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Using workplace learning to support the linguistic integration of adult migrants – lessons from a decade of work in Sweden

Abstract: This paper reviews learning from a decade-long series of large-scale projects to support the linguistic integration of adult migrants employed in adult social care in the Stockholm region. Despite the assumption that employment was in itself a guarantee of language learning, at the outset it was found that for many migrants, secure long-term employment in the sector had led to very limited progress learning Swedish. The projects set out to remedy this, developing a holistic approach that enabled the sharing of responsibility for language development.

Résumé : L'article revient sur les leçons de plusieurs projets d'envergure menés pendant une décennie pour soutenir l'intégration linguistique des migrants adultes employés dans les services de protection sociale des adultes dans la région de Stockholm. Alors qu'on supposait que l'emploi constitue en soi une garantie de l'apprentissage de la langue, il s'est avéré que les progrès en suédois de beaucoup de migrants ayant un emploi durable dans ce secteur ont été très limités. Les projets mis en œuvre pour remédier à cet état de fait ont adopté une approche globale et une vision partagée des responsabilités pour le développement de la langue.

1 Background to the work

1.1 Migration in Sweden

Sweden's population today is about 10 million, of which around 1.5 million (15%) are migrants (i.e. residents born in other countries), 65% of whom come from non-EU countries.

Migration has been a source of population increase in Sweden only since the 1940s, when importation of labour, primarily from other Nordic countries and

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in particular Finland, started to reverse many decades of net emigration. This managed labour importation continued until the late 1960s, alongside the arrival of political refugees from Eastern Europe, until 1967 when immigration controls were introduced due to labour market saturation. From then on, most arriving migrants have been refugees and their relatives from non-EU countries, e.g. former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America (Swedish Institute 2015).

1.2 The linguistic integration of adult migrants in Sweden

The main vehicle for the linguistic integration of adult migrants is *Svenskundervisning för invandrare* (SFI, ‘Swedish for immigrants’), created in 1965. Its aim is to ensure that immigrants have the Swedish they need to function at a basic level. The programme is free for migrants registered with their local authority and participation is voluntary, though welfare benefits may sometimes be made conditional on participation. It aims to take learners aged 16 and over from complete beginner to CEFR level B1. Some of the SFI programmes may include work placements. For adults wishing to study beyond level B1, courses (not necessarily free) are available through adult education centres.

In practice, migrants themselves tend to prioritise paid work over formal study of Swedish. A recent survey (Örstadius 2016) found that only a minority of SFI learners complete their programme, some not attending at all and many of those who started leaving as soon as they secure employment. The survey also found that those who did complete the programme were more likely to be in work eight years later.

Historically, policy makers had not been greatly concerned by migrants leaving SFI prematurely to start work, due to an assumption that employment itself was a direct route to linguistic integration, i.e. once employed, the migrant was sure to acquire Swedish. More recently, however, doubts have emerged regarding just how much language development unsupported employment offers to migrants (Sandwall 2010, 2013).

1.3 Workforce development in Stockholm

That approach had its origins in a large skills development programme for public sector workers launched in the early 2000s by the City of Stockholm. Over a four-year period, some 45,000 workers received vocational education and training (VET) through this voluntary programme, including some 1,400 care workers

(Johnsson, Högberg and Wallenberg 2007). It became evident to employers, however, that the programme was not reaching a cohort of staff who were clearly reluctant to participate. Even when managers succeeded in pressuring these individuals to enrol, results remained poor.

Investigation by the project leaders suggested that this resistance was linked to lack of confidence. It was also realised that a large proportion of these reluctant learners – particularly in adult social care – were migrant staff, many of whom had only limited Swedish. These low language levels among experienced workers (Table 1) came as a shock to the system, directly contradicting the assumption that employment guaranteed acquisition of language skills.

Table 1: Staff profiles from SpråkSam project (2009–2011), based on self-reporting by 253 migrants employed in adult social care and participating in the project’s workplace learning programme.

Years employed in elderly care		Years in school*	
0–6 years	21 %	0–6 years	20 %
7–9 years	31 %	7–9 years	18 %
Over 10 years	48 %	10–12 years	38 %
		Over 12 years	24 %

* May mean “a few days a week, when there was no war”

This led to consultation between the City of Stockholm’s competence development project and the National Centre for Swedish as a Second Language. Two questions arose. The first was a workforce development question: how to help staff with limited Swedish improve both their Swedish and their vocational skills? The second question focused on linguistic integration: How to realise the potential of work for language learning?

