

Nobody's darling? Swedish for adult immigrants: A critical perspective

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ABSTRACT

The elementary Swedish language program for adult immigrants (Sfi) is in many ways a privileged language program, as it is supported by an official language policy and is part of an integration policy ensuring all immigrants the right to free language tuition. However, after 40 years of practice, it still represents a low-status activity in search of recognition. After periods of intense pedagogic development, informed by research within applied linguistics, Sfi, as a field of expertise, now runs the risk of stagnation in a system of short-term tendering characterised by conflicts of interest, perspectives and values regarding the role and responsibility of the language program. In municipalities strained by poor finances and requirements to improve employment rates, Sfi professionals find it hard to claim their expertise. Long-term goals for immigrants to achieve personal and professional development and future citizenship are often overshadowed by demands for more efficient language training to speed up entrance to the labour market. Ignorance of important cognitive, sociocultural and affective aspects of second-language learning often characterises the official debates in which the time and effort it takes to learn another language and come to terms with another culture are often underestimated. This article gives an outline of the professional development of Sfi from a critical perspective, along with an overview of some key research within the field.

Introduction

The elementary Swedish language program for adult immigrants (Sfi) has been running for more than 40 years. However, its history is not one of great success in the way the story has been told or in how it has been referred to in official debates. A report from a nationwide evaluation of the program, undertaken by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket 1997), was ironically given the title *Vem älskar Sfi? (Who loves Sfi?) Utvärdering av svenskundervisning för invandrare – en utbildning mellan två stolar (An evaluation of the Swedish for immigrant language program – an education between two chairs)*, draws attention to conflicting views on the role and status of the program. Some consider the program should meet

changing labour-market demands and others see the program as fulfilling longer-term goals of personal and professional development and future citizenship. These different views on the primary role of Sfi are mirrored in conflicting opinions of who should take responsibility for the program. In this paper we discuss the development of Sfi from a sociopolitical perspective and also focus on theoretical influences and key research before we conclude with some reflections on current trends, recurring dilemmas and future challenges.

Sweden as an immigrant nation

Since the Second World War immigration to Sweden has gradually increased, changing the country from a relatively homogeneous society to one of considerable ethnic and linguistic diversity. From a European perspective, Swedish immigration figures are equal to Germany, higher than the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom, and significantly higher than Denmark, Norway and Finland. When considering the proportion of immigrants in relation to total population more globally, Swedish immigration equals the United States of America and exceeds nations such as Canada and Australia (Integrationsverket 2005a). During the 1950s and 1960s economic growth in Sweden led to large-scale immigration of labour from southern European countries such as Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia and from other Nordic countries, especially Finland. Today, Sweden is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the industrialised world, with 12.5% of its nine million people being born in another country and another 800 000 having one or both parents born abroad. Immigrants in Sweden come from more than 200 countries and form an extremely diverse group in terms of social class, ethnicity, gender, mother-tongue, previous education, professional experience, age and grounds for settling in Sweden, with the most common being family ties.

Until the mid-1970s Sweden had no official policy regulating the introduction and settlement of immigrants. However, in 1975 the parliament endorsed an integration policy, with the overall objective of 'equal rights, responsibilities and obligations for all' (Integrations- och jämställdhetsdepartementet 2007). This policy still basically applies in Sweden and implies that integration is a common concern and the responsibility of most social agencies. Since 1991 targets for the integration of refugees and other immigrants have been described in agreements involving national and, increasingly, regional and local agencies. The overall goal of these agreements is to 'focus society's efforts on providing circumstances for immigrants' self-support, education and participation as

part of society' during an introduction period (Integrationsverket 2006). This period is defined as 'the period of time during which the individual receives customised support in order to increase his or her opportunities to achieve a longer-term target, self-support and participation as part of society' (Integrationsverket 2006). The introduction period is limited to about two years and activities almost always include Sfi.

