

# Teaching pronunciation in Swedish as a second language

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## Abstract

*As global migration affects Sweden in a similar way as many other countries, this contribution aims to trigger the discussion about how teaching of pronunciation for this group of students might be developed in consideration to new foreign accents in Swedish.*

*A new project is presented which aims to expand and update the course material for the education of future teachers in Swedish as a foreign language. Due to the new patterns of global migration in the last decades, the valuable material that exists so far needs to be expanded and needs therefore the addition of further language analyses and descriptions.*

## Introduction

New patterns in global migration affects Sweden in a similar way as many other countries concerning the education in second language learning. According to national statistics from 2010, 15% of the population in Sweden is born in another country (www.scb.se). More than 90000 persons were registered in the program Swedish for immigrants (SFI) during 2009. National statistics (www.scb.se) is available about the country of origin of immigrants in Sweden. This tells us something about the native languages, but gives not a clear picture about which type of students there are in the classroom. The most common first languages among immigrants in Sweden change over time and due to global migration. New analyses of Swedish foreign accents need to be expanded to some of these languages. This is the first step in a new project which aims to expand and update the course material for the education of future teachers in Swedish as a foreign language.

Everyone who has another first language than Swedish or speaks Swedish on a daily basis with one or both legal guardians has the right to receive education in the subject *Swedish as a second language*, due to The Swedish national office of School and Education (Skolverket 2000a, b).

When learning a second language the speaker's first language plays a role, more or less (e.g. Abrahamsson 2009, Engstrand 2007). Depending on the grammar and the phonology of the first language there are different

difficulties in learning a second language. Teaching Swedish as a second language is not only about phonetic variation in Swedish which is not only based on dialectal diversity, but comprises even characteristics of foreign accents of those residents in Sweden, which do not have Swedish as their first language. Therefore, teachers need more information about the differences between the learners first and second languages and what kind of pronunciation problems there might be depending on the speakers native language. Deviant pronunciation might depend on the speaker's articulation habits as well as different perceptual cues between the L1 and the L2 speakers (Flege 1995). There is quite some agreement among the teachers of Swedish as a foreign language that intelligibility of L2-Swedish is most difficult for the L1-speakers of the South East Asian languages, which mainly seems to be related to the lack of complex consonant clusters in these languages, which are common in Swedish. Introduction of vowels to overcome consonant clustering also disturbs the language rhythm and perturbs the prosodic continuity.

Different studies show that prosodic features, such as intonation, stress and the quantity in Swedish, play an important role when learning to speak Swedish with a minimum of foreign accent (e.g. Bannert 2004, Engstrand 2007). In a comprehension-based learning program, Trofimovich et al (2009) found out that listening and reading English – but not speaking – as a second language improved the phonological

development and the pronunciation to the extent that the learners sounded just about as fluent to be easily understood.

### **Foreign accent and attitudes**

Immigrants sometimes are judged by native speakers based on their foreign accent. There are studies indicating that pronunciation is important, not only for understanding, but for the listener's attitude to the second language speakers (e.g. Boyd 2004). Torstensson (2010) observed that listeners made differences when appraising speakers based on the type of foreign accented Swedish. Although his focus was on foreign accent in a legal setting, he also pointed out that people evaluate the speakers personal qualities depending on the foreign accent outside the court room.

Teachers should be aware of these results when teaching Swedish as a second language and therefore maybe even change focus of what is important in Swedish pronunciation and prosody. Pronunciation and accent is closely related to the speaker's identity and a slight foreign accent might be acceptable. Some types of foreign accents might even give a higher prestige to the speaker. One has therefore to ask whether it is desirable for the student to aim for the complete deletion of a foreign accent in Swedish. It is also important to know which components in the second language are more or less difficult to learn in order to understand how to teach these students. Priority must be given to everyday conversation in their new second language, for most of the students.

### **Immigrant languages**

In the eighties of the last century, Bannert (2004, (first edition 1990)) and Garlén (1988) have done a good pursuit in collecting and describing immigrant languages and compared them to Swedish, partly with the implication to point out the potential difficulties that are likely to occur for the students of particular native languages. These studies contain descriptions of a varied number of languages, merely the phonological systems of the different languages, and also an analysis of observed pronunciation problems, based on a large amount of data collected from second language learners of Swedish. Bannert (2004) also ranks the different languages according to their distance in phonology from the Swedish language, based on the number of observed pronunciation errors and

difficulties produced by the native speakers of the diverse languages collected in the material. Bannert also gives pedagogical advice on how to approach pronunciation difficulties. Besides the fact that this lecture book is out of print, the foreign accent analyses need to be expanded.

Thorén (2008) focuses on prosodic features of Swedish, mainly quantity aspects, and on how to approach them pedagogically in a second language learning situation of Swedish, without specification of the learners' first languages. McAllister et al. (1999) also are attracted by quantity aspects in Swedish and how they are produced and perceived by native speakers of English, Spanish and Estonian. However their work has more implication for the explanation of a foreign accent and does not include any pedagogical dimension.

