

Quality enhancement in language studies in Sweden

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The linguistic situation of Sweden

Sweden has about 9 Million inhabitants. More than a tenth of these are estimated to be of non-Swedish origin and a major portion of these are speakers of other languages than Swedish. There are almost 200 different languages spoken in the country. This situation is due to the vast immigration to the country of people entering the Swedish labour market from the 1950s onwards. The peak in the number of immigrants was achieved in 1960-70, when more than 50% of the immigrants were from Finland. Since the end of the 1970s the immigration has diminished to a considerable extent, and the nature of immigration has changed from labour market immigration to refugee immigration.

Sweden has no official language according to the Swedish law, but last year the Swedish government formed a state committee to investigate the situation of the Swedish language in the European perspective and especially in regard to the steadily growing use of English and general English impact. This committee presented its report to the government in March 2002. The committee proposed Swedish to be declared the official, national language of the country, and the founding of a Swedish language council with representatives of the language board for Swedish but also for the new official minority languages (see below).

In the 1970s Sweden was, in competition with Australia, regarded the most progressive country of the world with regard to positive measures taken in favour of the immigrants, not least their school education, also taking care of their mother tongues. One example of this was the so called home language reform of 1976, according to which all immigrant children in the elementary school were given the right to at least two hours of training in their mother tongue along with special support in Swedish. For children belonging to larger immigrant groups (e.g. the Finnish, Danish, German, Norwegian, Turkish, and those from former Yugoslavia), bilingual school education was organized within the public school.

The situation has changed drastically during the last two decades, in directions which are by many people involved in work or research on immigration interpreted as negative. According to these interpretations not only are the possibilities of refugees to get asylum in the country much more restricted now than they used to be 10-15 years ago¹, but also the school policies have changed. This last-mentioned circumstance partly depends on diminishing resources due to periods of economic depression, partly to attitudinal unwillingness among local authorities to implement decisions taken by the government in favour of a multilingual and multicultural Swedish society.

However, there are some signs, which are to be considered as positive, in favour of multiculturalism and multilingualism. One is the possibility for immigrant groups, as for many other kinds of minorities in the country (e.g. religious) to found own schools, called "free schools". This has had the consequence that some linguistic minorities have started own bilingual schools for children belonging to or originating from an immigrant group. Most of these schools (about 10) are Finnish/Swedish bilingual schools.

The other main positive measure is the new law concerning regional and linguistic minorities in Sweden. The Swedish government was for a long time very reluctant to demands of ratifying the European charter of regional or minority languages and the framework convention for protection of national minorities. When Sweden entered the European Union the attitudes in regard to the charter and the convention have changed and in December 1999 the Swedish parliament decided Sweden should sign and ratify the charter and the convention. The law came into force in April 2000, giving the Sweden Finns, the Jews, the Romes, the Sámi people and the Tornedalians in northern Sweden special linguistic and cultural rights. The Finnish language, Jiddisch, Romani chib, Sámi and Meänkieli (Tornedal Finnish) were declared official minority languages of the country.

Primary and secondary education

Coming to the university Swedish students have all studied English for several years, starting usually from the 3rd or 4th grade in elementary school. English is the first foreign language taught at school, compulsory for all children, regardless of other choices of subjects. Earlier German and French were the only languages possible to choose as a

¹ So even more after the introduction of the Schengen treaty.

second foreign language in the three last grades of the 9-year elementary school. German was earlier the most popular language, but since 10-15 years French is the most popular one of these two. Nowadays it is, however, possible to choose other languages, as well, outside the bilingual classes and free schools, in stead of German or French, e.g. Finnish, Russian and Spanish, which is a language rapidly growing in popularity in Sweden. The content of the language programs of each school depends, naturally, on the possibility to organize instruction (the availability of teachers, etc.).