The term *refugee* refers to an immigrant who has been granted a residence permit according to the Geneva Convention and for whom the municipality receives a government grant. The term *other immigrants* refers to immigrants with a residence permit, often granted on the grounds of family ties. For this category of immigrants, the municipality does not receive a grant, which means that refugees might be offered a more intensive and varied introduction program.

The elementary Swedish language program for adult immigrants is in many ways a privileged second-language program, as it is supported by an official language policy, which states that 'everyone is to have a right to language: to develop and learn Swedish, to develop and use their own mother tongue and national minority language, and to have the opportunity to learn foreign languages' (Kulturdepartementet 2005/06). The program is also part of an integration policy that ensures all immigrants have the right to free language provision and financial support while studying, with no legal limitation on hours of provision. Five hundred and twenty-five hours is stipulated but this is regarded as a guideline and is interpreted differently by municipalities.

From a pilot project to an established program

The government started to finance tuition in the Swedish language on a preliminary basis in 1965 and the learning of Swedish was considered a basic prerequisite for the successful settlement of new arrivals. The tuition was organised through study circles, within private study associations with various ideological and political affiliations, and courses were initially run as evening classes once or twice a week. These courses were based on a non-authoritarian view of teaching, where the circle leader acted more as an organiser than a teacher. Overall, there was no formal curriculum and no formal training requirements for teachers.

A regulation introduced in the early 1970s meant that Sfi classes could also be organised during working hours in larger workplaces. Such provision was a joint responsibility of the state, trade unions and employers, and gave each immigrant worker the right to 200 hours of free language tuition. Swedish language provision for unemployed immigrants grew in the mid-

1970s due to a deepening economic recession and growing unemployment. As a consequence, tuition increasingly came to be organised as part of labour market training programs and was gradually transferred from the private study associations to AMU Centres (Labour Market Training Centres) run by the state. By the end of the 1970s a substantial part of the Sfi tuition was, however, still carried out as a preliminary pilot activity in private study associations, with no formal curriculums or requirements for teachers. It was not until 1986, after several years of deliberations, following the final report by a Parliamentary Sfi Committee, that Sfi finally became a permanent education program with a formal curriculum and some modest teacher qualification requirements. Seven hundred hours of tuition were now divided into an elementary and a supplementary course. The municipalities could choose to organise the elementary course within public adult education or leave the provision to study associations or folk high schools, while the supplementary course was to be provided by the National Labour Board or study associations.

The following ten years were characterised by a number of studies that were prompted by dissatisfaction with the effectiveness and flexibility of provision. Since the division into elementary and supplementary courses was seen to support an ineffective system split between providers, a new reform in 1991 introduced a more coherent state-funded system of provision, with the municipality as the sole responsible provider. This reform coincided with a major change in the Swedish public school system when responsibility for public education was transferred to the municipalities. Still, the national objectives for public education were to be laid down by the Swedish Parliament. In the new decentralised system, the municipalities determine how schools are run and consequently no guidelines on methodology are included in national syllabuses. The Sfi syllabus was included in the new national goal-based curricular system in 1994, and in 1996 a national Sfi test, issued twice a year, was introduced as part of the national public education test system. Sfi is not always considered a high priority by municipalities, and the decentralisation of public education has led to local government interests, competitive tendering and cost-effectiveness increasingly influencing the program, mostly in terms of rapid throughput.

Two main factors contributed to the issuing of another syllabus in 2003. The first was a strong demand for individualised learner-centred instruction (cf Burns 2006; Cooke 2006). The second was a need to deal with the high dropout rate from Sfi, which was said to be due to the undifferentiated Sfi course lacking short-term attainable goals. A four-

course system, within three differently paced study tracks, was introduced to meet the needs of individuals with different backgrounds, prerequisites and goals. The overall goal of Sfi was to provide students with the opportunity to develop their abilities to communicate in spoken and written Swedish in everyday situations, different social settings and in their working lives. The objectives described in the new syllabus also focused on aspects of language competence, language awareness, cultural comparisons and civics. Moreover, the syllabus stressed the importance of individualised needs-based language instruction and the need to combine and integrate Sfi with employment, other study programs and work experience.

