, the observations served as a ground for determining which participants to interview since I wanted participants who showed contrasting use of L1.

The focus in the observations was on when the L1 was used, and which function the L1 use had. All observations were conducted before the interviews with the intention of decreasing the risk of students being influenced by the interview questions and therefore acting in a manner that does not represent their natural behavior. The initial intent was to observe four different classes. However, due to the limited timeline and scheduling issues, only three classes were observed in the end.

3.2 Participants

For this study, participants were contacted through personal connections with teachers that I had previously been in contact with.

3.2.1 Participant observations

35 students in total (31 male and 2 female) were observed. The study is limited to upper secondary students and all students were studying vocational programs at the same upper secondary school. Classes A and B were studying the same vocational program, while Class C was studying a different vocational program.

During the observations, Class A had 12 students present, and Class B had 17 students present. All the students in these two classes were in their last year of their program, were 18 years old or older, and were taking the course English 6. The two classes had different English teachers who also were their Swedish teachers. The students had the same teachers throughout upper secondary school although the two classes sometimes were mixed. Hence, all students were familiar with peers from both classes, as well as with both teachers. All students have Swedish as their L1.
Class C had 14 students present during the observation. However, since the students were under 18, parental consent was needed to participate in the study. Due to missing consent forms, only 6 students were observed. The students were in their second year in a vocational program and have had the same English teacher throughout their English classes in upper secondary school. The students were taking English 5, and all students have Swedish as their L1.

3.2.2 Participants interviews

8 students in total were interviewed (3 students from Class A, 2 students from Class B, and 3 students from Class C).

3.3 Data collection procedure

To collect data, both observations and interviews were conducted. Each method is presented in its own subsection below.

3.3.1 Observations

Three systematic observations were conducted, and an observation checklist (Appendix 1) was used. According to Denscombe (2009, p. 275), an observation checklist minimizes the risk of the observer’s subjective perception. Therefore, the checklist also had predetermined focus areas which were when L1 was used, and which function the L1 use had. I as the observer was in one of the front corners of the classroom and did not interfere with the discussions in class.

The observed lesson with Class A lasted for 75 minutes. At the time of the observation the students were both reading and writing as they were preparing for a debate. The teacher started the lesson with a quick recap on what they were doing, and the students started to work on their debate-task immediately after the teacher finished with the recap.

The lesson that was observed with Class B lasted for 75 minutes, too. At the time of the observations, the students were reading about the subject for a debate and writing their manuscripts for the debate. The teacher started the lesson with a short clip that was a part of the material for the debate. Shortly after, the students started writing their manuscripts for the debate.

The observed lesson with Class C also lasted for 75 minutes. The lesson started with the teacher handing out the lesson material that the students had previously worked with. In
this class students were writing an essay and the material that was handed out was notes that the students had made in previous classes regarding the topic of the essay.

3.3.2 Interviews

According to Denscombe (2009, p. 234), semi-structured interviews allow the participants to elaborate although the questions are predetermined. A semi-structured interview therefore allows the interviewer to collect data that is representative of the respondents’ personal opinions (Denscombe, 2009, p. 235). Five semi-structured interviews with predetermined questions (Appendix 2) were conducted. To get as extensive data as possible, the students chose whether the interviews were to be conducted in focus groups or individually, as well as in Swedish or in English. All students chose to do the interviews in Swedish, and six students chose to do the interviews in pairs of two, while two students chose to do the interviews individually. The risk of students affecting each other when answering in group interviews was taken into consideration but the fact that some of the students were more comfortable being interviewed with a peer was considered as more important. The students were instructed before the interview to avoid affecting each other and to share their personal opinions. In addition, all students were asked to re-read the letter of intent before starting the interviews. All interviews were conducted in a quiet, secluded workspace where only the interviewer and the participants were present. The interviews were recorded on a mobile phone, transcribed in Swedish and then translated to English. Since the interviews allowed the students to elaborate on their answers, the length of the interviews differ. The shortest interview lasted for 7 minutes, and the longest interview lasted for 17 minutes.

