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Teachers' beliefs about literacy teaching in Swedish for Immigrants during the COVID-19 pandemic: Stability and dynamics

Abstract

International migration creates a need for second language (L2) education in majority languages. The language programme Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) offers basic education in Swedish as an L2 to newly arrived adult migrants in Sweden. The aim of the study presented here is to explore the stability and dynamics of teachers' beliefs about the education offered to students studying Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study is part of an action research project that included teachers and students at four SFI schools. This sub-study builds on individual and focus group interviews with teachers from these schools, which are analysed through content analysis. The theoretical base for the study is the beliefs of teachers and the stability and dynamics thereof. For these teachers, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic meant an abrupt switch from in-person instruction in the classroom to various combinations of digital education and in-person instruction in smaller groups. The beliefs of these teachers remained stable concerning their students' needs, such as the importance of social interaction, varied exercises and frequent feedback. At the same time, they showed creativity in developing new forms of teaching. The situation was stressful for teachers and a higher level of stability could have allowed them to prioritise in other ways. In these politically and economically challenging times, LESLLA students are in even greater need of efficient and empowering education, not least access to digital tools and competence of high quality. We conclude that the possibilities for the schools of handling the crisis that the pandemic caused depended on the professional competence of individual teachers as well as their ability to act independently.

Keywords: Swedish for immigrants, basic literacy teaching, teachers' perceptions, digital media in teaching, second language development, adult education

Lärarpuffattningar om litteracitetsundervisning i svenska för invandrare under covid-pandemin: Stabilitet och dynamik

Sammanfattning

International migration creates a need for second language (L2) education in majority languages. The language programme Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) offers basic education in Swedish as an L2 to newly arrived adult migrants in Sweden. The aim of the study presented here is to explore the stability and dynamics of teachers' beliefs about the education offered to students studying Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Nyckelord: Svenska för invandrare, grundläggande litteracitetsundervisning, lärares perspektiv, digitala medier i undervisning, andraspråksutveckling, vuxenundervisning

Introduction

Since March 2020, when the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic, the education sector has faced massive challenges and been forced to adopt new policy responses. Overnight, teachers and students all over the world were expected to start using digital and online tools in place of physical classrooms. In many countries they had no choice, as schools were closed due to lockdowns. Sweden was one of the few countries where schools remained open and comparatively few restrictions were imposed. The responsibility for preventive measures was to a large degree devolved to local educational authorities.

In the case of the language programme Swedish for Immigrants (SFI), which offers education in Swedish as an L2 at basic levels, the responsibility was placed on municipalities and school management to stay informed about the national pandemic situation and make decisions accordingly. At the time the pandemic

broke out, we were carrying out a research project on literacy in SFI Study Path 1, which is aimed at adults with less than four years of education before their arrival in Sweden. Students start in course A and then can proceed through courses B, C and D. We observed how conditions for teaching and learning at SFI changed overnight and remained in flux throughout the field study, which took place in 2020/21. We therefore decided to investigate teachers' experiences of how the COVID-19 pandemic changed their teaching. More specifically, the aim is to explore the stability and dynamics of teachers' beliefs about literacy education among Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) students. Like the main project on basic literacy education in SFI, the present sub-study involves four SFI schools in four different municipalities and is based on individual and focus group interviews with teachers working at these schools.

Earlier research on the COVID-19 pandemic

Zimmerman (2020) has described education during the COVID-19 pandemic as “the great online-learning experiment”, while Hodges and Fowler (2020) developed the concept of *emergency remote teaching*, a type of crisis management in the form of a temporary shift. When transitioning to digital forms of education, it is important to consider aspects of equality, students' academic integrity (Morgan, 2020; Sahlberg, 2020; Williamson et al., 2020) and the physical and material aspects of digitally mediated education (Stenliden et al., 2021). Nilsberth et al. (2021) conducted a study of the content and implementation of the school subjects mathematics, history and Swedish in a digital context. They investigated the discursive frames used in teachers' pedagogical considerations, concluding that during the pandemic teachers initially felt that only with great effort could they maintain teaching, in what the researchers describe as a *crisis organisation*. They also discovered that teachers' ability to manage this situation, draw on their professional competence and find professional solutions to this teaching challenge in a time of crisis were decisive for the outcome of their teaching.