A 2006 evaluation of the new system reported positive results in terms of more transparent goals and a higher degree of flexibility vis-à-vis individual needs (Skolverket 2006d). The fact that the new system made it possible to exit the program with a grade after each course was, however, identified as a problem, since it seemed to encourage early termination of programs, particularly when the desire to move immigrants and refugees off municipal financial support overshadowed longer-term goals (Skolverket 2006c, 2006d). Although immigrants have the right to re-enter tuition, this has not always been encouraged by municipal agents responsible for their financial support.

The rationale behind the introduction of the most recent syllabus in 2007 was a perceived need to clarify the role and responsibility of Sfi as first and foremost an educational program devoted to language instruction (Skolverket 2007). The syllabus also stipulated 15 hours of instruction per week. The need to learn how to communicate in everyday contexts in society is still emphasised, but civics goals were removed from the syllabus. The emphasis on Sfi as a labour-market instrument is mirrored in an increasingly strong demand that Sfi should focus on work-related communication skills. Consequently, many municipalities now put great efforts into organising periods of practical work experience and courses targeting rapid employment, even in the early stages of Sfi.

Considering the fact that 23% of Sfi students have less than seven years of schooling prior to entering the program (Skolverket 2006b), an important change in the 2007 syllabus is the integration of adult literacy tuition into Sfi. Literacy is preferably integrated into Sfi courses but can be studied as a separate course. Literacy instruction is almost always given in Swedish, but can also be provided in a first language.

Theoretical influences on the curricular and pedagogical development of Sfi

The impact on Sfi of changing theoretical views of language learning has been considerable. An early and influential milestone in this respect was the introduction in 1967 of a Swedish language course for immigrants. The material was based on a textbook supported by radio and television programs and was published by Sveriges Radio (The Swedish Broadcasting Corporation). The manual was an introduction to teaching techniques in line with a modified audiolingual method (in Sweden referred to as the *Direct Method*), and lessons were based on everyday dialogues in which vocabulary and grammar were introduced according to a strictly graded progression, in accordance with a structural view of language and behaviouristic learning theory. This was also the method later recommended in the first 1971 Sfi curriculum.

Criticism of this mechanical view of learning resulted in the 1978 release of new goals and guidelines, based on a cognitive view of the learning process. Learner experiences, attitudes and feelings about their learning were stressed in line with progressive pedagogy and the ideas of scholars such as Rogers (1969) and Freire (1970). At this time many Sfi teachers adopted a thematic approach to language teaching, which was introduced through a nationwide in-service program. This was seen as a way of linking the content of instruction to the needs and experiences of learners. Textbooks with an adapted, simplified and trivial content were often abandoned in favour of more authentic and socially relevant teaching materials.

The period between 1975 and 1985 was dynamic in terms of professional development. Increased provision and new regulations granted many immigrants Sfi instruction as part of labour-market training in the Labour Market Training Centres, where students, after a maximum of 500 hours of full-time language tuition, could go on to vocational training that met labour-market needs. Hundreds of circle leaders moved to employment that was linked to formal teacher qualifications and more favourable conditions of employment. In larger cities, over 100 Sfi teachers could be employed in a centre and many innovative pedagogic projects were initiated. In close collaboration with vocational teachers, language teachers initiated projects integrating language and vocational training. On a national level, large-scale in-service training initiatives were undertaken by *Skolöverstyrelsen*, the former Swedish Board of Education, which contributed to a rapid spread of second-language acquisition research and the sharing of new ideas and approaches across the country.