3.4 Analytical procedure

An observation-checklist (Appendix 1) was used when conducting the observations and a summary of the observations was done to see if there was a pattern in the data. The data from the observations was summarized before the interviews and the predetermined focus areas showed a pattern of when and for which functions L1 was used. The results were taken into consideration when formulating the interview questions. A thematic analysis inspired by Denscombe (2009, p. 324) was conducted on the translations of the transcribed interviews. Re-occurring themes were marked by color and were analyzed and compared in order to see a pattern. Initially, seven color coded themes were detected in the data: ‘talking with friends’, ‘the use of Swedish when having trouble understanding’, ‘the usage of English’, ‘insufficient
knowledge’, ‘the use of Swedish to understand’, ‘unconsciously use of Swedish’, and ‘choice of language depending on situation’. The seven themes were analyzed further, and four main themes emerged: ‘L1 as an aid’, ‘L1 for solidarity and as a part of a student’s identity’, ‘L1 and L2 transition’, and ‘L2 exposure’. A comparison of the observations and the interviews was made to increase the validity of the study (Denscombe, 2009, p. 378) and to see if the data showed similar patterns, which turned out to be the case. The quotes presented in the result section are taken from the translated transcriptions and any adoptions only regard correction of grammatical errors, not the content.

3.5 Ethics

Guidelines for good research ethics provided by the Swedish Research Council (2017) were followed in this study. All participants were handed a letter of intent (Appendix 3) where the aims of the study were stated. The participants were informed that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and could be revoked at any time during observations or during the observations or interviews. Students under the age of 18 were given the same letter of intent but were instructed to share the letter with a legal guardian. Attached with the letter was a consent form (Appendix 4) for a legal guardian to sign. No name or other personal information was given to the researcher by the participants, and the participants are not traceable in the report.

4. Results

This section is divided into two subsections: 4.1 Observations, and 4.2 Interviews. Words in italics are translations into English (for transparency) but were uttered in Swedish by the students.

4.1 Observations

This section presents the data from the observations of classes A, B and C. As mentioned in 3.3.1, Class A and B were preparing for a debate and were studying the class material as well as writing their manuscripts. Students in class C were writing a descriptive essay.
4.1.1 Class A

Apart from repetition of vocabulary, when asking for help from the teacher, and when reading out loud in English from the material, most students in Class A used predominantly Swedish when communicating. This occurred both when communicating with the teacher or about the task with a peer. All private conversations were conducted in Swedish. In contrast to the students, the teacher spoke almost exclusively English, apart from two occasions when using Swedish to explain the words “Red Riding Hood” and “missionary militia”. However, a few students combined Swedish and English. The following utterances are from three different students, and were addressed to the teacher:

S1: Ska jag just pick one? [Should I just pick one?]

S2: Second amendment är outdated eller hur? [Second amendment is outdated, right?]

S3: Second amendment är gammalt eller hur? [Second amendment is old, right?]

There were, however, noticeable differences in how the students used both Swedish and English. While students 1 and 2 combined the two languages effortlessly, student 3 used predominantly Swedish apart from two words. In fact, students 1 and 2 combined Swedish and English to a bigger extent and spoke English more extensively in general during the lesson than the student who used less English when discussing the second amendment. Students 1 and 2 sat next to each other and read from the text out loud, and they were also two of the few students that used English when speaking to the teacher. Similar to the other students, all three students spoke Swedish when talking with a peer.

4.1.2 Class B

In Class B, both Swedish and English were used. Although the teacher spoke English throughout the lesson, several students spoke Swedish almost exclusively. Students that spoke Swedish did however use English when reading or when having interactional troubles:

S4: Vad är min standpoint? Oh, min ståndpunkt. [What is my standpoint? Oh, my standpoint]
Other students spoke predominantly English apart from a few occasions of switching to L1:

S5: Men då, you have to look up facts.
[But then, you have to look up facts].

The students that spoke mostly English spoke English to the teacher although the private interaction between students was altogether in Swedish. A common denominator was that the task was always read out loud in English, but the students switched to Swedish when discussing it with a peer.

4.1.3 Class C

Students in Class C sat spread out in the room and used both Swedish and English, except for private discussions, which were conducted in Swedish. The teacher spoke English during the lesson and explained in English when students did not understand. On one occasion, the teacher explained how to write the assignment several times to a student. When the student still had trouble understanding, the teacher asked the student to use Swedish when checking comprehension:

T: Ok, one more time. Introduction, what is this in Swedish?
S6: Introduktion [Introduction]
T: Yes. And this? Body paragraph?
S6: Texten, innehållet [the text, the content]
T: Yes. And conclusion?
S6: Slutsats [Conclusion]
T: Yes. Now you can start writing.
S6: Ok.