A number of studies have been published on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education at tertiary level, including Casacchia et al. (2021), Han et al. (2021), Gamage (2022), Chen (2022) and Svedmark et al. (2021). Chen (2022) investigated digital affordances for online classroom teaching through the reflections of two teachers of Chinese as an L2. Chen discovered that the teachers exerted greater agency over their teaching and found that the “emergency remote courses” they had to teach demanded greater classroom social dynamics.

An anthology edited by Gamage (2022) presents research on COVID-19 impacts on higher educational systems together with best practices. In a collection of essays drawing on COVID-19 experiences from eight different countries, Han et al. (2021) deal with the problems associated with virtual learning, as well as

solutions such as techniques and support for online teaching and learning and how to minimise so-called “Zoom fatigue”.

In a study based on the responses of upper-secondary students (years 10–12) to the disruption of their education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Paston et al. (2021) show that students generally demonstrated positive attitudes towards their learning and associated opportunities for digital creativity in terms of perceived enjoyability, subject relevance and self-efficacy. The authors conclude that these associations may have given students a degree of creative resilience and buffered the disruptive impact of the pandemic on their learning.

An extensive anthology on primary and secondary education during the pandemic (Reimers, 2022a) addresses issues of educational (in)equality, including articles dealing with the duration of school closures, the implementation of remote educational strategies and comparative national results in student learning and well-being from various countries. Reimers (2022b) concludes that there have been educational losses in the form of impact on poverty and household conditions in countries with lower levels of per capita income. At the same time, he argues that the pandemic has resulted in greater recognition of the importance of schools and of in-person schooling, as well as of the necessity to support not only students’ cognitive development but also their emotional and social development.

When it comes to teachers’ working conditions, Casacchia et al. (2021) conducted a survey to investigate the impact of distance education on university teachers and their emotional well-being during a period of home confinement. While a quarter of the teachers reported depressive symptoms, some appreciated the opportunity for learning and the challenges it presented to them, with the frequency being higher amongst teachers with a heavier teaching load.

Research on COVID-19 and adult migrant education

While most of the studies mentioned here focus on tertiary education and a few on primary and secondary school level, to our knowledge there are as yet only a handful of studies examining the impact of COVID-19 on teaching adult migrants or on adult literacy education (although Busic et al. (2020) cover SFI more generally). A study by Berbyuk Lindström et al. (2023) examines teachers’ professional digital competence, concluding that teachers need to consider learners’ study conditions, development of digital literacy skills and cultural awareness in order to ensure inclusive online education for migrant learners. In another study, Barker (2021) focuses on social integration during COVID-19, one dimension of which is language learning. Among other things, the study shows the importance of taking migrants’ physical and psychosocial needs into account. Ghanem (2023) discusses her own experiences as a LESLLA teacher during the pandemic, demonstrating how she managed to develop and use various digital tools to enhance her students’ reading autonomy. Based on an interview with four LESLLA teachers, Malessa (2023) found that the pedagogical costs for this student group may have been high. She calls for more LESLLA-specific empirical and experi-

mental studies on technology-equipped learning and teaching, as well as greater trust in teachers as professionals.

As teaching of adults with little or no prior education generally presents its own specific challenges (Rosén, 2014; Sandberg et al., 2016; Wedin & Norlund Shaswar, 2023), our focus on the impact of its abrupt shift to digital learning is particularly timely.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical basis of this article is *teacher beliefs*, defined by Borg (2011) as:

propositions individuals consider to be true, and which are often tacit, have a strong evaluative and affective component, provide a basis for action, and are resistant to change [...] beliefs are seen as a key element in teacher learning and have become an important focus in research. (pp. 370–371)

Studies of teacher beliefs generally show that teachers' experiences, ideas and convictions form their practice and thus have an impact on students' learning and development (Fives & Buehl, 2016; Kalaja et al., 2016; Kulbrandstad et al., 2020). Fives and Buehl (2012) are particularly interested in different perceptions of the relationship between beliefs and practices, and whether, and if so, how beliefs can change:

[A] teacher may hold a stable belief about the viability of inquiring learning, but that belief may appear to shift as the teacher responds to more information from a specific learning context, such as the available resources and students' prior knowledge. (p. 475)

So, a teacher's beliefs about what constitutes good education may change in response to a specific situation that demands adaptation to new conditions (for examples of studies in multilingual education in a Nordic context, see Alstad et al., 2020; Danbolt, 2020). This would clearly include a pandemic, and indeed a specific group of students, about whom the teacher may have more or less traditionally based beliefs concerning their background knowledge and other aspects.

