“It’s Important to get into the Community” – Students’ Voices on Disciplinary Literacy, Opportunities and Challenges in a Linguistically Diverse Classroom

Student 1: It’s important [to focus on language] to get into the community, like, to be able to come in and talk to neighbours and like ...
Student 4: Otherwise you feel like... so alone and strange.

The traditional approaches to education are today both challenging and challenged. An important task for schools, in a society with diverse and unexpected demands on students, is reflective and linguistic competence including reasoning (Skolverket, 2022). The aim of this study is to contribute with knowledge about opportunities and challenges in civics, with a focus on language-oriented content teaching and disciplinary literacy, in the case of students with a foreign language background. The research question is:

- What opportunities and challenges, related to language and disciplinary literacy in civics, can be identified in the case of students with a foreign language background?

Students need explicit support in the classroom (Cummins, 2015; Hajer, 2018), since learners’ literacy backgrounds are very diverse (Cummins, 2015). Schools therefore have a crucial role in supporting understanding of language and content, especially for students with a foreign language background. Explicit teaching with a focus on subject words and disciplinary thinking tools might support students reasoning (Waagaard, 2023).

The interviews were analyzed through thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where opportunities and challenges were identified. Semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014) with 11 secondary school students with a foreign language background were conducted in connection with civics lessons.

The civics teaching was based on reading fiction related to the current work area. The results show that a focus on subject words and disciplinary thinking tools (cf. Sandahl, 2015) can support students’ understanding of language and content. Reflection time, teacher support and well-thought-out group division seem to favor students’ comprehension and reasoning. Some
of the students with a foreign language background however felt they had to "work much harder" than students with a Swedish language background (cf. Waagaard, 2023).

In today's often time-pressured world, students need access to tools to support language comprehension and reflective reasoning. A focus on disciplinary literacy (subject words, social science thinking tools) can be a way to support multilingual students to gain access to a diverse and unexpected community, in Sweden as well as in a Nordic context.

References