The same is the case at the high school level. English is one of the so called kernal subjects, the other ones being Swedish and Mathematics, which means that they are obligatory at all levels and in all programs offered at the high school. Until this year the requirements for entering university studies has been the mark "approved" in all the kernal subjects. This will, however, be changed from the next year on: only 90% of the marks achieved in high school are required to be at least "approved". This may indirectly affect the knowledge of English and what is, in fact, possible to require of the students with regard to knowledge of English and English speaking skills when entering the university, because it will formally be possible to get admission to university studies without being approved in English. This worries not least the linguistic faculties and departments of the universities and the university colleges, among others because textbooks in English are frequently used in practically all subjects taught at the universities. Some faculties plan to get round the risk of getting students without sufficient knowledge of English by introducing a special requirement with regard to English.

In high school studies with English as the language of instruction are not that frequent in Sweden as they seem to be in some other European countries but have been introduced to a higher extent during the last years. Another trend has been, at least in bigger cities, to start educational programs called e.g. *Classe française* or *Deutsche Klasse*, which are normally organized with Swedish as the main language of instruction but with a bigger amount of French or German studies than in normal classes. These programs also have fairly extensive exchange programs for visiting school classes in French- or German-speaking countries, with whom they are in touch during all the three years of studies in various ways (as via the internet). As these classes, moreover, have been classes in natural sciences, another favourable consequence has been noticed, with regard to gender equality in choosing natural science programs in Sweden. These classes are chosen almost exclusively by female high school students.

A trend that has been observed during the last years, but which may be temporary, is a tendency among ambitious pupils in high school, aiming at high status university studies with high requirements for entrance, consciously drop the other foreign languages from their subject choices, because they regard it more laborious to get high marks in languages than in other subjects. This is possible, because all subjects are evaluated equal, irrespective of what their content is or of what studies you are going to pursue. Changes of the system have been discussed.

Higher education

Most of the 12 universities and 35 University Colleges (Swed. *Högskola*) in Sweden are state-owned. There are two exceptions: the Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg (Swed. *Göteborg*) and the University College of Jönköping (both in Western Sweden) are independent foundations. All universities are to some extent urged to find external financing, especially for research, also for courses, tailored, e.g., for specific purposes, ordered by a company. This last-mentioned activity is often criticized by the "regular" students. Externally financed research is also often debated.

Some of the universities are multifaculty institutions, the most extreme examples of which are the two oldest universities in Sweden, Uppsala University (founded 1477) and Lund University (1666). Stockholm University is a four-faculty institution (the Humanities, Law, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences), forming the so called Stockholm Academic Forum together with the Karolinska institutet (Medicine), The Royal Technical High School and the Stockholm School of Economics. The universities of Göteborg, Linköping and Umeå are all to a high degree multifaculty institutions, the newest universities, Luleå Technical University and the universities of Karlstad, Växjö and Örebro to a lesser extent. The three last-mentioned universities were accepted as full universities as late as in the year 2000. Luleå Technical University applied for the name Luleå University, but was considered to have to little of humanities and social sciences and relatively seen as too heavily profiled on technical studies.

One basic (or the basic) requirement for being accepted by the state as a (full) university is that the institution in question has a postgraduate program of a certain quality and extent. The University Colleges are often very specifically profiled and are not allowed to organize their own postgraduate programs. The students willing to continue their studies have to be enrolled as postgraduates at a full university. The teachers at the newer universities and the university colleges are often recruited from the full universities and they may of course

continue their own research (although their teaching load is very high). Good research done at the schools may make way for the acceptance to start postgraduate education in a specific subject and in the long run also for the acceptance as a university, as was the case in Karlstad, Växjö and Örebro. There do not, however, seem to be any university colleges close to acceptance in this respect in Sweden in the near future, according to the Swedish Minister of Education.

The objectives, extent and overall structure of university degrees are defined by national regulations, and the universities themselves make the decision on the contents and the structure in greater detail. There has been a development towards greater freedom for the universities and colleges themselves to form own specific (or less specific) regulations and decide more by themselves. Only few years ago professors were appointed by the government, today the universities themselves are responsible for the whole process. The presidents (Swed. *rektor*) of the universities are elected by the university people themselves, but an innovation in the university management structure is that the rector no more is the president of the university board, but filling this position is a business of the government and the universities cannot influence in any respect in this process. Consequently, the rector is not the president of the university board, but this is a person chosen from outside by the government, appointed on political grounds.