Fives and Buehl (2012) propose five dimensions in which teachers' beliefs can be conceptualised. These dimensions show how teacher beliefs may be understood as more or less explicit or implicit, stable or dynamic, general or situated. Consequently, they distinguish between studies that treat teacher beliefs as implicit and those that treat them as explicit, that is to say, the degree to which the teachers themselves are aware of their beliefs and how they may impact their teaching (p. 473). For Fives and Buehl, it is problematic if a study fails to clarify how explicit the beliefs being studied are, as implicit beliefs are more difficult to identify.

The dimensions highlighted by Fives and Buehl (2012) regarding the degree to which beliefs may change, are the focus of this study. The question is: *Are teachers' beliefs stable or dynamic?* Teachers' beliefs exist in a continuum in a

complex, integrated and multidimensional system of beliefs and other phenomena (Fives & Buehl, 2016), but some beliefs are more stable than others and more difficult to change. In this study, we seek to understand whether and how the beliefs of SFI teachers about literacy education and adult migrants were challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic and how resistant to change – how stable or dynamic – they proved to be.

How teacher beliefs are conceptualised in research is largely dependent on the ontological points of departure for the research (Burns et al., 2015; Kulbrandstad et al., 2020). In simple terms, Kalaja et al. (2016) distinguish between the aforementioned dimensions of research on beliefs as being either more cognitive, explicit and stable, or more contextually oriented, with greater emphasis on the social, implicit and dynamic dimensions. Our own point of departure in this study is a contextual view of beliefs as something dynamic, changeable and dependent on the interaction between individuals in a given context. This implies that beliefs may also be subject to change if the interaction changes, which is to say that beliefs have not only cognitive but also social dimensions (Kalaja et al., 2016). Such an understanding of beliefs as meaning-making and impacting how different individuals act makes knowledge about teacher beliefs more salient, as it carries social and cultural information of importance for school practices.

Furthermore, there is an ongoing dialogue about how the relationship between beliefs and knowledge should be defined, and attempts to arrive at a clear distinction have usually led to new questions (Fives & Buehl, 2012). To understand how beliefs and knowledge are manifested in teachers' practice, we need knowledge about how their teaching is based on beliefs and also on factors such as informal education and research findings. It is also important to take into account the extent to which beliefs need to be viewed as part of a bigger system of beliefs or as interwoven with other phenomena such as identity and motivation (Kalaja et al., 2016). One important prerequisite for teaching literacy to adult migrants is therefore teachers' experience and knowledge about, for example, adult learning. This may include more or less visible norms, as well as beliefs about students' knowledge and experiences or lack thereof. It may also include something called *epistemic beliefs*, the experiences, ideas and convictions that a person has about knowledge (Conley et al., 2004; Hofer & Pintrich, 2004), such as how language and literacy skills develop. These beliefs may be related to *epistemic practices*, which are the specific ways in which someone approaches, justifies and evaluates knowledge in a particular situation (Duek et al., 2020; Kelly, 2008). Giving teachers opportunities to reflect on and understand how both knowledge and beliefs will impact on their teaching and the educational choices they make, appears to be very important.

Methodology and material

This study is part of an action research project designed to explore and develop basic literacy education within SFI Study Path 1. The project uses a combination of linguistic ethnography (Copland & Creese, 2015) and action research (Zeichner, 2001). Teachers working in four schools – River School, Ridge School, Valley School and Hill School – collaborated with the researchers¹ over a period of two years. The study consisted of three action research cycles: planning, teaching and reflection (McNiff, 2013). Material was also gathered from classroom observations and interviews. During the reflection cycle, 27 individual and 20 focus group interviews were conducted with teachers. These interviews focused on reflecting on the action carried out and planning the next action. Of the individual interviews, 22 were conducted in spring 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic and 5 in spring 2021. The focus group interviews were conducted over a period of 12 months beginning in autumn 2020.

The focus of these interviews was to invite teachers to reflect on their work more broadly. The COVID-19 pandemic was not originally included as a topic for discussion but, given its tangible impact on both teaching and the teachers' working conditions, the subject often came up in interviews. No mention was made of the pandemic and its effects on education during the 8 focus group interviews conducted at one of the schools, hence group interviews conducted at that school have been disregarded. This study is thus based on findings drawn from the other 12 group interviews plus individual interviews, 9 of which have been excluded either because the pandemic was not referred to or because the teachers interviewed had no experience of teaching SFI Study Path 1 at the time of the interview. The study material therefore consists of 18 individual and 12 focus group interviews with a total of 18 teachers.