Student 6 spoke Swedish the whole lesson except when reading out loud in English. Another student who spoke mostly English, used Swedish to clarify the meaning of the word conclusion:

S7: What is conclusion in English? Sammanfattning?
[What is conclusion in English? Summary?]
T: Slutsats [Conclusion]
S7: Ok, slutsats [Ok, conclusion]

Although English was predominantly used during the lesson apart from one student who exclusively used Swedish, several students used Swedish when having interactional troubles:

S8: I don’t have my key to the skåp so I can’t get in.
[I don’t have my key to the locker so I can’t get in]

S9: Do you need to stycka upp the text? What is it called? Divide the text?
[Do you need to paragraph the text) What is it called? Divide the text?]

Another pattern that was noticeable was how the students spoke Swedish when it concerned instructions or practical aspects of the task:

S7: Jag kan inte komma in i Exam. Nu går det igen, jag kan skriva nu. I’ve written that (…)
[I can’t access Exam. Now it works again, I can write now. I’ve written that (…)].

S10: Kan man skriva såhär att: (reading out loud in English) Is that ok?
[Can you write that (reading out loud in English) Is that ok?]

The students spoke mostly English during the lesson apart from when having private conversations with a peer, when asking about instructions, or when having technical difficulties with the platform they were using for writing their essays.

4.2 Interviews

This section presents data from the interviews conducted with students from Class A, B and C. The interviews were analyzed thematically, and four themes will be presented. No indication is provided as to which class a certain quote came from. Similar answers were given during the interviews, which means that one answer can be representative of several students.
4.2.1 L1 as an aid

One of the most common answers for L1 function was that L1 is used when there is insufficient knowledge. Several students mentioned how L1 is used when they have trouble understanding a certain word or trouble communicating:

-But if you need help with something you don’t understand in English, then it can be useful to use Swedish.

-Yes, but if you don’t know a word, then you say it in Swedish.

With regard to teachers using L1, students’ perceptions are that the teachers are reluctant to use L1 and only do so as a last resort:

-It goes like this, first she really tries to speak in English, and then clarify it in English, sort of make it easier so that you understand. If it’s the case that I still don’t understand, then she’s talking and saying it in Swedish.

Moreover, the perception is that teachers are reluctant to speak L1 to the whole class. Instead, L1 is used in private when students are having trouble understanding. All participants mentioned a switch to L1 when having trouble understanding:

-The home language you have, or the language you understand can provide an explanation for the word you are looking for.

-We use Swedish to understand more because it is what we have learned since we were children.

-It is both. Both Swedish and English, but Swedish is more like an aid. It’s more like having a calculator in math lessons. Not that it is instead of English. It will be more of a help.

Several students predominantly used L1 during instructions and a common pattern was to ask questions in L1 and receive an answer in L2:
- It allows me to understand what it is I’m going to do in English.

- I ask the question in Swedish and I’m sure that I’ll get an answer in English, but that I can usually understand.

When having trouble understanding, students tended to use their L1 since they felt more comfortable. This was especially mentioned when discussing the efficiency of using Swedish when helping each other during tasks.

4.2.2 L1 for solidarity and as a part of a student’s identity

The tendency of switching to L1 when discussing with a peer was a pattern noticed by the students:

- I would say in comfort zones, such as group rooms, a lot of Swedish is used.

- Or maybe it’s when you talk to peers that you use Swedish.

- But yes, when you talk about other things than the school assignment itself.

Another aspect of solidarity that was mentioned is the fact that L1 can be used to create an inclusive environment. Several students connected L1 use to the students’ different proficiency levels:

- I think it is right to be able to speak Swedish. Because those who have difficulty with it should still be able to keep up and develop, even if they are not that proficient. So, then it would have been wrong if they had only spoken English.

The matter of the L2 environment as an artificial situation was also something that was mentioned by several students. L1 use was seen to be the natural way to communicate, especially since the students spoke Swedish with the teacher on other occasions. Students found it difficult to feel authentic when using L2 in an artificial situation compared to when L2 use was needed for the respondent to understand or when being graded on their L2 use.
Turning to their L1 by mere habit was mentioned several times, and that English is considered a second language was emphasized:

- There is a difference if you read it to have it as a second first language or what to say. But now I read it more like a second language to keep in the back of my mind. And then it feels ok that you can mix it with the main language.

In addition, the connection between L1 use and ethnicity was made by several students:

- We live in Sweden, so it is natural that you speak Swedish. … It’s what you get the most comfortable with, I guess. It’s just because it’s my home language. So that’s what I’m used to.

Students compared their L2 use in the English learning environment to L2 use in other contexts when communicating with people with other first languages than their own.