The basic university degree for humanities in Sweden is the Bachelor of Arts, which is intended to be achieved after three years of study. The actual length of studies is normally longer. Certain study programs are regularly longer than the "normal" ones, e.g. those in medicine, architecture, and some other programs. Surprisingly often, for example students of natural sciences choose an additional subject from the faculty of humanities. As another example might be mentioned a co-operation at some universities between the humanities and law faculties for programs in order to train "law linguists" (Swed. *juristlingvister*) by a combination of a certain amount of law studies and a certain amount of language studies. There have previously been special language courses at the linguistic departments in French for law students, and the like.

The maximum time a university student may get regular study allowances is six years, a limit which has been criticised by the students, for different reasons, among others for the difficulties it may cause a student in case he or she has not been able to decide for a definite choice of a general program or a definite individual program from the beginning of the university studies. Another problem, pointed at, is that, despite the fact that students constantly are encouraged to join all kinds of international exchange programs, you are not always ensured study allowances for this but sometimes will have to take private loans (esp. in cases when the student wants to add courses outside Sweden, which will be an addition to a regular Swedish exam – formally it is not regarded as necessary, not even in cases where a specific subject or course is not available in the Swedish curriculum).

A certain minimum of credits per academic year is required in order to get allowances and grants. The main part of the allowances the student get are loans, only a minor portion are real grants, which the student does not need to pay back to the state. A credit unit is called a 'point'. In an academic year (two semesters) 40 points is the normal rate you are expected to take.

The Bachelor (or corresponding) was until recently the formal requirement for being accepted to enrol in doctoral studies. In theory, the doctoral degree should be achieved after four years of postgraduate studies, according to the reform carried through in 1969. In praxis this has been possible only in natural sciences, technical studies and medicine, hardly ever in law, social sciences and humanities. (I do not go into the reasons for these differences, which may be rather obvious.) In the new reform of postgraduate studies in Sweden a couple of years ago, this four year limit is sharpened and new means will be tried to make this a reality also within humanities, social sciences and law. One of these is that the student has to present a plan for financing the studies and has to sign a kind of treaty with the department, represented most often by the presumable supervisor of the student, and/or the head of department, who is in all cases responsible for the finances of the department.

The time the new system for doctoral studies has been in force is too short to allow an evaluation of it. One point of criticism that has been directed towards this system is that the number of four year grants is still too small to have a considerable impact on the number of doctoral exams to be passed within humanities, law and social sciences. Others are of the opinion that the financial system *per se* is not decisive, but that there are other means which, if taken seriously, will speed up the doctoral studies also in these fields of study, e.g. special courses for supervisors, doctoral schools, more work in larger research programs, etc. The variety of means to achieve the goals set up is rapidly growing, initiated by the universities themselves and encouraged by the government.

However, the universities also have reacted to this in a different way. The requirements for entering doctoral studies have recently been sharpened at some faculties to the effect that the Bachelor is not any more sufficient for

enrolment in doctoral studies; the requirement is now often a master's degree, in stead. This seems to be very common in the humanities. Formally the doctoral studies programs in the old system were organised in a way, according to which 1,5-2 of the (formally) four years were to be used to going through and being examined in advanced theoretical courses (methods of linguistics, theory of science, English linguistics, and the like), and 2-2,5 years were used for writing the dissertation. Now, when the master's degree is introduced as an entrance requirement, the bulk of these advanced courses will be carried out on that level, the course part of the doctoral studies is shortened considerably and a bigger part of this four year enrolment, which is, in fact, organised as a regular position, is possible to spend for the dissertation work. This is the basic idea of this change, which has developed spontaneously at the universities, and may not have been an intended effect by the government.

Evaluation of higher education

All institutions of higher education are regularly evaluated in Sweden. The evaluations take place every three years and are carried out by committees denounced by the *National Agency of Higher Education*. The National Agency supervises, promotes and assesses the quality of higher education. The first round of evaluations, at the end of the 1990s, was an overall evaluation focused on quality enhancement as it was mirrored in the structure of measures taken to guarantee a high quality at the whole university or university college. These can be characterised as kind of peer reviews: the committee members were, besides representatives for the students, teachers, administrators or researchers from the other Swedish universities. In praxis this evaluation was concentrated on graduate studies. The aim of this round was to start a cyclic process of evaluations at all units of the academic institutions in the country. The second round initiated by the Board was directed to special sectors, among others the general conditions for the students at the universities and high schools and ways to get minority and immigrant children to choose university level studies to a higher degree than hitherto.