In the early 1980s an in-service initiative introduced a functional

view of language through a Swedish version of the *Threshold Level*, in line with the work carried out within the Modern Language Project of the Council of Europe. This view of language was easily incorporated into the thematic approach to form a coherent needs-based model for the principled integration of socially relevant language and content. As pointed out by Johnson and Morrow (1981), covering communicative needs in semantic or functional syllabuses is only half the battle and certainly not the same as teaching how to communicate. Even though the 1986 syllabus was accompanied by considerable efforts in terms of the implementation of more functional and communicative language teaching, it took a long time before deeply rooted traditional views and attitudes towards language teaching gave way to a wider perspective on language and how it should be taught. After all, such a major theoretical re-orientation has far-reaching implications for language teaching, which cannot be expected to happen over night.

Since the 1994 integration of Sfi into the national goal-based curriculum system, the influence of applied linguistics and second-language research on Sfi has decreased and few coordinated initiatives with any significant impact on the field have been undertaken at a national level. This is partly due to restrictions in the government's right to interfere with municipal issues and to the professional freedom of teachers to implement steering documents according to local needs and contexts. Lack of far-sighted educational initiatives, informed by relevant research at a national level, along with the unstable working conditions of many teachers within the system of tendering, has led to an increasing stagnation in Sfi as a professional field. Even though many local initiatives aimed at orienting provision to individual language needs in work and other societal contexts have been taken, such dispersed actions have limited impact when they are not informed by theoretical frameworks and do not contribute to a principled evolution of curriculum. The national Sfi test actually constitutes an exception in this respect. Since its introduction in 1996, it has come to play an increasingly important role in the interpretation and implementation of vague general syllabus goals. The strong impact of the test can, however, be contested. The aim of this non-compulsory criterion-referenced test is to assess communicative competence as a guideline for grading. However, the test is often used as an exit test, rather than as a guideline for grading.

Research perspectives

Since the mid-1970s Swedish research has only had a limited focus on adult immigrant second-language teaching. Early research included

contrastive and typological studies of Swedish, and subsequent second-language research became more acquisitionist (cf Roberts and Baynham 2006), focusing on learner data and the development of different linguistic phenomena.

Typically, this research has been carried out in departments where other disciplines dominate and where second-language research has been considered peripheral. It was not until 1981, when a unit of bilingualism was established at Stockholm University, that this line of research was prioritised within a research organisation. In 1988 this unit became the autonomous Centre for Research on Bilingualism, with an independent PhD program; since the mid-1990s, several dissertations focusing on adult second-language acquisition have been completed. Nevertheless, a substantial part of research within this field is still carried out in departments of linguistics, Swedish or Scandinavian languages. Since 1998 there has also been a research centre at Göteborg University, the Institute of Swedish as a Second Language, with continuous research funding and a PhD program in Swedish as a second language established in 2004. Another important agency contributing to research-based professional development and in-service training, as well as network-building, is the National Centre for Swedish as a Second language, which was founded in 2001 and is financed by the Ministry of Education.

Until the late 1990s a cognitive acquisitionist approach characterised most Swedish second-language research, including a few Sfi classroom studies. Based on quantitative and qualitative investigations of classroom discourse, these studies (Håkansson 1987; Håkansson and Lindberg 1988; Lindberg 1995) focused on issues of input and interaction in line with research by Krashen (1981), Long (1981), Varonis and Gass (1985) and Swain (1985).

An action-research study focusing on form in collaborative small Sfi groups (Lindberg and Skeppstedt 2000; Lindberg 2003) represented a shift towards a sociocultural view of second-language learning. This research focused on the role of social interaction for collective and mutual scaffolding in the mediation of language learning. It was inspired by the work of Donato (1994), Swain (1995, 1998), and Swain and Lapkin (1995, 1998), and is in line with work by Storch (1998) in the Australian context. The study carried out within a Vygotskian theoretical framework (Vygotsky 1962, 1978) aimed to investigate the possibilities for adult Sfi learners from different educational backgrounds to benefit from collaborative form-focused activities in a dictogloss format (cf Wajnryb 1990). The longitudinal study revealed that repeated participation in collaborative

text-reconstruction tasks promoted metalinguistic awareness and resulted in increased attention to language form, irrespective of literacy level. Most notably though, the collaborative format seemed to be helpful to learners with limited formal schooling, as they could pool their resources to process and explore the target language collectively, mediated by mutual support and feedback.