### 4.2.3 L1 and L2 transition

Although the students were not introduced to the term *translanguaging*, several students commented on switching between English and Swedish effortlessly during class:

- If I talk to the teacher, I usually try to speak some English (…), but if I’m talking to the friend next to me, then it’s Swedish.

- I think Swedish helps. Then I would say that it probably helps more subconsciously (…) it feels more like it happens automatically. But yes, it helps.

English was referred to as a second language and that it is constantly present in the student’s mind. According to the students, the constant presence made it easier to switch between L1 and L2, and the mixing of the two languages was mentioned by several students. In addition, how translation from L2 to L1 happens automatically when thinking although responses are given in L2 was mentioned. Similar statements were given when discussing writing in L2 since students felt that they alternate without effort between languages when
they work on an assignment. The natural transition between L2 and L1 was mentioned by several students:

-When we sit and work, we end up speaking Swedish. We don’t speak English just because we have an English lesson. But around the task itself or whatever it is, there is a lot of English. Then it’s not that much Swedish, I wouldn’t say. Then it’s mostly English.

Other statements suggest that L1 is mostly used out of habit and not considered as an escape from using L2 since all students stated that they are comfortable with speaking English.

4.2.4 L2 exposure

Most students that were interviewed mentioned L2 exposure as imperative when discussing L1 use in the classroom. Although Swedish was found to be helpful when trying to understand, students still felt that they had to speak English in order to be proficient. Several students suggested that there should be a limit to how much L1 they were allowed to speak in the L2 environment, and one student felt guilt when speaking L1 extensively. In addition, the connection between L2 exposure and repetition was made when discussing English proficiency.

Comments about lack of proficiency were connected to the use of L1 out of habit and students felt positive towards being encouraged to speak their L2:

-Say you are not very proficient in English, and you use a lot of Swedish, so you will not learn as much then. If you are forced to perhaps use English in a different way (…) you have to use English and then you also learn, otherwise you will likely get into this comfort zone and just kind of withdraw and become like, I can use Swedish. Then it doesn’t matter.

A willingness to communicate in L2 could be noted after all, since students reported trying to communicate in English before switching to Swedish. The connection between L2 exposure and proficiency was made by several students.
5. Discussion

This section is divided into two subsections. In 5.1, the results of the study are discussed, and in 5.2, its limitations.

5.1 Discussion of results

The results of this study corroborate the findings of prior research (Fang & Liu, 2020, p. 10; Rosales and Gonzales, 2020, p. 5; Wang & Shen, 2023, p. 13) which states that there is some disagreement as to how much L1 should be used in the L2 English learning context. Even though the students find their L1 useful, they still recognize the importance of L2 exposure to become proficient in that language too. This emerges in both the interviews and in the observations when students show an effort to use English when approaching a teacher or when discussing a task. However, like some other studies (Neokleous, 2017, p. 324; Rosales & Gonzales, 2020, p. 6), this study demonstrates a favorable attitude towards L1 use. In the light of prior research as well as the results of this study, it is evident that several factors need to be considered when discussing L1 use in the Swedish L2 learning environment.

Firstly, bilingualism needs to be considered since the participants not only refer to English as a second language, but also state that they switch effortlessly between Swedish and English. Therefore, there is an indication that the participants concur with Hult’s (2017, p. 266) idea on Swedish students as bilinguals. Since the students do not express any negativity toward L1 use, this study also corroborates prior studies on how bilingualism reduces L1 stigma in the L2 teaching environment (Hall & Cook, 2012, p. 278). The fact that the teachers attempt to apply a predominantly monolingual approach, which is encouraged by the Swedish curriculum (Skolverket, 2022), did not seem to bother the students, as they did not express a need for the teacher to use L1 unless necessary. This implies that the students in this study use different linguistic resources in the L2 English learning environment.

In accordance with Sobkowiak’s (2022, p. 6), the present study has shown a connection between translanguaging, bilingualism, and the natural choice of L1 use. As shown in the interviews, students state that they consider it natural to use both Swedish (L1) and English (L2). Wei’s (2016) idea of a “translanguaging instinct” (541) is therefore relevant in this study. Even though several students connect the Swedish language to their ethnicity
and consider L1 use natural in the Swedish L2 learning environment, some statements also show that they are equally comfortable with the switch to L2 when required. In line with Wang and Shen’s study (2023, p. 12), the results of the present study thus seem to indicate a connection between L1 use and bilingualism. The idea that students in this study consider themselves bilingual is strengthened by the fact that several students refer to the L2 learning environment as an artificial situation and that it is more natural to speak their L1 in class and their L2 when the recipient does not speak the same language. The switch between L1 and L2 can be seen as the students’ way of moving between different linguistic codes (Wei, 2016, p. 537).