Between 2007 and 2013, an extended series of projects investigated these two questions in the context of adult social care workforce development in the Stockholm region. These projects began with the state-funded APU project (2007–2008), then continued with the SpråkSam (2009–2011) and ArbetSam (2011–2013), projects funded through the European Social Fund (SGRC 2009, 2011, 2013). These projects were followed by a European transfer-of-innovation project, TDAR (2013–2015), which explored the results of the Stockholm projects in Belgium, Germany, Spain and the UK (SGRC 2015).

Alongside those projects, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare funded a three-year research project to deepen understanding of written and oral interaction in the working life of carers and to investigate

what strategies and techniques the carers develop that help them complete their work effectively and overcome possible language and literacy-related problems (Jansson, Karlsson and Nikolaidou 2014). Findings from this research informed work in the SpråkSam and ArbetSam projects.

2 The work

2.1 Skills development in adult social care

The overall workforce development objective was to help adult social care providers to modernize their services to cope with growing demand for increasingly complex services. High on this agenda was the professionalization of care workers, i.e. developing the enhanced knowledge, skills and understanding staff require to deliver, e.g., person-centred dementia care.

The existing workforce development model for the sector was straightforward: recruit new entrants to the labour market, pre-qualified via relevant upper-secondary school vocational courses. From the 1990s onward, however, this system had struggled to supply sufficient staff to the sector, obliging employers to recruit unqualified adults, often migrants with limited Swedish.

Once in employment, moreover, access for these staff to formal learning of Swedish was very limited, due to the structure of both SFI and VET and also to the acute operational and funding constraints on employers. The nub of the matter, then, was that staff could not be released for formal learning (of either Swedish or care skills) and that learning was only available in education centres.

The challenge therefore was to create a new workforce development model consistent with the needs and constraints of both staff and employers.

2.2 Development of the ArbetSam model

Over the course of the three projects (APU, SpråkSam and ArbetSam), a comprehensive system of workplace learning, incorporating formal, informal and non-formal learning, was developed (SGRC 2013). The formal learning (delivered in the workplace by care trainers team-teaching with SFI teachers) gave staff opportunities to achieve national vocational qualifications while improving their Swedish language skills. The approach created two new roles to harness the non-formal learning opportunities of management systems (i.e. supervision, team meetings etc.), including a workplace language advocate and a reflective discussion leader. Both were voluntary roles designed for care staff (with the ap-

proval and support of their manager), who received training in the roles from project staff. These roles, together with the incorporation into formal learning of constant reference to daily work activity, also aimed to support as much informal learning as possible through everyday work activity and interactions with colleagues.

The approach was inclusive, addressing needs of all staff, migrant as well as non-migrant, and partnership-based, connecting employers, VET and SFI learning providers. It focused on reflective learning, with language development for all staff (SGRC 2013).

2.3 Large scale projects

The projects themselves, particularly SpråkSam and ArbetSam, were large scale, providing formal learning in care and Swedish language skills to more than 1000 staff in the Stockholm region. Programmes included three hours of formal workplace study per week over terms of 40 weeks, typically for one to two years. In addition, the projects delivered significant amounts of training for managers, key personnel in more than 100 workplaces, employing 10,000 staff.

The projects involved extensive partnership working between the Stockholm Gerontology Research Centre, local authorities, care providers, VET providers, SFI, and researchers from the universities of Stockholm and Södertörn, in addition to co-operation with the Swedish Municipal Workers' Union, Stockholm County Board and, finally, partners in other European countries.

3 Outcomes and conclusions

3.1 Key elements of the approach for the linguistic integration of adult migrants at work

In relation to the two questions this work addressed (“How to help staff with limited Swedish improve both their Swedish and their vocational skills?” and “How to realise potential of work for language learning?”), the following points can be made:

- This was a sector-based approach that promoted workforce development linked to quality improvement.
- It treated language as a core vocational competence, something all staff needed to do their jobs properly.

- Managers were engaged as full partners in all aspects of the learning process (planning, delivery, evaluation).
- The two new roles created for staff, i.e. the reflective discussion leader and language advocate (champion), were key to sustaining the workplace focus on language and offering individual colleagues ad hoc support.
- Sustainable language development was achieved through via non-formal and informal learning, embedded into workplace routines and requiring no external funding.
- The approach demonstrated the potential of cooperation between education systems and working life.

3.2 Lessons for LIAM

Finally, then, what are the lessons for the linguistic integration of adult migrants?

- Clearly, work itself offers no guarantee of language learning – it may even be negative. With support, however, that same work can provide real opportunities for language development – and significantly, learning at work may be the only way to support certain groups of migrants.
- Responsibility for language development must be shared between worker, employer, colleagues and state.
- Linking language learning to job learning is motivational for individuals, but engagement from managers is key to individual progress. The learner needs to see that their manager cares about their learning.
- Cooperation between education and workplace on structural, organisational and individual levels is essential and building structures for this to happen is necessary.

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