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Class and School Years 1-3

Teachers' beliefs about plurilingualism in the EFL classroom

A new syllabus takes place

Lärares syn på flerspråkighet i engelskundervisningen

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Abstract:

Recent language policy developments in Sweden emphasize the importance of developing students' plurilingual competence within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. However, it remains unclear how such perspectives are interpreted and enacted by teachers in early primary classrooms. This study aims to explore how primary school EFL teachers in Sweden understand plurilingualism and how their beliefs relate to their teaching practice. Two research questions guided the study: (1) how teachers in grades 1–3 describe their beliefs about plurilingualism in relation to their teaching, and (2) how different orientations towards language are reflected in their descriptions of plurilingualism in EFL teaching.

The study adopted a qualitative design with a phenomenographic approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five primary school EFL teachers. The interview data were analysed through qualitative content analysis to identify recurring patterns in teachers' beliefs. Ruiz's (1984) framework of language orientations (language as problem, language as right, and language as resource) was subsequently used as an analytical lens for examining how different perspectives on language were reflected in the teachers' descriptions.

The findings indicate that teachers generally express positive attitudes towards plurilingualism and acknowledge students' linguistic resources as supportive for participation and comprehension. At the same time, English remains the dominant language of instruction. The analysis further shows that different language orientations may coexist both across teachers and within the same teacher's descriptions depending on context and pedagogical considerations.

The study suggests that plurilingual perspectives in early EFL education are negotiated within an English-dominant instructional tradition rather than implemented as a systematic pedagogical approach. The findings also highlight a gap between policy ambitions and classroom practice, pointing to the importance of stronger preparation for plurilingual pedagogies within teacher education.

Keywords:

Plurilingualism, EFL teaching, primary school, language orientations

Abstract:

På senare år har förändringar i den svenska läroplanen betonat betydelsen av att elever utvecklar sin flerspråkiga förmåga inom engelskundervisningen. Samtidigt är det oklart hur dessa perspektiv tolkas och omsätts i praktiken av lärare i de tidiga skolåren. Syftet med denna studie är därför att undersöka hur lärare i engelska i årskurs 1–3 i Sverige förstår flerspråkighet och hur deras föreställningar relaterar till deras undervisningspraktik. Studien utgår från två forskningsfrågor: (1) hur lärare beskriver sina föreställningar om flerspråkighet i relation till sin undervisning, samt (2) hur olika språkorienteringar kommer till uttryck i lärarnas beskrivningar av flerspråkighet i engelskundervisningen.

Studien har en kvalitativ forskningsdesign med fenomenografisk ansats. Semistrukturerade intervjuer genomfördes med fem lärare som undervisar i engelska i de tidiga skolåren. Intervjuerna analyserades genom kvalitativ innehållsanalys för att identifiera återkommande mönster i lärarnas föreställningar. För den andra forskningsfrågan användes Ruiz (1984) ramverk för språkorienteringar: språk som problem, språk som rättighet och språk som resurs - som analytiskt verktyg för att tolka lärarnas beskrivningar.

Resultaten visar att lärarna generellt uttrycker positiva attityder till flerspråkighet och uppfattar elevers språkliga resurser som stöd för delaktighet och förståelse. Samtidigt framträder engelska fortsatt som det dominerande undervisningsspråket. Analysen visar också att olika språkorienteringar kan samexistera, både mellan olika lärare och inom samma lärares beskrivningar, beroende på sammanhang och pedagogiska överväganden.

Studien indikerar att flerspråkiga perspektiv i engelskundervisningen i de tidiga skolåren i stor utsträckning förhandlas inom en engelskspråkigt dominerad undervisningstradition snarare än genom ett systematiskt flerspråkigt arbetssätt. Resultaten synliggör även en möjlig diskrepans mellan läroplanens intentioner och klassrumspraktik, vilket pekar på behovet av starkare och mer systematiskt stöd för flerspråkig pedagogik inom lärarutbildningen.

Nyckelord:

Flerspråkighet, undervisning i engelska som främmande språk, grundskola,

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1. Introduction

The Swedish National Agency for Education (2018) states that more students than ever are plurilingual. In a time of increasing globalization and migration, language education faces both new challenges and opportunities. Globally, the importance of English continues to expand. According to the British Council (2013), a quarter of the world's population uses English at an adequate level, and non-native speakers now outnumber native speakers. This illustrates the global reach of English and reflects the extensive EFL teaching taking place today. In the Swedish teacher education programme for grades 0–3, English, together with Swedish is the only language taught (Paulsrud & Lundberg, 2021, p.41), further emphasizing its role in the early school years.

The Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2021) provides central language policy guidelines for Europe and promotes plurilingual and pluricultural competence, understood as the dynamic ability to draw on one's full linguistic repertoire (see section 2.1.1). Its aim is to support equal language education across member states while encouraging the use of learners' full linguistic repertoires. In the Swedish context, the National Agency for Education (2021) explicitly states that the English syllabus is aligned with the CEFR. Until the implementation of *Läroplanen för grundskolan, förskoleklassen och fritidshemmet* (Lgr22) in 2022, references to plurilingualism in Swedish curricula were reserved to mother-tongue and minority-language instruction. For the first time, Lgr22 introduces plurilingualism as a focus for all students in compulsory school, specifically within the English syllabus.

This policy shift aligns with research highlighting that plurilingual approaches in EFL teaching can support learners' English development (Cutrim Schmid, 2021; Chabert, 2019). However, it remains unclear to what extent Swedish teacher education prepares future teachers to work with a plurilingual approach (Paulsrud & Lundberg, 2021), potentially resulting in varied interpretations among teachers. Lo Bianco (2010, p.165) argues that regardless of official policy, it is teachers who ultimately enact policy through curricular choices and classroom practices. This suggests that the space between policy, teacher education and teachers' personal beliefs may form a "grey area" where practice is shaped more by individual views than by policy guidelines. Understanding teachers' beliefs therefore becomes essential, especially as Swedish policy increasingly moves toward pluralistic language pedagogies.

Although previous research has addressed teachers' perspectives on plurilingualism (e.g., Lundberg, 2019; Boeckmann, 2012; Jessner & Kramersch, 2015; Werner & Todeva, 2022; Möller & Sivertsen, 2022), little empirical work has focused specifically on EFL teaching in the Swedish early primary years. This study therefore seeks to investigate primary school EFL teachers' beliefs about the notion of plurilingualism in the Swedish context. The study's aim and research questions are presented below.

1.1. Aim and research questions

This study aims to shed light on how plurilingualism is understood and described in relation to EFL teaching practice in Swedish grades 1-3.

- How do primary school EFL teachers in grades 1–3 describe their beliefs about plurilingualism in relation to their teaching practice?
- How are different orientations towards language teaching reflected in teachers' descriptions of plurilingualism in EFL teaching in grades 1–3?

2. Background

This section presents relevant background to the study. It includes definitions of key terms, an overview of EFL teaching traditions, and a description of plurilingualism in the Swedish educational context.

2.1. Definition of terms

2.1.1. Plurilingualism

The Swedish National Agency for Education (2018, p.11,13) describes a plurilingual [flerspråkig] student as the user of two or more languages. The different languages are not viewed as bounded entities, instead they are viewed to be in an interconnected relationship. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2021, p.30) also explains plurilingualism as a dynamic competence where the individuals' linguistic resources are understood as one single unit. However, the term multilingualism is often used as a synonym to plurilingualism. Traditionally, research about multilingualism has had its focus in a larger sense where social context has been its focus (Lundberg, 2020; CEFR, 2021). The social context described could be on a national level, an international level such as the EU or simply in a classroom. Thus, multilingual research has tended to conceptualise languages as separate and bounded systems coexisting within the same social context.

However, Lundberg (2020, p.41) explains that the term *plurilingualism* has a focus on the individual's multilingual competence. Plurilingualism is therefore explained as somewhat disconnected from the social context, as it focuses on the specific individual's linguistic repertoire. The CEFR (2021, p.30) states that multilingualism also exists on an individual level, where the individuals' languages are seen as co-existing rather than interrelated. Plurilingualism, on the other hand, is explained as a dynamic competence where the individuals' linguistic resources are understood as one single unit. This study will use the term plurilingualism.