All participants were fully informed about the nature of the study and gave their written consent. The collected interview material has been stored in a manner that prevents unauthorised access in accordance with Dalarna University's Data Security Plan. All data has been pseudonymised. All participants have been given a code that identifies both them and the school in which they were teaching when the study was conducted: Rd is River School teacher d, Ria is Ridge School teacher a, and so on. The code for teachers from Valley School is Vx and for Hill School Hx.

The data analysis was performed after the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been performed in two steps. The content of the interviews has been analysed through qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). All interviews were audio recorded and the recordings transcribed. As a first step, sequences were identified in which mention was made of the pandemic and its effect on the teaching and learning. These sequences were then analysed to identify recurring topics in

¹ Apart from the authors also Jenny Rosén.

teachers talk about their teaching in relation to COVID-19, from which the following categories were constructed:

1. Experiences of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching.
2. Experiences of the increased use of digital media in teaching.
3. Reflections on which experiences will prove useful for future teaching.

In a second step, this was related to the main aim, to explore the stability and dynamics of teachers' beliefs, by asking the following research questions to explore how the changes in teaching affected their beliefs about literacy teaching and their students' L2 development:

- 1) In what ways do teachers' beliefs about literacy and language learning appear to be stable?
- 2) In what ways do they appear to be dynamic?

Findings

The study's findings are presented under headings corresponding to the three categories of experiences identified in the analysis performed as step one.

Experiences of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching

In their reflections, teachers frequently raised issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. All teachers taking part in these interviews spoke a great deal about how the pandemic had affected their teaching. We have gathered their experiences under four headings: a) early experiences of the pandemic, b) organisational changes, c) impact on teaching, and d) impact on the work environment.

Early experiences of the pandemic

The sudden change in teaching practices after the outbreak of the pandemic was repeatedly highlighted by many teachers. Their working conditions changed overnight, and they were called on to radically adjust their teaching. The directives to teachers from their headteachers and local educational authorities varied both from one school to the next and over time. In March 2020, the Public Health Agency of Sweden recommended that all upper-secondary schools, adult education colleges and higher education institutions immediately change to distance education, effectively banning students from the classroom. Rd spoke about how she and her colleagues at River School copied teaching materials and sent them by post to students who then mailed the completed work back to them. At Hill School, one set of students was invited to the school by the teacher where they were given paper-based study materials to work on at home. The teacher then rang each student once a week to monitor their progress. When a new teacher took over this group, she started to communicate with them via WhatsApp. At Valley

School, digital media were not used at all in the initial phase of the pandemic. Va said that initially students were expected to come to the school to collect their homework and that teachers rang individual students every day. However, when many students failed to turn up to collect homework, Va and her colleagues went out to the areas where students lived and dropped off what she called “ett bibliotek” (a library) at their homes. Vc, who was responsible for students on course B, stressed just how challenging the situation became. She had to invent new teaching methods and develop new teaching materials for a group she had barely had time to get to know. As she put it: “How much do the students know and such. I didn’t know everybody.”

A few months after the outbreak of the pandemic, teachers at River School were permitted to have groups of up to five students in a classroom. Rc talked about how she organised her teaching in this scenario, which involved working with assistants in other languages and a special needs teacher with ICT competence.

Organisational changes

The teachers highlighted the frequent, often abrupt organisational changes in response to the pandemic. In all the schools, students were taught in smaller groups and thus had less class time with their teachers than previously. The restrictions meant that students were sometimes prevented from socialising outside the classroom: “When the students arrive, we pick them up at the entrance. It wasn’t like that before. It was just open door and come in. Now I let them in through the entrance and hope in the best case all are there when we begin and sometimes, I have to go and pick them up in several rounds” (Rf).

The teachers mentioned that organisational arrangements changed in other ways. At all the schools, as the official restrictions and the local situation changed, so too did the names for what they were actually doing. Teachers talked about their teaching as “distans” (distance), “heldistans” (full distance), “närdistans” (close distance), “halvdistans” (half distance) and “halvnärdistans” (semi-close distance). For example, teachers were highly conscious of the variability in their working arrangements and the expectation that things were likely to change at any moment, as in the following excerpt from a focus group:

- Rb: But wasn’t that, didn’t that decision come last week? I saw it on Facebook.
- Rc: But that was the press conference was um the press conference was I saw that with Anna Ekström (The Minister of Education at the time).
- Rb: But I saw it before in this um SFI group [on Facebook] I saw last week but maybe it was just that they were putting forward a different proposal.
- Rf: Is there going to be something else now that they’ve said it’s going to be distance?
- Rb: They’ve said that we are going to start with close distance, weird.