The first extensive qualitative study carried out within Swedish second-language research is a case study by Granberg (2001), which follows the successful but strenuous language learning and gradual socialisation into Swedish society of a young Greek woman. It focuses on extracts from her personal diary and transcripts of continuous interviews with her. Through his focus on the sociocultural and affective nature of second-language learning, Granberg challenges the view of language learning as an entirely cognitive and individual process and sheds light on aspects often disregarded by cognitive-oriented research. Like Norton (2000) in the Canadian context, Granberg draws attention to the trauma that the confrontation with another language and culture may involve. However, he also highlights rewarding moments of great satisfaction associated with the conquest of the new language.

Carlson (2002, 2006) undertook a sociological study of Sfi that combined discourse analysis of various political and ideological documents with data-gathering from textbooks and interviews with Sfi students, teachers and other key stakeholders. Within a social-constructionist frame of reference, Carlson shows how the (re)production of knowledge and learning in an educational institution such as Sfi is embedded in an ideological context sustaining numerous *deficiency discourses* through which students are interpreted. Carlson also shows how dominant discourses can arouse resistance when students oppose being characterised as traditional, ignorant or backward and manage to bridge borders to deal with life in Sweden. Carlson's study draws attention to how power relations operating at the macro-level of society feed into the micro-level of social encounters in everyday life, as highlighted in the work of Gumperz (1982), Bremer et al (1996) and Norton (2000).

Many immigrant learners are marginalised in the majority society, leaving them with few opportunities to use the second language in natural communication outside the classroom. As a consequence, conversations with volunteer native speakers are sometimes organised within Sfi, but, according to a framework developed by Shea (1994), the character of native speaker responses decides whether non-native speakers are encouraged to participate in conversation or inhibited from expressing the full range of

their identities. The active structuring and responsive engagement of the native speaker is thus decisive in shaping the coherence, force and fluency with which the non-native speaker can speak.

In a recent case-study (Rydén 2007), aspects related to democratic participation and second-language literacy development were investigated by means of participant observations within an ethnographic approach. The researcher investigated the role that social networks play when adult immigrants, with little formal schooling, are forced to manage in situations and activities involving literacy skills in their everyday lives. The researcher's close contact with the learners made it possible to study how language competence, including reading and writing, was often distributed in an exchange process in which social networks played an important role. These networks also decisively affected opportunities for language development, socialisation and active participation in the new country.

Recent research related to adult immigrant second-language learning has emphasised important sociocultural perspectives, including issues of power relations. A greater awareness of such aspects is certainly desirable in public debates, where individual and cognitive perspectives dominate. Whether this research can contribute to a more balanced debate in this respect remains to be seen.

Sfi in search of its role and responsibility

Persistent calls for more efficient language training often include calls for increased competitive tendering, individualisation and *vocational Swedish*, along with demands for an economic agenda for immigrant education and integration. This, in turn, raises questions about the role, responsibility and recognition of Sfi as a language program and field of expertise.

During the 21st century, tendering within Sfi has increased from 12% to 32% on a national basis (Skolverket 2005, 2006a), and in larger cities 80% of Sfi can be provided by private tenders. This preference for competitive and short-term tendering and the tendency to base tendering criteria on short-term local needs has given rise to a much-needed discussion of the role and responsibility of Sfi. It has also highlighted the need to investigate what constitutes relevant content and methods for work-related language training. However, tendering may also entail an unstable and fragmented provision with less regard for teacher qualifications and reduced opportunities for in-service training. Statistics show that 53% of teachers employed under private tenders have teacher qualifications, while the corresponding figure for municipalities is 78% (Skolverket 2006b). Moreover, the sharing of expertise and ideas between teachers working

within different tenders may not be encouraged (Skolverket 2006c, 2006d).