2.1.2. English as a foreign language (EFL)

According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2022) the definition of English as a foreign language is teaching English to students whose first language is not English. The Swedish Language Act (SFS 2009:600) states that Sweden is a multilingual country with five minority languages

(Finnish, Sami, Romani, Yiddish, and Meänkieli) and Swedish as its main language. However, there is no legal distinction regarding English. Thus, according to this definition English is considered a foreign language in Sweden. With this in mind, the Institute for Language and Folklore (Institutionen för språk och folkminnen, hereafter ISOF) states that although English is not considered a minority language in Swedish legislation, many consider it more like a second language than a foreign language (2020). This could indicate a discrepancy between legislation and reality when it comes to the English language in Sweden.

2.2. The EFL teaching tradition

In the 1960's there was a common belief that a language needed to be fully mastered before one could use it (Lundahl, 2021, p.103). Since this was such a normative view, language teaching was all about practicing grammar and other linguistic rules, which led to a native-speaker mindset where errors were considered a divergence of the norm. The Communicative Language Teaching's introduction in the 1970s was a movement with a firm belief of the sole use of the target language in the EFL classroom (Lundahl 2021, p.344; Hult, 2012, p.232). This is described as a theoretical reorientation that focused more on the functional form of language teaching, rather than the formal. Larsen-Freeman and Andersson (2016, p.115) explain that students during this time were able to make correct sentences in classroom situations but could not communicate in more authentic situations. Hence, a focus on communicative competence was enhanced in the EFL classroom, with the goal of enabling students to communicate in the target language.

In a more recent perspective, Cummins (2007, p.221) writes that there are three common assumptions in foreign language teaching. The first is that the students' L1 and the target language should be kept separately. The second assumption is that no translation should be done between the two languages. Finally, the third assumption is that the target language is only to be used without interference from the students L1 when it comes to instruction. These assumptions are referred to as the "monolingual principle" (Cummins, 2007, p.223). This principle is described with a goal to support students to think in the target language without interference from their L1. Another method described to correlate with named assumptions is the *direct method* (Cummins, 2007, p.223; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson 2016, p.25). The direct method is said to have been used in language teaching for many years with its one, simple, rule: no translation. The target language is seen as best taught without interference from other languages; instead, visual aids as pictures or objects are used to convey meaning (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson 2016, p.25).

2.3. The multilingual turn with a plurilingual approach

Werner and Todeva (2022, p.214) express a concern regarding languages still being taught as bounded entities and that the monolingual- and native speaker- mindsets, conveyed earlier in this section, still are predominant in language teaching. They argue that people today have a pluralistic way of communicating, which stands in clear contrast to the monolingual ideologies and policies that still dominate academic contexts. Therefore, they stress that the educational discourse needs to catch up with the high level of linguistic resources available to students

today, enabling them to be used for creating and accessing knowledge (ibid, 2022, p.216). Melo-Pfeifer (2018, p.192) also argue that there is a call for a shift regarding language teaching with a more holistic perspective rather than viewing languages as isolated units. However, she is critical that this multilingual turn is a new phenomenon. The author argues that multilingualism is a normal element in societies, but not always in the academic world (p.194). Melo- Pfeifer reflects upon a pluralistic approach in language teaching arguing that the traditional view, where students are seen as monolinguals engaged in language learning, needs to shift to a view where students are seen as plurilinguals engaged in language learning:

Pluralistic approaches, then, promote an integrated and dynamic individual multilingual [plurilingual] repertoire, recognizing and exploiting students linguistic and cultural biographies with pedagogical goals. Therefore, they go beyond monolingual pedagogies and monoglossic practices that conceive language learning as being linear, successive and homogeneous, following the same strategies, aims, goals and motivations for all students. Pluralistic approaches rely on previous knowledge and on the linguistic and cultural lives of the school population, inviting students to follow a transfer-based discovery pedagogy and acknowledge the added value of establishing links across multiple languages. (Melo- Pfeifer, 2018, p.200)

2.4. Plurilingualism and the English syllabus in Sweden

Lgr22 was implemented in Swedish schools in autumn 2022, replacing the previous curriculum. At the time of this study, it had been in force for approximately three years. One of the foremost amendments concerning the English syllabus was that it for the first time states that students are meant, through EFL, to develop their plurilingual ability (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022A). This plurilingual ability is described as a communicative competence where students' previous knowledge and experience regarding language is considered a resource for learning English (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022: B, p.8). Furthermore, the teaching is to make students reflect on their prior linguistic knowledge and thereafter be given tools to use them as resources when learning English. By doing so, the students should be able to use their plurilingual competence in a flexible way when communicating in different contexts.

3. Previous research

The section will start by presenting a glance at previous research regarding the results of a plurilingual approach in EFL teaching. Thereafter, a review regarding plurilingualism seen from three different perspectives: official policy, Swedish teacher education and finally on teachers' own notions about plurilingualism.

Relevant studies were identified through searches in ERIC, Scopus, and Google Scholar using the keywords *plurilingualism*, *EFL teaching*, *primary education*, and *Sweden*. Peer-reviewed articles from the past ten years were prioritized, and additional sources were found through reference lists of included studies to ensure coverage of both international and Swedish research relevant to the study's aim.

3.1.1. A plurilingual approach in EFL teaching

Research indicates that plurilingual tasks in primary EFL classrooms can improve students' English acquisition (Cutrim Schmid, 2021; Chabert, 2019). A German study investigated

plurilingual tasks over three years across five case studies (four in primary, one in secondary school). Tasks allowed students to use other languages than English, and data were collected through interviews, observations, and reflective reports from teachers and pre-service teachers. Findings suggest that teachers believed these tasks increased student engagement and aligned learning with students' communication habits outside school (Cutrim Schmid, 2021, pp.74-78).

A study conducted in Norway, China and Spain compared monolingual and plurilingual approaches in upper primary years. Students encouraged to use their L1 as a scaffolding tool showed higher grammatical understanding, better overall comprehension, and increased communication in English (Chabert, 2019, p.99).

However, not all research univocally supports plurilingual practices. Several studies report mixed results or important implementation challenges. Teachers' attitudes are often ambivalent, and effects depend on context, task type and how approaches are enacted in class (Ticheloven, 2019, pp.14-15). This mixed evidence emphasizes the need to explore how Swedish primary school EFL teachers understand and interpret plurilingualism in their classrooms.

3.1.2. Building students' plurilingual identities

Cutrim Schmid (2021, pp.75-78) also highlights that allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire enables them to incorporate aspects of their cultural identity, increasing genuine motivation. Younger students were generally more willing to share their identity, while older students were more reluctant, emphasizing the importance of implementing plurilingual approaches early. This was also reported in a recent questionnaire study where 75% (of 139 participants) agreed that students self-confidence increased when students can draw on their background languages when learning English (Sundqvist et al., 2025, p.17).

A study in Australia reinforces this perspective in a multilingual context, where students with migration background could use prior knowledge and experiences in EFL. This approach shifted focus from viewing students as lacking English resources to recognizing their previous linguistic and cultural knowledge as assets (Slaughter & Cross, 2020, p.41).

3.1.3. Official policy and plurilingualism

Research indicates that plurilingual pedagogies can support English learning when students' L1 is used strategically (Chabert, 2019; Cutrim Schmid, 2021). Despite generally positive attitudes, teachers often report uncertainty about how to implement such practices (Slaughter & Cross, 2020, p.39; Alasaawi, 2020, p.25).

Analyses of the Swedish curriculum demonstrate that plurilingualism has been largely restricted to mother tongue and minority language instruction (Paulsrud, Zilliacus & Ekberg, 2020, p.310). As the 2011 curriculum offered little guidance, responsibility for plurilingual integration fell on individual teachers, leaving practice dependent on personal beliefs rather than policy (ibid, p.315). This lack of clarity corresponds with Hult's (2012) observation of a "grey area" between language policy and classroom realities. His discourse analysis of student

teachers' observations shows that English is framed simultaneously as a global and a local language, yet teachers must navigate this tension on their own (p.246). Student teachers' further question whether English can be localized in classroom contexts where it remains officially positioned as a foreign language despite its societal presence (p.248).

3.1.4. Swedish teacher education and plurilingualism

Swedish teacher education displays considerable variation in how plurilingualism is addressed, partly due to broad institutional autonomy (Paulsrud & Lundberg, 2021, p.53). Because available documents from different institutions offer limited insight, the extent to which plurilingual perspectives are embedded in practice remains unclear. This variability aligns with Hult's (2012, p.251) description of Swedish language policy as a "discursive space" where the role of English is continuously negotiated.