### **Most frequent languages in Sweden today**

The first step towards the expansion and update of the teaching material requires an analysis of which languages are more common as native languages among the learners of Swedish nowadays compared to the analyses introduced above (Bannert 2004, Garlén 1988). Swedish for immigrants (SFI) is a program for education in Swedish as a second language. All immigrants, who live in Sweden, are welcome to participate, irrespective their first language. The Swedish national office of School and Education (Skolverket) provides statistics about the native languages of the students who are enrolled in the program Swedish for immigrants (SFI). The statistics is calculated for different groups of learners, according to their enrollment for adult classes or their status in being part of the obligatory school education, i.e. children and teenagers. Table 1 gives an overview of the ten most frequent L1 of the adult learners who were registered for the years 2005-2009. It has been refrained from presenting all available statistics, as a comparison shows that there is a great amount of overlap between the L1s of the adult learners and the L1s of younger students.

It is obvious that Arabic, regardless dialect, is the most common language among immigrants learning Swedish as a second language. The increase of adult students speaking Arabic is shown in Table 1. As seen in Table 1, there has been a shift in ranking among the most frequent languages during 2005-2009. Languages such as Spanish, English, Kurdish and Bosnian/Kroatian/Serbian were more frequent a few years ago in the national

program. Somali on the other hand has clearly become more frequent. Therefore, new course material, including updated information about the most frequent languages nowadays, is needed for the students at the universities in the program of “Teaching Swedish as a Foreign Language”.

*Table 1. L1 of the adult students registered in the national program for Swedish for immigrants (SFI) for the years 2005-2009, in percentage [%] (taken from www.scb.se).*

Rank	Language	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005
1	Arabic	23,9	24,8	22,9	18,1	17,2
2	Somali	6,8	5,7	5,6	5,2	4,1
3	Thai	6,0	6,0	5,9	6,2	6,9
4	Polish	5,4	5,7	5,6	4,5	4,0
5	Spanish	4,5	4,5	4,7	5,2	6,0
6	English	4,1	3,8	3,6	4,1	5,1
7	Kurdish/ North Kurdish	3,6	3,9	4,5	4,7	4,7
8	Persian	3,1	2,9	3,3	3,6	3,7
9	Bosnian/ Kroatian/ Serbian	2,9	3,2	4,0	4,7	4,8
10	Turkish	2,9	2,9	3,0	3,3	3,8
	others	36,7	36,6	37,0	40,3	39,7

An enquiry addressed to teachers currently engaged in teaching Swedish as a foreign language (scholarly year 2010-11) was undertaken, by the authors. Most of the teachers work in the southern part of Sweden. The ranking of the occurrence of the different L1s were assembled according to different components: a numbered list was provided where the encountered L1s could be ranked in the questionnaire, according to their apprehended frequency. Furthermore, the number of students was asked for representing the different L1s. However not all teachers filled in the figures so that measure could not count alone for the frequency of occurrence. Table 2 shows the ranking of L1s gathered from the authors' questionnaire filled in by the teachers. It was chosen to group together the languages Persian, Dari and Pashto, as some teachers did not made the distinction in the questionnaire, coherent with not making a difference between different Arabic or Chinese variants.

*Table 2. Most frequent languages acquired by the authors' enquiry*

Rank	Language
1	Arabic
2	Somali
3	Bosnian/Kroatian/Serbian
4	Albanian
5	Chinese
6	Turkish
7	Kurdish
7	Vietnamese
9	Russian
10	Persian/Dari/Pashto
11	Thai

When comparing Table 1 and 2 it is clear that there are some similarities concerning languages in the top of the rankings, namely Arabic and Somali. There is also an interesting difference between languages such as Thai and Bosnian/Kroatian/Serbian. Some languages occur only in one of the tables and it is unclear what languages ‘others’ include in Table 1. The differences between the two tables might be explained by the amount of answers, time and place differences.

Further statistics about the frequency of occurrence of various languages in Sweden is also presented in Dahl (2010). His data however accommodates languages that are rather unlikely to be represented in the classrooms of learners of Swedish as a second language, like other Scandinavian languages.

## Spelling and pronunciation

One interesting question is if the speaker's pronunciation of the second language has any impact of the spelling in the new language. In a study by Andersson (1981) he argue that since the phonological system of the learner's first language has an impact of the second language that might influence the spelling in Swedish. Andersson found that it is mostly the Swedish vowels å, ä, ö, the length of the consonants and the different spelling of sounds like [o], [s] and [ç] that gives the second language learner problems with their spelling in Swedish.

Except from the study by Andersson there is only a few student papers about this subject

(Hökbring 2008, Vitikka 2009). In this ongoing project the relationship between spelling and pronunciation will be studied using recordings of children and papers written by the same children at a school in Rosengård, Malmö.

## Further analysis procedure

Several steps have to be taken for the compilation of updated course material. This includes generation and revision of phonological descriptions and the making and analysis of recordings of Swedish speech of speakers with different L1s. The analysis of foreign accent features in Swedish due to the L1 of the speaker is aimed to be based on recordings of the L2-Swedish learners. These recordings will contain read words and phrases and spontaneous speech, like the description of a picture. One extra idea is to let the L2-Swedish learners try to imitate native Swedish speech. These imitations will also be recorded and taken into account for foreign accent analysis, basically in respect to prosodic features.

The phonological systems of the most common immigrant languages and the typical foreign accent features need to be made clearer, including more listening examples to the future teachers of Swedish as to what extent they were presented in the current material, so that they can help the L2-learners of Swedish to improve their communication skills.

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