Evaluation of research is also going on regularly, and since a couple of years there is a long term plan for the evaluation of all subjects taught at the Swedish universities and university colleges. A majority of the members of the committees are Swedish researchers and teachers, but in the scientific evaluation committees at least one, but often more, of the members must be from abroad, in order to ensure the levelling of the evaluation to an international standard. The students are represented also in the committees evaluating research. The research is, of course, also reviewed in all the normal channels that are used within the international society of researchers.

Innovative methods in teaching are supported by a special body within the National Agency of Higher Education, namely *The Council for Renewal of Undergraduate Education*, founded in 1990. A specific area which has got much support is computer aided language instruction. In the late 1990s a special committee, the members of which were university professors and lecturers from language departments, was working to promote the development of new teaching methods with the aid of computers and other technical means within information technology.

Measures relating to the training of teachers

In Sweden all teacher education takes place at schools of vocational teacher education, more or less loosely attached to the universities. Teacher education programmes lead to the qualification required of language teachers. Language teacher education is arranged jointly by language departments in faculties of humanities and teacher educations departments or schools of vocational teacher education. Graduates from language departments can qualify for language teaching by doing their pedagogical training at departments with vocational teacher education programmes.

For this latter category, subject teachers, the requirement for qualifying is the bachelor's degree, i.e. a total of 120 credits. This is combined with theoretical pedagogical studies and periods of teaching practice. This is, however, a smaller number of graduates, in teacher training today (this used to be the normal practice until the end of the 1970s). Most teacher trainees do their pedagogical training alongside the subject studies. To become a teacher in the elementary school you may choose between becoming a "1-7" or a "4-9 teacher", i.e. you will be trained for teaching either in grades 1 to 7 or 4 to 9. The former category corresponds to the old category of class teachers in the comprehensive school. Training for a career as a teacher in kindergarten is separately organized.

Teacher trainees may combine one or more languages with other subjects as Swedish, mother tongue teaching or teaching Swedish as a second language, or History, Social Sciences, Physical Training, Domestic Science or others. There is a specific training for Swedish as a second language for those who intend to become teachers in

Swedish for minority or immigrant children. There is a great need for developing this branch of teacher education, and it has been criticized for the small resources allocated to this field and for the insufficient methodological development of the subject.

One of the weak points in teacher education has been considered to be the cooperation between the providers of teacher's education, i.e. the subject departments at the universities or university colleges and the teacher education departments, which are often organized as separate units or schools. A cause of conflict is often the balance between the amount of theoretical language studies and to be given and the amount of pedagogical teaching and training. There are teacher education departments, which give all the teaching, including the subject matters, at the education departments, without cooperating with the university departments. This has caused conflict, and has awakened proposals within universities on starting special teacher education programs within the universities, closer attached to the subject departments.

One problem within Swedish school education besides the cutting of resources is the frequent change of working methods and pedagogical ideologies for the school. The conflict is often formulated as an opposition between advocators of the need of teaching subject matters on one side, and giving the pupils social training and methodological training as a means "searching for knowledge", on the other. This has been an issue of public debate for a long time and the question has been a big issue also in the recent elections for the Swedish parliament and the politically elected bodies in the municipalities. This debate is reflected in the concrete school work as well as in teacher training, which has been the object of numerous changes and reorganizations during the last decades.

One of the main reasons for the budget cuttings has been regarded the fact that the public school, which was formerly a responsibility of the state now is a responsibility of the municipalities, which often means that less money than before is allocated to school education. Another consequence of this is that the differences between schools in different municipalities may be considerable. Together with this change another big change was made in 1989, to the effect that the former National Board of Education was changed into a considerably smaller body, *The National Agency for Education*, with much smaller resources for evaluating school teaching and giving pedagogical support to teacher training.

Research on pedagogical methods and the outcome of school teaching is carried out at the departments of pedagogy at the universities and at the teacher education departments.