The curricular framing of plurilingualism is reflected in teacher education: plurilingualism is typically associated only with students who have a minority language background (Paulsrud et al., 2020, p.308). As a result, before the curriculum revision in 2022, primary teachers were not formally required to integrate plurilingual approaches into English teaching.

A study conducted after the implementation of Lgr22, investigated attitudes and beliefs on plurilingualism in education in a Swedish context, although not solely in EFL teaching. Paulsrud, Juvonen and Schalley (2023, p.77) found that there could be a poor consensus amongst Swedish teacher training on how and in what extent plurilingualism should be taught. The study included 5 teacher educators, 5 in-service teachers as well as 8 pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers expressed concerns about being sufficiently prepared to work with plurilingual students (2023, p.78) and described how their practical training largely determined whether they developed knowledge about teaching plurilingual students. The authors conclude that the Swedish teacher training is: "an education out of step with the multilingual Sweden of today" (2023, p.80).

In Sweden, the teacher education programme for grades F–3 consists of 240 hec throughout four years, including 15 hec in English. Within the teacher education programme for grades F–3, English and Swedish are the only languages formally included as subject studies, and are also, according to Paulsrud and Lundberg (2021, p.43), the two subjects in which the plurilingual concept is most visible. Although the authors make no claim that their research is absolute, they do find some visible examples of how the plurilingual concept is implemented. Firstly, at one university "multilingualism [plurilingualism] is discussed as a resource for native Swedish speakers" (2021, p.47). Secondly, they find at another university, the teacher students study the English subject with a "multilingual [plurilingual] perspective based on current research and European language control documents" (2021, p.47).

3.1.5. Primary teachers' notions of plurilingualism

A study on Swedish teachers' beliefs on plurilingualism highlights several misconceptions (Lundberg, 2019, p.280). Using Q-method, 40 primary school teachers from three schools with varying proportions of students with non-Swedish backgrounds were surveyed. One misconception was that only students already considered plurilingual benefit from plurilingual

teaching, reflecting the still predominant monolingual norm in Sweden. Lundberg (2019, p.280) notes a clear discrepancy between teachers' traditional monolingual views and Sweden's increasingly pluralistic language policies.

Similarly, a small European survey with 26 teachers from countries including Finland and Norway revealed a gap between positive attitudes toward plurilingual approaches and perceiving linguistic diversity as challenging (Boeckmann, 2012, pp.261-262). As one participant noticed, "Ten to fifteen years ago 99% of pupils had the same mother tongue. This has been changing fast, but teachers are not fully prepared to face this reality" (Boeckmann, 2012, p.264). Boeckmann concludes that attitudes toward plurilingual approaches evolve slowly, and even in countries with long experience of linguistic diversity, pluralistic perspectives are not yet fully reflected in curricula, teacher education, classrooms or EFL materials (2012, p.263).

One remaining question concern which students' Swedish teachers consider to be plurilingual. Earlier in this study it was concluded that in Swedish curricula, until 2022, the term plurilingual was referred to the syllabuses for minority languages or mother tongue teaching (Paulsrud et al., 2020, p.310). This was also concluded as mirrored in the Swedish teacher training (Paulsrud & Lundberg, 2019). Lundberg (2019, p.269) agrees that the discourse in Sweden concerning plurilingual students is reserved for students with migration background. The author further describes that named students are being discriminated against, because they are viewed differently from the monolingual norm which Lundberg suggests is being conveyed through the national education policy documents.

Another aspect on teachers' view on plurilingual students is what level of proficiency gives a student the identity of a plurilingual speaker. A common view on plurilingualism is understood as native-like proficiency in two, or more, languages (Lundberg 2019, p.269; Jessner & Kramsch, 2015, p.3). This could suggest that students who have a partial proficiency in multiple languages as well as students with a high proficiency in Swedish are not considered plurilingual. Indeed, this is in great opposition to the sociolinguistic realities students today are encountering outside of school (Lundberg 2019, p.269; Werner & Todeva, 2022, .216).

Another study, conducted by Möller and Sivertsen (2022), examined pre-service teachers' understandings of plurilingualism in Norway elementary education. When 54 student teachers were asked to define the concept, many described plurilingualism simply as having knowledge of multiple languages. Three participants reported that they did not know the meaning of the term, while a few provided broader interpretations, including various forms of literacy such as internet language or slang as part of the plurilingual competence (pp.11-12). The study concluded that the main reason teachers wanted to include languages other than English in their EFL teaching was to facilitate cross-linguistic comparison, enhance language learning by highlighting similarities and differences, and increase comprehension in the classroom. Although two thirds of the participants were positive towards including other languages in their EFL instruction, one third were reluctant to do so. This was primarily due to concerns about the already limited time that students are exposed to English (2022, p.19).

3.1.6. Research summary

Research indicates that plurilingual approaches in EFL classrooms can enhance students' English learning and motivation, especially when students are encouraged to use their L1 as a scaffolding tool (Cutrim Schmid, 2021; Chabert, 2019). In the Swedish context, official policy has historically limited plurilingualism to mother tongue and minority language instruction, leaving teachers responsible for integrating plurilingual practices themselves (Paulsrud et al., 2020; Hult, 2012). Teacher education programs vary widely, a few provide consistent preparation for teaching plurilingual students, which many pre-service teachers report as insufficient (Paulsrud & Lundberg, 2021; Paulsrud, Juvonen & Schalley, 2023).

Studies on teachers' beliefs show that while several holds positive attitudes toward plurilingualism, uncertainty about practical implementation remains, and plurilingualism is often viewed as relevant only for students with a non-Swedish mother tongue (Lundberg, 2019; Möller & Sivertsen, 2022).

Overall, the research suggests that plurilingual approaches have the potential to support EFL learning, but successful implementation depends on teacher competence, context and policy frameworks.

4. Theoretical framing

This section will present the study's theoretical stance. As this study aims to investigate teachers' beliefs on plurilingualism in the EFL classroom, Richard Ruiz's framework of language orientations was chosen as the theoretical frame. The theory will be described in more detail below, followed by a discussion of the choice of theory in relation to the study's focus.

4.1. A framework of language orientations

In 1984 Richard Ruiz set out to create a conceptual model to serve language planning (p.16). This resulted in three orientations: language as problem, as right, and as resource. Ruiz explained these orientations to offer a heuristic approach to the study of issues in language planning. He explained these orientations to be different dispositions towards language and its role as well as its role in society. He concluded: "[...] orientations determine what is thinkable about language in society!" (Ruiz, 1984, p.16). Although this framework was created considering language planning, Hult and Hornberger (2016, p.42) advocate that it also can be useful in any situation where people express their opinion on language. In this study, the three orientations will be used as a tool for data analysis. Teachers' descriptions will be analysed in relation to whether they reflect a view of students' linguistic resources as a problem, a right, or a resource.

4.1.1. Language as a problem

Back in 1984, when Ruiz first presented the three language orientations, he stated that a lot of

work and research in language planning so far was about identifying and resolving language problems (Ruiz, 1984, p.18). These problems were described as associated with groups who did not speak the target language, in this case immigrants in the United States in the late 1950s. These groups were framed as being at a disadvantage due to their lack of proficiency in the target language. Consequently, language differences became associated with broader social issues as poverty, low educational attainment, and restricted social mobility (ibid., p.19). Therefore, in this context, multilingualism is seen as a threat to national unity. Monolingualism, on the other hand, is the main ideal in this orientation. An assimilationist mindset is valued, as the solution to these problems is seen as a single, common language (Ruiz 1984, p.21; Hult & Hornberger, 2016, p.34).