Secondly, the difference in how students switch between L1 and L2 needs to be discussed. A notable feature in this study is that students tend to use both codeswitching and translanguaging. The interviews show that all participants use translanguaging since there are statements to the effect that they for example use their L1 when having private conversations with a peer and their L2 when talking with the teacher about the task. The observations confirm that students use translanguaging, since all the observations showed how students read in English and then spoke Swedish when discussing the task with a peer. Another example of translanguaging is when students in Class C used their L1 when discussing the instructions of the task and L2 when continuing the discussion with the teacher. The change of language between modes is an example of how Williams (2000, p. 144) describes the action of translanguaging. It is also a sign of translanguaging if considering García and Wei’s (2014, p. 21) explanation that translanguaging enables students to switch back and forth between different languages.

Codeswitching is also something that is mentioned in the interviews by all students. All students state that they turn to their L1 when having insufficient knowledge and this is also something that is observed. An example is when Student 8 in Class C uses the Swedish word for locker when having trouble to finding the right word. Since the student switches to L1 within the sentence, the student seems to use codeswitching rather than translanguaging, even though the terms are somewhat difficult to separate. There are thus similarities with prior research (Copland & Neokleous; Rosales & Gonzales, 2020; Turnbull, 2018a, 2011; Wang & Shen, 2023) since the students found L1 helpful when having trouble with vocabulary or understanding instructions. Regardless of whether they were speaking predominantly L1, like Student 3 in Class A or predominantly L2, like Student 5 in Class B, the switch between L1 and L2 is an instance of codeswitching, and the students seem to engage in in instinctively.
Thirdly, the functions of L1 use need to be discussed. In accordance with prior studies (Sampson 2012; Sobkowiak, 2022; Wang & Shen, 2023), a pattern of using L1 for solidarity is found. The observations as well as statements in the interviews show how L1 is used for establishing relationships, since L1 is used in private conversations, which was both observed and mentioned by students in the interviews as something natural and normal. Statements that explain how the switch between L1 and L2 happens subconsciously, support the idea that a student’s L1 should be seen as a part of different linguistic competences (Wei, 2016, p. 537) and that the students have different functions for their L1 and L2. Since L1 was mostly used when having private conversations, there is an indication that L1 is used for establishing solidarity in the classroom.

As pointed out in previous studies (Sobkowiak, 2022, p. 6; King & Weng, 2022, p. 9), L1 use is also connected to an inclusive learning environment. Several students explain how L1 use allows all students to participate since they have different levels of proficiency in their L2. Since students explain how a student’s L1 can prevent communicative breakdown (Macaro, 2007, p. 74), this study supports the idea that L1 should be seen as a linguistic resource.

Students turning to their L1 when having trouble finding the right word is a sigh that a student’s L1 can be used as a communicative strategy (Macaro, 2005, p. 64; Sampson, 2012, p. 296). Although students explain how English is always in the back of their minds, they seem to purposely use Swedish. Prior knowledge is thus in focus, which can be connected to prior research on L1 for the purpose of scaffolding (Kim & Weng, 2022, p. 5; Meyer, 2008, p. 158). Students’ tendency to codeswitch when having insufficient knowledge, or their tendency to use translanguaging during instructions, could be seen as a way to use L1 for scaffolding. Both are examples of purposely using L1, which means that both codeswitching and translanguaging can be used as a communicative strategy (Macaro, 2005, p. 64; Sampson, 2012, p. 296).

As can be seen in this study, students use their L1 for different purposes. The results support the hypothesis that L1 not only should be seen as an aid, but also as a part of a student’s bilingual linguistic repertoire. However, since students not only connect L1 use to insufficient knowledge but also to identity, it remains unclear if students use L1 more extensively due to proficiency level, or out of mere habit as a native speaker. That students turn to their L1 when discussing with peers, when discussing extracurricular activities or when having communication troubles, is a strong indicator of students having different ways and preferences regarding L1 use (García, 2009, p. 48). Signs of translanguaging and
statements confirming that students feel comfortable turning to their L2 when needed, show that students also have preferences for when to use their L2. In line with prior studies (Brown et al., 2022, p. 112; Sampson, 2012, p. 312; Tsagari & Giannikas, 2020, p. 175; Wang & Shen, 2023, p. 15), the present study therefore connects L1 use to a student’s bilingual linguistic repertoire. In addition, this study corroborates prior research (Neokleous, 2017, p. 324; Rosales & Gonzales, 2020, p. 6) and demonstrates a favorable attitude towards L1 use among students.