It is obvious that within a system of tendering, long-term targets of individual fulfilment, empowerment and equal democratic rights run the risk of being sacrificed to short-term economic considerations in municipalities already strained by poor finances. Less favourable working conditions for teachers are another consequence. Yet, the government has announced increased tendering within adult education and has called for a system with intensified inspections by Skolverket, the Swedish National Agency for Education, as well as more distinct measurable outcomes. What impact these measures will have on the tuition of Sfi remains to be seen.

Individualisation is another panacea often referred to in the recent debates on Sfi. Even though individualisation is emphasised in later agreements, it has been pointed out in a recent evaluation (Integrationsverket 2005b: 6) that efforts to meet the demands for collaboration and rapid self-support may sometimes inhibit individuals from taking responsibility for their own situations. Thus, individual introduction plans, supposed to serve the long-term goals of individuals, may in practice run the risk of serving the short-term goals and needs of the collaborating agents (cf Cooke 2006: 59).

Increased collaboration among different agents in order to facilitate individual solutions may have contributed to a greater readiness to discuss Sfi matters but, paradoxically, this has not generally improved the ability for Sfi professionals to claim their area of expertise, since other agents involved often hold more powerful positions. Conflicts of interest, perspectives and values regarding the role and responsibility of Sfi may often result in deadlocks unfavourable for Sfi expertise (Integrationsverket 2005a). In some cases, a deficit discourse about immigrants can actually unite agents with conflicting goals and policies and make collaboration smoother (Carlson 2002).

Recurring demands for work-related language skills are often based on assumptions that successful integration is equivalent to rapid employment. Many providers therefore offer elementary Sfi courses targeting employment in low-paid positions. Many of these programs have a focus on so-called *vocational Swedish*, a concept that is seldom defined or specified. In most cases it seems to refer to specific vocabulary and phrases related to the accomplishment of separate work-related tasks rather than to the more multifaceted language demands associated with the complex institutional discourses of different working contexts (cf Holmes and Stubbe 2003; Burns 2006; Cooke 2006). The importance of needs-based, socially relevant and work-oriented language tuition is hardly a question of debate. The call

for more effective language training is, however, often based on a naive and unrealistic view of possible shortcuts to fix the language problem, in order to speed up entrance to the labour market and improve employment rates. The focus on vocational Swedish overshadows the need for basic and general language skills at beginner and intermediate levels as a foundation for language development.

The recognition of Sfi as a professional activity

Several factors have played a decisive role in the recognition of Sfi as a professional activity. Attitudes and values articulated in the public debate, often based on poor statistics and superficial evaluations, have severely damaged the reputation of the program. Moreover, government and municipal negligence in securing professional provision and adequate teacher qualifications has continuously undermined the credibility of Sfi.

In 2002 the Swedish Liberal Party (Folkpartiet), one of the parties in the right-wing/liberal coalition that took government in September 2006, proposed the introduction of a Swedish language test as part of the naturalisation process. Although this proposal was presented as being in the best interest of immigrants (cf Milani 2006), the rhetoric in which it was embedded has much in common with the discourse related to the role of language in integration in other contexts (cf Cooke 2006). Here, a perceived lack of competence in the majority language is taken as unwillingness to learn the language and is interpreted as a lack of loyalty and commitment to the nation of settlement. As pointed out by Cooke (2006), immigrant language learners, almost without exception, seem to be quite convinced of the importance of learning the language of the new country and put a great deal of effort into language learning. The fact that second-language programs for adult immigrants are discredited in public debates lends support to the assumption that such programs are frequently exploited as convenient scapegoats, covering up for all kinds of political shortcomings related to integration policies. This criticism is all the more unjust as only about 50% of immigrants who receive a residence permit enter Sfi within the first three years of residence (SOU 2003: 77).