4.1.2. Language as right

In this orientation, as given by its title, language is considered a human right. It has its focus on issues regarding equality and democracy (Ruiz, 1984, p.22; Paulsrud et al. 2020, p.307). Here, legal mechanisms are, in a compensatory way, used to ensure both individuals and groups' language rights. This includes official contexts, such as a school or a court where individuals or groups are entitled to use minority languages to access information or to use one's mother tongue as a resource in education (Ruiz, 1984. p.24; Paulsrud et al. 2020, p.307; Hult & Hornberger, p.306)

4.1.3. Language as a resource

In the last orientation presented by Ruiz, language is seen as a resource in many aspects (1984, p.27). In contrast to the language as problem orientation, multilingualism is seen as a resource for example in military-, diplomatic-, and research settings. In education, this orientation contrasts with the problem orientation, which tends to view plurilingual students from a deficit perspective. Here, their linguistic resources are valued as a mediation tool in learning. Minority languages are seen as both an individual and societal resource, as the minority language communities are seen as vital sources of knowledge (Ruiz, 1984; Paulsrud et al. 2020, p.307). Hult and Hornberger summarize the three orientations in the following table:

Table 1

Language as a problem	Language as a right	Language as resource
Linguistic diversity is viewed as a challenge for education and social integration.	Language is viewed as a fundamental human and civil right.	Linguistic diversity is viewed as a valuable resource for individuals and society.
Minority languages may be seen as obstacles to participation in the dominant language community.	Individuals should have the right to use and maintain their languages.	Multiple languages can support learning, communication, and cultural understanding.
Educational focus is often placed on assimilation into the dominant language.	Language rights aim to ensure equal access to education and participation in society.	Students' linguistic repertoires can be used as pedagogical resources in learning.

Note. Adapted from Hult and Hornberger (2016), based on Ruiz (1984).

4.2. Theory discussion

For theoretical framing, the Interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1981) and Translanguaging (Vogel & Garcia, 2017) was considered besides the three language orientations described above. However, as this study focuses on teachers' beliefs about plurilingualism, the choice fell on Ruiz language orientations. While the Interdependence Hypothesis and Translanguaging theory highlight specific dimensions of plurilingualism, Ruiz's three language orientations could provide a broader analytical framework for examining different perspectives on language. Although these perspectives are typically used to analyse language policy, they are also relevant to this study, as teachers are the ones who interpret and implement policy in classroom practice. Other theoretical choices would likely have shifted the focus from teachers' beliefs to classroom practices or cognitive language development.

5. Method

The following section presents the study's design and choice of method for data collection, selection of participants, instruments, implementation, method of analysis, as well as ethical considerations and validity and reliability.

5.1. Design.

This study used a qualitative interview-based design aimed at exploring variations in how teachers describe plurilingualism in relation to their teaching practice. This approach was considered appropriate for investigating teachers' beliefs about this phenomenon. Phenomenographic research focuses on identifying qualitative variations in how people understand or experience a phenomenon. However, it can be very difficult to access a person's inner thoughts. Therefore, this approach aimed to describe, in this case the teachers',

expressions of their beliefs (Dimenäs, 2020, pp.30–31). Thus, the focus in phenomenographic research is to find qualitative differences in beliefs.

Holliday (2016, p.6) describes that in a qualitative research setup, opportunities for the researcher to find unforeseen areas of discovery are created. In contrast to quantitative research, where the goal is to pin down and control, qualitative research rather captures glimpses of reality and then tries to interpret them. Qualitative research therefore focuses on interpreting participants' perspectives rather than producing statistically generalisable results, which leads Holliday to highlight the importance of the qualitative researcher managing subjectivity in the study.

A quantitative method would likely have limited the possibility to explore nuanced and context-dependent beliefs, which was central to the aim of this study. One of the research questions was designed to relate directly to Ruiz's language orientations, allowing the analysis to explore teachers' beliefs in terms of language as a problem, as a right, or as a resource.

5.1.1. Semi structured interviews

Based on the study's aim and research questions, semi structured interview as the instrument for collecting data was chosen. An interview guide was created with questions inspired by previous research within the field of plurilingualism and teacher beliefs (see Appendix 3).

In an interview setting, opportunities for profound answers are constructed as the interviewer can ask follow-up questions to gain more depth in the answers or to clarify any ambiguity. Holliday (2016, p.70) explains that the researcher becomes a part of the data by their presence. By actively steering the informants' answers a certain way and asking different questions, the informant can be guided into certain directions in their thoughts and answers. Therefore, the interviewer must take great caution not to lead the informant in a one-way street where only the research agenda appears.

In quantitative research, for example when using questionnaires to gather data, the researcher may reach more informants with a set of structured questions. In contrast, a qualitative method such as an interview can provide more profound answers, as the researcher is able to follow the informants' thoughts and discover unforeseen beliefs (Larsen, 2018, p.37).

5.2. Selection of participants

As stated above, the goal with qualitative methods is not to gain statistical data that can be turned into generalisations as in quantitative research. On the contrary, since the informants of a study with a qualitative onset do not need to be representative of a population (Larsen, 2018, p.124), the informants in this study were found through a combination of self-selection, snowball sampling, and convenience sampling.

The study was advertised in 4 Facebook groups for EFL teachers in Sweden, where interested informants registered their interest in participating and were thereafter contacted by the researcher. One informant was recruited through this channel. In addition, seventeen principals were contacted via email and asked to forward the invitation to relevant teachers. Two

principals responded that they had forwarded the information; however, no participants were recruited through this approach. Four informants were therefore recruited through convenience sampling via the researcher’s professional network.

Recruiting participants proved more challenging than anticipated, and despite efforts through self-selection and snowball sampling, six teachers agreed to participate. The sixth participant cancelled their interview last minute, leaving the study with five informants. While the sample is smaller than recommended in the university guidelines, the five interviews generated rich qualitative data relevant to the study’s exploratory aim.

5.2.1. Informants

The teachers that took part in the study were de-identified and given numbers 1-5. Following is a short overview of the informants’ educational background, teaching experience and current teaching context presented in the table below:

Table 2

Teacher:	Education:	Years teaching English:	Current teaching grade:	Languages in current class:
1	Grundskolelärare F-3	7	2	Swedish, Arabic, Finnish
2	Grundskolelärare 1-7	15	2	Swedish, English, Thai, Finnish
3	Grundskolelärare F-3	4	1	Swedish, Russian, French, Dutch, Finnish
4	Grundskolelärare 1-7	30	3	Arabic, English, Syrian
5	Grundskolelärare F-3	3	1	Finnish, Russian

5.3. Implementation

Prior to the main data collection, a pilot interview was conducted with one primary school teacher. The purpose of the pilot was to test the clarity and relevance of the interview questions. Following the pilot interview, some questions were clarified, additional follow-up questions were added, and one question was removed as it was found to be repetitive. The pilot interview was not included in the empirical material.

The interviews were conducted according to the informants’ preferences, one digitally and four in person. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The transcriptions constituted the basis for the analysis. To ensure a level of anonymity, the participants were assigned numbers (Teacher 1–5), and any identifying details were removed. Although the interviews were audio-recorded, no personal data that could directly identify the participants were included in the analysis.

Before participating, all informants received an information letter describing the purpose of the study and ethical aspects, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. These aspects were also briefly reiterated orally before each interview. The three informants interviewed in person signed a written consent form. For the digital interview, informed consent was given orally at the beginning of the recorded session.

5.4. Method of analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is where the researcher systematically investigates and organises the collected material to answer the research questions. In this study, the goal of the analysis was to describe teachers' subjective beliefs. Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) describes several approaches to analysing qualitative interview data, one of which involves organising the material through categorisation. As Fejes and Thornberg (2019, p.35) note, one of the main challenges in qualitative research is making sense of the large amount of data that is collected. In this study, categorisation was therefore used as an analytical procedure to organise the interview material and identify recurring patterns.

In this study, the data consisted of recorded interviews that were transcribed. The analysis was conducted through a qualitative content analysis focusing on identifying recurring topics in the interview material. First, the interviews were read several times to gain an overall understanding of the data. Relevant segments related to the first research question were then identified and coded. These codes were thereafter grouped into broader categories that captured recurring patterns in the teachers' beliefs. The analysis followed an inductive approach, where categories were developed from patterns that emerged in the interview material.

For the second research question, a deductive approach was used. Each interview was coded in relation to Ruiz's (1984) three language orientations: language as a problem, language as a right, and language as a resource. Thereafter, the coded excerpts were compiled into a joint document under each orientation, which enabled a comparison across informants. In this way, Ruiz's framework functioned as the analytical frame of reference for interpreting the data.

5.5. Ethical considerations

Good research practice can be valued as especially important in studies involving humans. Dimenäs (2020, p.149) describes that a researcher gains access to people's thoughts and experiences, which are then analysed and interpreted. Therefore, it is of importance to protect the informants' anonymity so that they will not be exposed in any way or subjected to offensive treatment.