5.2 Limitations

There are limitations to consider that impact the reliability and validity of the study. A more reliable result could have been presented with a quantitative approach since it could have been representative of more students. However, I chose to proceed with a qualitative approach since I considered the observations to be an opportunity to observe the students in their authentic learning environment. If this study was only based on a quantitative approach with a focus on frequency of L1 use or a questionnaire about attitudes towards L1 use, it would have been difficult to compare the answers to the students’ actual speech acts.

It should also be considered how I as an observer may have affected the learning environment and thus the validity of the data. I cannot disregard the effect my presence might have had on the students’ speech acts. In addition, I need to consider whether students felt comfortable enough to answer my questions during the interviews truthfully and without feeling influenced by me as the interviewer or by peer’ impact.

In regard to the interview questions, I should have incorporated questions regarding students’ view on themselves as bilinguals since it would have given me more time to elaborate on L1 use and the connection to bilingualism.

A factor this study did not take into consideration but that could have affected the outcome, is how students influence each other. As noted in the results, the extent of L2 use differed between the classes and is thus one factor that could affect the students’ attitudes toward L1 use. It could have been more beneficial with several studies of each class to collect more detailed data, especially since the sessions were not recorded.
6. Conclusion

If the participants are considered as representative of the general student population, Swedish students have a positive attitude toward L1 use and consider L1 use to be an effective aid in L2 acquisition. However, the findings in this study also shed new light on how a student’s L1 is a part of a student’s identity. So, the students’ L1 is naturally used in the L2 learning environment for different purposes. However, the multilingual learning environment needs to be explored further in order to see how the bilingual students’ proficiency is affected by L1 use. This study shows how students hesitate as to how much L1 should be used when considering L2 exposure as an important aspect of L2 development. The focus should therefore be on how students’ linguistic resources can be used in the most effective manner in the L2 learning environment if the goal is to educate proficient bilingual students.
References


# Appendix 1- Observation checklist

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<th>When?</th>
<th>Notes:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student initiation: S</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher initiation: T</td>
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| Instructions                  |        |
| Whole-class interaction       |        |
| Pair-work                     |        |
| Interactional troubles        |        |
| Clarification                 |        |
| Comprehension                 |        |
| Response                      |        |
| Repetition                    |        |

**Notes:**

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<th>How?</th>
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<td>L1 use only</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code-switching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Translanguaging</td>
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<tr>
<td>L2 use only</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher initiation</td>
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<td>Student initiation</td>
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**Notes:**
Appendix 2- Interview questions

1. Is Swedish your first language?
2. How often do you use English?
3. What influences your English the most?
4. Are you comfortable with speaking English?
5. Do you use Swedish during English class?
6. How often do you use Swedish in English class?
7. Why do you use Swedish in English class? For which purpose?
8. Do you think Swedish helps you in English class?
9. Are there any disadvantages with using Swedish in English class?
10. Does your teacher use Swedish during English class?
11. When do the teacher use Swedish during English class?
12. Do you feel that using Swedish is ok in English class?
13. Do you have anything to add?

Extra question: Could you see a pattern when Swedish is used in class?
Appendix 3- Letter of intent

Hi,

I’m in my last year in the Teachers program and I’m currently doing my degree project. The aim is to explore students’ attitudes on using Swedish during English class and how Swedish is used.

I will observe your classroom discussions and interview some of the students in your class. Hopefully you want to participate. It is voluntary to participate, and all the participants will be anonymous. Nothing in the report will reveal who you are, and you cannot in any way be identified in the report. I will analyze your answers and then connect them to prior research that has been done on the subject. Only my supervisor, my examiner and I will be able to see the collected materials and it will be safely stored so no one can have access to it.

Your participation is much appreciated and makes a difference in this degree project. Don’t hesitate to reach out to me or my supervisor if you have any questions.

Thank you for your participation,

Best,
Johanna Pettersson xxx@student.mdu.se
Supervisor: Duygu Sert xxx@mdu.se
Appendix 4- Consent form

Samtycke (Consent)

I have been informed in writing of the current study and had the opportunity to read through the information and had the opportunity to ask questions.

By my signature, I agree that my child is allowed to participate in the study.

I am aware that participation is voluntary, and that the participation can be cancelled at any time and without giving any reason.

____________________________ ____________

Legal guardian signature Date

____________________________