The empirical basis for the negative image of Sfi as an inefficient and inadequate program, continuously reinforced in the media, can be contested. Conclusions concerning the inadequacies of Sfi are often based on analyses of severely limited statistical data, in which the complexity and heterogeneity of Sfi are not taken into account. As shown in a large-scale national evaluation carried out by the Centre for Research on Bilingualism (Skolverket 1997), individual, as well as sociopolitical factors, play a decisive

role in learning outcomes and must therefore be taken into consideration in the evaluation of the program and in comparisons with the results of other educational enterprises.

In 2005 no more than 11% of the approximate 1600 Sfi teachers could be considered qualified in the sense that they had some kind of teacher training or university degree (unpublished statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education). This makes Sfi tuition predominantly practice-driven rather than research-driven (cf Roberts and Baynham 2006). After more than 40 years of practice there is still no regular teacher training with a specific focus on adult education in Swedish as a second language. This indicates that immigrant education has been, and still is, an issue of low priority for the state. The need for professionalisation in terms of a solid research base and appropriate formal training cannot be underestimated. However, it is important that the extensive experience of teachers and their dedicated work are fully acknowledged and made use of in future developments of Sfi to avoid loss of competence, which has characterised the history of Sfi.

For Sfi to continue to develop, two issues need to be addressed. The first concerns recruitment of new teachers, the other in-service training for unqualified teachers. New teachers should be recruited through preparatory teacher training. The problem of unqualified teachers must be solved through long-term, carefully planned teacher qualification programs, and not in the way it is presently done through incoherent, short-term and sometimes fairly arbitrary in-service training. The increasing age of Sfi teachers is another problem to consider, now that the government has recently allowed SEK51 million (US\$7 370 000) for in-service training from 2007 to 2009. Considering the fact that 30% of Sfi teachers are more than 60 years of age, this is hardly an investment that will lead to long-term improvement (unpublished statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education).

Conclusions

After more than 40 years of practice, Sfi still represents a low-status activity with obvious problems in claiming expertise. Numerous organisational changes, conflicting interests of different agents and unstable working conditions within short-term tenders mean that lack of continuity constitutes a constant threat to high quality provision and adequate professional development.

With the many unqualified teachers working within Sfi, the need for a more coherent and explicit framework as a foundation for local and

individual course design and assessment is urgent. The way in which the Australian Adult Migrant English Program national curriculum framework, *Certificates in Spoken and Written English*, was developed and implemented could serve as a model in this respect. The influences of genre pedagogy and systemic functional grammar are particularly important when it comes to finding ways of linking socially relevant language use to explicit language outcomes by means of text-based syllabus design (Rothery 1996; Feez and Joyce 1998). Following the Australian model, Sfi could develop as a theory-driven practice and be systematically linked to a coherent research agenda involving Sfi practitioners in curriculum development.

Few educational enterprises have attracted so much negative attention in the media over the years as Sfi and few professionals are shown so little recognition. Maybe it is because of the rewarding nature of their task and the appreciation from their students that many Sfi teachers still find the motivation to continue guiding newcomers to Sweden into the world of another language and culture. Referring back to the question asked in the title of this article, many Sfi participants, in spite of all the negative criticism, appreciate the program and often find the classroom an important place and the only 'point of stability' in a difficult life-situation (Cooke 2006). For many learners, Sfi represents a starting-point for self-fulfilment and a way out of marginalisation. We will therefore let two learners have the last word on Sfi by concluding with the following quotations from two young Turkish women from the study by Carlson (2002):

I used to be inferior to my husband – he always decided everything. When I started school I also wanted to decide – I gained confidence in myself.

I manage everything on my own. I go to the doctor on my own. I take care of my children's problems, all the papers, letters and such things. As a matter of fact, I manage everything on my own nowadays.

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