Larsen (2018, p.17) writes that informants need to provide their consent for participation and must be informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any point during the study. In this study, informants signed a form of consent (or provided oral consent in the case of the digital interview) to assure their voluntary participation. Participants were assigned numbers, and the transcripts and presentation of the data were de-identified through these numbers. The audio recordings, which contained participants' voices and therefore constituted personal data, were stored on a password-protected university server and were not

uploaded to cloud services. No other personal data that could directly identify the participants were collected.

5.6. Validity and reliability

Validity concerns the extent to which a study investigates what it intends to investigate and whether the collected data is relevant for answering the research questions (Larsen, 2018, p.129). In qualitative research, validity is not only about literal correspondence between questions and answers but also about the credibility and relevance of the interpretations made from the data (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014, p.297). According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014), validation is a continuous process throughout the research all from planning and interviewing to transcription, analysis, and reporting.

In this study, validity was enhanced by carefully designing the interview questions based on the research questions and previous studies on teachers' views of plurilingualism. During transcription and analysis, the data were carefully reviewed to ensure that interpretations reflected the participants' intended meaning. The use of follow up questions during the interviews allowed participants to clarify or elaborate on their answers, further increasing validity.

Reliability refers to the trustworthiness and consistency of a study (Larsen, 2018, p.131). In qualitative research, responses may vary depending on the interview situation or the interaction between researcher and participant. Therefore, it is important to minimize potential sources of bias. Larsen (2018) emphasises the importance of non-leading questions, careful transcription, and accurate coding as ways to strengthen reliability (pp.131–132). Similarly, Kihlström (2007, p.232) notes that recording interviews improves reliability by providing a complete account of what was said.

In this study, reliability was addressed through several strategies. The interview guide was designed to avoid leading questions, and all interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were cross-checked by listening to the recordings while reading the texts to ensure consistency. A pilot interview was conducted prior to the main data collection to refine the questions and procedure and to ensure that the interview guide functioned as an appropriate data collection instrument. While independent coding by a second researcher could have strengthened reliability further, this was not possible within the study's limitations.

6. Results

In the following section, the results of the study are presented. The analysis focuses on identifying variations in how teachers understand and describe plurilingualism in relation to their teaching practice. The themes presented below therefore illustrate different ways in which plurilingualism is conceptualised in early EFL teaching, rather than fixed positions associated with individual participants.

6.1. Teachers' beliefs about plurilingualism in EFL teaching

The following section presents the results of the study's first research question: *How do primary school EFL teachers in grades 1–3 describe their beliefs about plurilingualism in relation to their teaching practice?* The results are organized into three themes that emerged during the analysis.

6.1.1. Plurilingualism as a challenge, or a resource?

This theme captures how the participating teachers conceptualise plurilingualism and the role of different languages in the EFL classroom. The analysis reveals variation in how teachers position English in relation to other languages, ranging from English-dominant orientations to more plurilingual perspectives.

Three teachers described English as the preferred language of instruction. In these cases, exposure to English is outlined as essential for learning, and the use of other languages is therefore limited. For example, Teacher 1 explains that: “In my opinion, the more English the better.”, suggesting a belief that maximum exposure leads to improved proficiency. Teacher 5 stated that:

I think that now, in grade one, I feel comfortable with there being quite a lot of Swedish as well. But my goal is to speak mostly English. At the same time, I don't want the students to feel uncomfortable. I want to get to a point where I use mostly English and the students also try to speak English.

This orientation positions English as the central language of the classroom. These statements indicate an implied hierarchy where English is prioritised over other languages. Although English is naturally central in EFL instruction, this could indicate that other languages are not always described as equally valuable learning resources.

In contrast, two teachers describe students' plurilingualism as an asset in the learning process. These teachers express positive attitudes towards plurilingualism and emphasise that knowledge of multiple languages can support English acquisition. For instance, one teacher highlights how students can use comparisons between languages to understand new vocabulary or grammatical structures. Teacher 4 stated:

[...] in Swedish we put the words in this order. In English we put them in this order. In what order do you put them? Do you remember, in what order do you put them in your language?

Here, plurilingualism is not merely tolerated but actively encouraged as a resource that allows students to draw on their existing linguistic knowledge when learning English.

Four teachers described creating opportunities for comparison between languages and allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire. This could reflect a belief that languages are interconnected rather than separate systems. Teacher 3 reflected on the use of plurilingualism as a tool for learning English:

I'm thinking about those students who find it a bit scary to speak up, regardless of the language. And then imagine also having the requirement to only speak a language that you might not understand or master very well. I think that would become a major barrier for that student. I would rather have a classroom where students feel comfortable expressing themselves using different languages. Then plurilingualism can function as a kind of bridge to expressing themselves in English as well, especially if English is a new language for the student.

Here, Teacher 3 describes plurilingualism as a pedagogical resource that facilitates participation. Allowing students to draw on different languages is here described as a way of lowering linguistic barriers and gradually supporting the use of English.

6.1.2. Plurilingualism in the EFL classroom

This theme concerns how teachers describe their actual classroom practices and how plurilingualism is enacted in early EFL instruction. While beliefs varied across participants, the interviews also reveal differences in how teachers translate their beliefs into classroom practice.

All teachers described the use of Swedish or other first languages as support for understanding. However, the extent and purpose of this use differed. Teachers 1, 2 and 5 described Swedish primarily as a tool for clarification, particularly when students struggled to understand instructions or new vocabulary. In these cases, Swedish functioned as a resource for scaffolding comprehension rather than as part of a broader plurilingual practice. The use of L1 was described as situational and often dependent on students' proficiency level, as Teacher 1 put it: "The weaker they are, the more Swedish words I might include, or a Swedish translation if needed."

Teachers 3, 4 and 5 described a more deliberate inclusion of students' different languages. Rather than using L1 solely for translation, they create space for students to bring in words from different languages and share linguistic knowledge with peers. This could suggest a broader view of linguistic resources beyond comprehension support. As Teacher 3 mentioned when introducing EFL in first grade:

In the earliest stages of instruction, I prefer activities that allow students to use all their languages. [...] The purpose is to encourage students to open their "language brain" and create a sense that this is a space where they can engage with languages without feeling that they need to know very much.

In this view, drawing on multiple languages becomes a way of supporting early language learning by creating a classroom environment where students feel comfortable experimenting with language.

Another recurring pattern involves encouraging students to compare languages. Teachers 2, 4 and 5 described activities where vocabulary or structures are discussed across languages, allowing students to identify similarities and differences. Teacher 2 said:

We also have many loanwords from English in Swedish. So you can kind of make the connection and see that they exist.

Teacher 5 expresses that students themselves often spontaneously make comparisons between their languages:

The students themselves often bring up other languages. Sometimes just for fun, like saying you can't use another language instead of English now. Those who speak Finnish often bring it up, saying things like, "We know Finnish. My cousin and I usually speak Finnish with each other." I usually ask them to tell us how it sounds, how you say it in Finnish.

Through these practices, teachers acknowledge that knowledge of one language can facilitate the learning of another. Students are encouraged to draw connections between English and other languages they know, which positions language learning as cumulative rather than isolated.

At the same time, two teachers describe trying to keep the classroom mainly in English. In these cases, English is prioritised, and other languages are used as little as possible. Teacher 1 motivates this approach as wanting to give students as much English practice as possible and help them feel more comfortable using the language: "The reason I try to avoid Swedish is basically so they feel brave enough to speak English, even if it doesn't come out perfectly.". Further, Teacher 3 ambivalently states:

I don't really believe in this whole English only idea, for example. I think it was mentioned during my teacher training. No, I think that would limit the students. But I don't know, maybe you could get better results if you were stricter about using English.

Although Teacher 3 presents an English only approach as potentially limiting for students, the statement also reflects some uncertainty about whether stricter use of English might produce better results. Together, these examples highlight how English may be prioritised in the classroom, while teachers simultaneously reflect on the potential limitations of an English only approach.

The teachers' approaches to language use seem to vary. While English is naturally the target language and often described as prioritised, some teachers in this study allow students to draw on their other languages to support understanding or make cross-linguistic connections. Nevertheless, English remains the central instructional language, which could indicate a tension in practice: other languages are recognised as useful, but English continues to dominate classroom interactions.

6.1.3. Plurilingualism, teacher training and policy

This theme concerns how teachers describe their preparedness to work with plurilingual approaches and the challenges they experience in relation to such practices. The interviews reveal varying levels of confidence, as well as structural and educational limitations that could influence classroom implementation.

Teacher 1, 2 and 4 expressed that plurilingualism was not something discussed in their teacher training. While some although describe positive attitudes toward plurilingual approaches, they simultaneously report uncertainty regarding how to implement them systematically. Teachers 1, 2 and 4 mention that plurilingual perspectives were not a central component of their teacher education, and teacher 2 further describes that they developed their strategies independently through experience:

From the training I had, I don't think it was enough. I've had to read up on it myself and try to keep up with what is happening.

Teachers 3 and 5 are the only ones expressing this was mentioned during training. Teacher 3 stated:

I remember that this was something we discussed at university, and I think I early on adopted a more open and permissive approach to language learning.

This discrepancy in experience from teacher training could suggest that beliefs about plurilingualism are not always matched by formal pedagogical preparation.

Another recurring pattern concerns teachers' sense of confidence when working with multiple languages. Some teachers describe feeling comfortable incorporating Swedish and other languages, particularly when they share linguistic knowledge with their students. However, others express hesitation, especially when students speak languages the teacher does not understand. Teacher 1 expressed, when asked, why they did not incorporate other languages in their EFL teaching: "I don't know those languages!". This can point out an uncertainty about how to meaningfully include those languages in classroom activities. In these cases, the teachers seem to rely more heavily on Swedish and English, which they presumably perceive as more manageable.

None of the teachers in this study reported any changes in their EFL-teaching since the implementation of Lgr22. Teacher 4 suggests that an interpretation of the amendment about plurilingualism is interpreted by teachers as:

And maybe in a way where, when you read it, you don't really reflect on it as something new. I think many people just interpret it as meaning that plurilingualism in this case simply refers to English as another language to learn in school alongside Swedish.

This may indicate that the revision of the curriculum has not necessarily led to noticeable changes in teachers' practices in this study. If the concept of plurilingualism is interpreted narrowly, it may not lead to significant changes in how teachers organise language use in the classroom.

These findings suggest that teachers' preparedness to work with plurilingual approaches varies. While two teachers report encountering plurilingual perspectives during their training, one describes developing their practices independently, and two not at all. The interviews also

indicate that uncertainty about how to incorporate multiple languages, particularly those unfamiliar to the teacher, may limit the implementation of such approaches. In addition, the teachers in this study report no noticeable changes in their EFL teaching following the introduction of Lgr22.

6.2. The three language orientations

The following section presents the results of the study's second research question: *How are different orientations towards language teaching reflected in teachers' descriptions of plurilingualism in EFL teaching in grades 1–3?*

To further explore how teachers conceptualise language use in early EFL classrooms, the findings were analysed through Ruiz's (1984) three orientations towards language: language as a problem, language as a right, and language as a resource. This framework could make it possible to examine not only what teachers describe doing in practice, but also the underlying assumptions about language that appear to shape these descriptions. When analysed through Ruiz's (1984) framework, the teachers' descriptions reveal elements of all three orientations towards language, although these rarely appear in isolation. Rather than representing fixed positions, the orientations seem to coexist and sometimes shift depending on context.

6.2.1. Language as a problem

English seems to be positioned as the target language, overall, and is often prioritised in classroom interaction. Several teachers emphasise maximising exposure to English and limiting the use of other languages, as teacher 2 explained: "So the older they get, I think it's better to use more English in teaching." which can be interpreted as reflecting aspects of a language as problem orientation. For these teachers, students' additional languages are not necessarily rejected, but they are sometimes framed as potential sources of difficulties, particularly when teachers feel uncertain about how to integrate them meaningfully.

Among the informants, only Teacher 4 provided a clear response regarding potential challenges of plurilingualism in EFL teaching:

And I suppose it's when children struggle to let go of a pattern from another language. When it becomes clearly wrong. You point it out to them again and again that this isn't the right word to use, but they still can't let go of that pattern. The best example I have is that plurilingual children often say they are going to *walk* somewhere when they actually mean they are going to *travel* somewhere. "I'm going to walk to Greece." No, you're not - that's not possible.

This could reflect elements of a language as problem orientation, where plurilingualism is associated with potential difficulties in separating linguistic systems.

Teachers 4 and 5 reflect on how their students seem to establish hierarchies between different languages. Teacher 5 explains:

Something I often think about and also experience myself as a multilingual person is that English is often seen as something impressive, like “how nice that you speak English” or that you have it as a mother tongue. But other languages are often seen as less important. If someone says they speak Kurdish, Arabic, or Russian, it’s not considered as interesting. That’s the attitude I would like to change - that every language is equally interesting and has so much to offer. For example, that students who speak Finnish should also be able to talk about it, like “this is how you say it in Finnish.” And also be able to talk about the culture that comes with a language.

Teacher 4 similarly observes:

For many students today, it’s almost as if they rank languages like which language is the best or the nicest. Instead of valuing all languages equally, they end up placing them in a hierarchy where some are worth more than others when people speak. And English is ranked very highly. I would say it’s number one.

These reflections indicate that teachers are aware of linguistic hierarchies among students, where English is often perceived as the most prestigious language, while other languages risk being perceived as less important. Such hierarchies illustrate how elements of a language as problem orientation may still shape views of plurilingualism. At the same time, Teacher 5 explicitly challenges this hierarchy by emphasising the value of all languages, which leads us on to the next orientation.

6.2.2. Language as a right

Further on, teachers describe creating space for students to use Swedish or other first languages to foster security and participation. Such descriptions resonate with a language as right orientation, where students’ linguistic repertoires are acknowledged as legitimate and connected to issues of inclusion and confidence. This is particularly visible when teachers emphasise the importance of reducing fear of speaking and ensuring that English lessons do not feel alienating. As Teacher 1 put it:

[...] you also hear Swedish. Because it will be easier for them. Especially if they don't feel safe.

This comment illustrates how the use of Swedish can function as a supportive strategy in early language learning. Rather than being viewed as an obstacle, the use of students’ first language is described as a way of creating a safe classroom environment where students feel confident participating. In this sense, allowing space for students’ familiar languages may be understood as acknowledging their linguistic rights and promoting inclusion in the classroom. Teacher 5 described how they in the beginning of first grade had to change their practice:

At the beginning of the term, I spoke only English, which scared the students. Even those who are usually considered strong students felt intimidated.

Teacher 3 also reflected in a similar way when teaching first grade:

In the beginning, I think I use quite a lot of Swedish, so the students don't feel intimidated and the English lessons don't feel strange or unfamiliar to them.

This perspective highlights how linguistic inclusion may be connected to students' sense of security, particularly in the early stages of learning a new language. It shows elements of a language as right orientation, where allowing the use of familiar languages becomes a way of supporting participation and ensuring that students feel included in the language learning process.

Teacher 2 reflects on how students' mother tongue can facilitate language learning:

And if they also receive some instruction in their home language, they develop a sense for language, which I think is important. That's why I think Swedish as a second language teaching is important, and also that they have the opportunity to receive instruction in their home language.

This reflection highlights how support in students' first languages is viewed as an important part of language learning. In this sense, Teacher 2 emphasises the importance of maintaining and developing students' mother tongue, which resonates with a language as right orientation where linguistic diversity is recognised as legitimate within the educational context.

In the same area teacher 2, 4 and 5 note that students who struggle in Swedish sometimes "shine" during English lessons. This suggests that plurilingual students may gain new opportunities for participation and recognition when their linguistic resources become relevant in the classroom. Teacher 4 notes:

Yes, absolutely. We can often make these kinds of comparisons, like: what is a word in English? What is it in Swedish? What is it in Arabic? What is it in Sorani? What is it in Assyrian, for example. Sometimes we just take a few words like that so that some of the students can also shine a little and show that this is a competence they have.

Teacher 2 makes a similar note:

I sometimes feel that the students who have come here and perhaps haven't yet learned Swedish can get a chance to shine. When we work with English, they might feel that this is something they can actually do.

Throughout these statements, these teachers emphasise the importance of recognising students' linguistic backgrounds and allowing them to draw on familiar languages in the classroom. Such

descriptions resonate with a language-as-right orientation, where linguistic diversity is connected to participation, inclusion, and recognition of students' linguistic identities.

6.2.3. Language as a resource

Furthermore, some teachers actively draw on cross-linguistic comparisons and translation as pedagogical tools, illustrating aspects of a language as resource orientation. In these instances, plurilingualism is positioned as something that can support comprehension and strengthen language awareness. Teacher 1 describes plurilingual knowledge as providing “hooks” that help students make connections between languages. This suggests that existing linguistic knowledge can support the learning of new languages:

But I also think that the more languages students have, the more “language hooks”, so to speak, they have to draw on. It gives them more ways to talk about language. So speaking several languages is not something negative.

Teachers 1 and 2 also suggest that multilingual students may benefit from their linguistic experience as they grow older, indicating how knowledge of multiple languages can contribute to broader language awareness. As Teacher 1 put it:

I mean, with younger children who are plurilingual, they might mix the languages more. But as they get older, they can benefit more from knowing several different languages.

Teacher 2 also states:

[...] But if they arrive later, they have usually already had language instruction in their home language, and sometimes in English as well. That can give them a better understanding of language and of how one learns a language. I find that this often makes things a bit easier when they are older.

These reflections resonate with a language as resource orientation, where students' existing linguistic knowledge is understood as something that can facilitate the learning of additional languages.

Throughout these examples, Teachers 1 and 2 describe drawing on students' plurilingual repertoires as pedagogical resources. Through translation, comparison, and collaborative interaction, different languages become tools that support comprehension, engagement, and language awareness.

Teacher 3 also reflects on the observation that activities involving multiple languages generate strong engagement in the classroom, as students are eager to contribute their linguistic knowledge:

When students get to say “hello” in as many languages as they can, it really feels like the classroom comes alive. Everyone wants to contribute. And then they also come up with many different ways to say it in English as well, which is fantastic.

As above, this reflects a language as resource orientation, where students’ linguistic knowledge becomes a resource for participation and learning.

As these examples show, teachers sometimes draw on students’ plurilingual repertoires as pedagogical resources. Through translation, comparison, and student interaction different languages can function as tools that support comprehension, engagement, and language awareness. At the same time, these practices take place within classrooms where English remains the central instructional language. This suggests that elements of a language as resource orientation coexist with more monolingual norms in early EFL education, rather than fully replacing them.

7. Discussion

This section will present a discussion of the study’s results divided into 5 different topics, followed by a discussion of the study’s method.

7.1. Results discussion

7.1.1. Beliefs about plurilingualism in relation to teaching practice

The first research question concerned how teachers describe their beliefs about plurilingualism in relation to their teaching practice. The results indicate that teachers generally express positive attitudes towards plurilingualism, particularly when it is understood to support comprehension, participation, and confidence in the classroom. Several teachers described allowing students to draw on Swedish or other languages to facilitate understanding, and some actively encouraged cross-linguistic comparisons to support comprehension.

These findings resonate with research suggesting that plurilingual approaches can enhance engagement and language awareness (Cutrim Schmid, 2021, pp.74–78; Chabert, 2019, p.99). In particular, the teachers’ descriptions of language comparison activities and scaffolding through L1 align with Chabert’s (2019, p.99) findings that strategic use of students’ first languages may strengthen grammatical understanding and communication in English. Similarly, when teachers describe how students gain confidence when their languages are acknowledged, this reflects research highlighting the motivational and identity-building dimensions of plurilingual pedagogies (Cutrim Schmid, 2021, pp.75–78; Sundqvist et al., 2025, p.17).

At the same time, the findings also reveal a persistent prioritisation of English. While other languages are described as supportive tools, English remains the central language of instruction. This echoes Lundberg’s (2019, p.280) observation of a lingering monolingual norm within Swedish educational discourse, despite increasingly pluralistic policy ambitions. The teachers

in this study therefore do not reject plurilingualism, rather, they appear to negotiate it within an English-dominant teaching context.

From this perspective, plurilingualism in early EFL education does not replace the traditional target-language focus but instead appears to coexist with it. This coexistence suggests that teachers operate within a tension between established monolingual teaching traditions and more recent plurilingual policy developments. In this study, plurilingual practices therefore appear less as a systematic pedagogical approach and more as situational strategies used to support students' comprehension and participation in the early stages of English learning.

7.1.2. Language orientations in teachers' descriptions

The second research question examined how Ruiz's (1984) orientations language as problem, language as right, and language as resource are reflected in teachers' descriptions. The findings of this study indicate that all three orientations are present, often within the same teacher's account.

When English is described as needing to dominate classroom interaction and when other languages are framed as potentially confusing or difficult to integrate, elements of a language-as-problem orientation emerge. This aligns with Cummins' (2007, pp.221–223) description of the “monolingual principle,” where languages are ideally kept separate and maximum exposure to the target language is prioritised.

At the same time, many teachers express concerns about students' confidence and inclusion. When they allow Swedish or other languages to reduce anxiety or ensure participation, their descriptions resonate with a language-as-right orientation. In these moments, students' linguistic repertoires are treated as legitimate and connected to issues of equity and emotional safety (Ruiz, 1984, pp.22–24; Paulsrud et al., 2020, p.307).

Several teachers also describe practices that align with a language-as-resource orientation. Cross-linguistic comparisons and reflections on similarities and differences position plurilingualism as something that can actively support learning. In these instances, languages function as cognitive tools that support comprehension and language awareness, aligning with Melo-Pfeifer's (2018, p.200) call for integrated and dynamic understandings of students' linguistic repertoires. Some of these resource-oriented descriptions can also be seen in teachers whose accounts otherwise reflect more English-dominant perspectives, which illustrates how the orientations may overlap within the same teacher's descriptions.

Importantly, these orientations rarely appear in isolation. Instead, the findings suggest that teachers move between them depending on context, age group, and perceived pedagogical needs. This supports Hult and Hornberger's (2016, p.42) argument that Ruiz's framework can illuminate underlying assumptions in language-related discourse. In this study, the orientations therefore appear less as fixed ideologies and more as negotiated positions within everyday teaching practice, where different perspectives on language coexist in teachers' descriptions of EFL teaching.

7.1.3. Teacher training, policy and the “grey area”

A central finding of this study concerns the limited role of teacher training in shaping plurilingual practices. Three participants reported that plurilingualism was not a significant part of their training. This corresponds closely with previous research indicating variation in how plurilingualism is addressed in Swedish teacher education (Paulsrud & Lundberg, 2021, p.53; Paulsrud, Juvonen & Schalley, 2023, pp.77–80).

Moreover, none of the teachers reported any changes in their EFL teaching following the implementation of Lgr22, despite the syllabus explicitly stating that students should develop their plurilingual ability (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022B, p.8). This may reflect the “grey area” between language policy and classroom practice described by Hult (2012, p.246). While policy discourse promotes plurilingual competence, teachers may interpret this in more limited ways, for example as simply learning English alongside Swedish. This may also mirror earlier curricular framings where plurilingualism was primarily associated with mother tongue instruction (Paulsrud et al., 2020, p.310).

These findings suggest that policy reform alone may not be sufficient to shift classroom practice. As previous research has shown, teachers’ beliefs, confidence, and perceived competence play a crucial role in how plurilingual approaches are enacted (Slaughter & Cross, 2020, p.39; Alasaawi, 2020, p.25). In this study, hesitation often emerged when teachers felt uncertain about how to include languages they did not understand. This highlights how the implementation of plurilingual perspectives may depend not only on policy changes but also on the extent to which teachers feel prepared to work with linguistic diversity in the classroom. Strengthening plurilingual perspectives within teacher education may therefore be an important step in supporting teachers to integrate students’ linguistic repertoires more systematically in early EFL teaching.

7.1.4. Teachers negotiating plurilingualism within monolingual norms

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that plurilingualism in early Swedish EFL education is not rejected but rather negotiated in everyday teaching practice. English remains the central instructional language, consistent with both historical EFL traditions (Lundahl, 2021, p.344) and communicative language teaching principles. At the same time, teachers demonstrate awareness of students’ diverse linguistic repertoires and, in many cases, attempt to integrate them in meaningful ways.

This coexistence reflects the broader multilingual turn described by Werner and Todeva (2022, pp.214–216), where educational practice is gradually responding to increasingly pluralistic societies, while established monolingual norms continue to persist. Rather than a complete shift from monolingual to plurilingual pedagogy, the present study suggests a hybrid space in which different language orientations overlap in teachers’ descriptions of their teaching practice.

In this sense, plurilingualism in grades 1–3 appears less as a fully established pedagogical model and more as a situated and context-dependent practice shaped by teacher beliefs, confidence, the extent of plurilingual preparation in teacher training, and the way national curriculum reforms are interpreted in practice. This highlights how the development of

plurilingual approaches in early EFL education may depend not only on policy changes but also on how teachers interpret and translate these policy ambitions into classroom practice.

7.2. Method discussion

The methodological approach of this study made it possible to explore primary school EFL teachers' beliefs about plurilingualism in relation to their teaching practice. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to elaborate on their experiences and reflections, which generated rich qualitative data. This was particularly valuable given the exploratory aim of the study and the interest in how teachers themselves conceptualise plurilingualism in EFL education years 1-3.

At the same time, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Since the study relies on interviews, the findings are based on teachers' descriptions of their beliefs and practices rather than direct observations of classroom interaction. While interviews are well suited for exploring teachers' perspectives, what participants report in interviews may not always fully correspond to how language use unfolds in classroom practice. Observational data could therefore have complemented the interviews and provided a more detailed understanding of how plurilingual approaches are enacted in everyday teaching.

Another limitation concerns the relatively small sample size and the recruitment process. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling and self-selection, which means that the teachers who chose to participate may already have had an interest in language issues. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as representative of Swedish primary school EFL teachers in general. However, the purpose of the study was not statistical generalisation but to identify variations in how teachers understand and approach plurilingualism.

Finally, the analytical framework also influenced how the interview material was interpreted. Ruiz's (1984) language orientations provided a useful lens for identifying underlying perspectives on language in teachers' descriptions. However, teachers' beliefs are often complex and cannot always be neatly categorised within predefined orientations. There is therefore a risk that such a framework simplifies nuanced statements. In this study, the orientations were therefore treated as overlapping and dynamic rather than as strictly separate categories, reflecting the complexity of teachers' descriptions. Despite this limitation, the framework helped illuminate patterns in how teachers position plurilingualism in relation to their teaching practice.

8. Conclusion

Overall, the findings show that plurilingualism in grades 1–3 is approached with generally positive attitudes yet enacted within an English-dominant framework. This study therefore contributes to research on plurilingualism in early EFL education by highlighting how such perspectives are negotiated within existing English-dominant teaching practices.

While teachers acknowledge students' additional languages as supportive resources, English remains the central instructional language. Hence, plurilingual practices appear to be negotiated within existing monolingual norms rather than fully replacing them.

The analysis through Ruiz's (1984) framework reveals that the three language orientations coexist not only across the group of teachers, but in some cases also within the same teacher's descriptions. This suggests that teachers do not appear to hold one fixed orientation towards plurilingualism; rather, they move between different perspectives depending on context and pedagogical considerations. Such coexistence may be expected in early EFL education, where teachers balance the goal of English exposure with students' need for comprehension, security, and participation. At the same time, it may also reflect uncertainty about how plurilingual perspectives should be implemented in practice, since teachers appear to negotiate plurilingualism within an English-dominant instructional tradition rather than through a fully developed plurilingual pedagogy.

The study further highlights a gap between curriculum intentions and classroom practice, as teachers report limited training in plurilingual pedagogy and no significant changes following the implementation of Lgr22. This suggests that the successful integration of plurilingual perspectives in early EFL education may depend not only on policy reform, but also on stronger and more systematic support within teacher education. The findings challenge the assumption that policy shifts automatically translate into classroom change.

8.1. Further research

Future research could examine how plurilingual approaches are enacted in early EFL classrooms over time and how they affect students' language development and confidence. Further studies should also investigate how teacher education can more systematically prepare teachers for plurilingual pedagogy, as well as include students' perspectives to better understand how such practices are experienced in the classroom.

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10. Appendix 1 Information Letter



Information om examensarbete rörande lärares syn på flerspråkighet inom engelskundervisning

Jag heter Karin Eriksson och skriver mitt examensarbete inom Grundlärarprogrammet F-3 vid Högskolan Dalarna.

I läroplanen (Lgr22) som implementerades den 1 juli 2022 har Skolverket för första gången valt att använda begreppet flerspråkighet i en kursplan som berör alla elever, nämligen den för engelska. Då flerspråkighet tidigare har varit begränsat till kursplanerna för modersmål och minoritetsspråk avser denna studie att undersöka lärares uppfattningar om flerspråkighet kopplat till just engelskundervisning i årskurserna 1–3. Du tillfrågas härmed om deltagandet i denna studie.

Du som medverkar i studien kommer genom en semistrukturerad intervju få svara på frågor om flerspråkighet i engelskundervisning. Undersökningen kommer att ta ungefär 30 minuter. Vi ses antingen digitalt eller i person där jag som intervjuare kommer till dig på avsatt tid. Urvalet av informanter till studien sker genom ett självselektionsurval där de deltagande ska vara verksamma lärare som undervisar engelska i årskurserna 1–3.

Förutsatt att du godkänner deltagandet i studien, kommer intervjutillfället att spelas in digitalt för att senare transkriberas. De inspelade intervjuerna kommer att ligga till grund för examensarbetet. Inspelningen av intervjun och intervjutranskriptionerna kommer att förvaras på ett lösenordskyddat Högskolan Dalarna studentkonto fram till dess att uppsatsen är godkänd (eller i max 3 år). Materialet är åtkomstskyddat och hanteras enligt Högskolan Dalarnas rutiner så att obehöriga inte kan ta del av det. Transkriptioner av intervjuerna kommer att pseudonymiseras i samband med bearbetning av materialet. Din identitet kommer inte att framgå i presentationen i uppsatsen.

Undersökningen kommer att presenteras i form av en uppsats vid Högskolan Dalarna, samt publiceras i DIVA (Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet).

Ditt deltagande i undersökningen är helt frivilligt. Du kan när som helst avbryta ditt deltagande utan närmare motivering.

Ytterligare upplysningar lämnas av nedanstående ansvariga:

Student
Karin Eriksson
h25karer@du.se

Handledare
Katherina Dodou
kdo@du.se

11. Appendix 2 Consent form



HÖGSKOLAN
DALARNA

Samtyckesblankett

Jag har tagit del av muntlig och skriftlig information om studien rörande lärares syn på flerspråkighet inom engelskundervisning och behåller den skriftliga informationen.

Jag bekräftar med min underskrift nedan att jag deltar i ovan studie frivilligt och godkänner att intervjun spelas in med ljudupptagning.

Ort och datum:

Underskrift:

Namnförtydligande:

12. Appendix 3 Interview guide

Intervjuguide

1. Vilken typ utav utbildning har du?
2. Hur många år har du arbetat som lärare?
3. Hur många år har du undervisat i engelska F-3?
8. Vilka/vilken årskurser undervisar du i engelska just nu?
9. Vilka språk förekommer i din klass?
10. Vilka språk har du?
11. Hur skulle du beskriva en "flerspråkig elev"?
Möjliga följdfrågor:
 - Vad menar du när du använder begreppet *flerspråkig*?
 - Räkna elever som talar mer än ett språk hemma men inte läser/skriver på alla språk som flerspråkiga?
 - Spelar graden av språkbehärskning någon roll i din definition? På vilket sätt?
 - Är flerspråkighet något statistiskt eller något som kan förändras över tid, enligt dig?
14. Vilka språk använder du i engelskundervisningen och i vilka situationer?
 - Gör du olika i olika årskurser?
15. Vilka språk använder eleverna under dina engelskalektioner?
16. Tycker du det är viktigt att eleverna får möjlighet att använda sin flerspråkighet (språkliga resurser) i engelskan?
 - På vilket sätt tror du att det kan vara bra/inte spela roll/vara ett hinder?
12. På vilket sätt, om alls, har införandet av Lgr22 påverkat din undervisning i engelska när det gäller flerspråkiga elever?
20. Hur ser du på elevernas flerspråkighet i relation till deras lärande i engelska?
21. Kan du ge exempel på när flerspråkighet varit en styrka i din undervisning i engelska?
22. Kan du ge exempel på när flerspråkighet varit en utmaning i din undervisning i engelska?
21. Hur vill du att språkanvändningen ska se ut i engelskan – både för dig och för eleverna?
22. I vilken utsträckning upplever du att du är rustad, genom utbildning eller fortbildning, att undervisa flerspråkigt i engelska?
24. Finns det något mer du vill tillägga om flerspråkighet i engelskundervisning i år 1–3?