In this discussion, teachers were referring to decisions made at national level as reported on Facebook and in a televised press conference, as well as decisions they had heard about locally. A teacher or student falling ill could also prompt a

change in teaching arrangements. One teacher said: “Now I’m at home in quarantine and I went and tested myself and my son and we’ll have to see if I can come in next week, hopefully by Friday if the test is negative.” (Rc)

Teachers like Hc expressed a sense of uncertainty: “It’s sort of a strange situation because nobody knows when it will end.” Rb mentioned the extra time it took her to keep students informed because of changes to timetables. At her school, timetables changed every week even when pandemic directives remained the same, simply because lesson days and times were regularly changed from one week to the next. She also noted that SFI presents its own specific problem as it operates a system of rolling admissions. Rb suddenly found herself with seven new students who, as she said: “don’t have any of the basics and it’s sort of a challenge to get them into it”. Another teacher, Ra, complained that she had to inform the headmaster about the number of students in her group, while she would rather that they gave her clearer instructions regarding group size.

Impact on teaching

The changes due to the pandemic had several effects on teaching. The fact that individual students had fewer lessons, were taught in smaller groups, needed to keep their distance in the classroom and had to do more of the coursework on their own at home, affected what teachers did in class. Teachers’ experiences of these new teaching arrangements varied. They were concerned about reduced classroom time for students but also felt smaller class sizes had been a positive development, enabling them to provide more individual support and encouraging students to interact and speak more Swedish.

However, teachers clearly expressed frustration at the restrictions caused by the pandemic. New teaching arrangements meant they did not have enough time for classroom teaching, making it difficult to individualise teaching, and that students missed out on class time. Students also had problems managing the various information channels, for example, many had old mobile phones that could not download the apps that were used. All these changes increased the teachers’ workloads, and most were looking forward to the time when they could once again teach in the classroom.

Ria said that the teaching at her school became more teacher centred. There was more information to process and fewer interactions with students, which made her feel she was not performing well as a teacher. Rid and Ric also mentioned that, for students on courses A and B, less time for teaching meant less time for vital repetition. Ha described the situation as having to “peel away as much as possible” and only do what was most important in the classroom, which for her meant opportunities for oral communication. Hf said that in larger groups, students could support each other better.

Both Rc and Rb pointed out that the limited onsite teaching meant there was not enough time to explain things in class and that students, particularly those who needed extra support, missed out on the structure and routines that they needed

for effective learning. The unpredictable timetables were a real problem for some students. Rib said that her follow-up, based on her knowledge of students' needs, was impaired when a large proportion of the students' studies were performed at home. Still, some teachers were able to meet with and support individual students and stressed how important this was.

Some teaching activities became difficult or impossible to carry out. Social distancing made it difficult to perform communicative tasks that required students to interact in groups. At Ridge School, teachers tried working in pairs with students maintaining social distancing, but this meant that students had to raise their voices, and some forgot to keep their distance. According to the teachers, activities outside of school, such as study visits, meetings with a student counsellor and mixing different study groups, became impossible to conduct.

Ha pointed out that it was particularly difficult to make students on her A course understand that reduced classroom time meant more homework in order to fulfil course requirements. She said that she had no way of knowing whether her students were working at home. That said, both Ha and Hf observed that digital teaching and the use of WhatsApp clarified for students that they needed to study on their own when they were at home. In addition, Hf said that, because students could get help at home from other family members or friends, some students were more active in the classroom than previously. She concluded that while some students became more passive, others "have kind of grown a bit in the situation, so it goes both ways". Regarding pronunciation, Hf said that when they studied on their own and a teacher was not present, students neglected their pronunciation.

Teachers talked about how they had adapted their teaching and developed their digital skills. At the same time, Rib described the pandemic phase as "a black hole" and expressed a negative opinion about how it had affected her teaching.

Impact on the work environment

Smaller class sizes resulted in a perceived need among teachers to teach more actively in the classroom and leave exercises and desk work for students to do at home. With more classes to teach, teachers had to give the same lesson several times: "Now it's two hours and then the next group comes and gets two hours of the same thing. We have a five-minute break, only long enough to ventilate the room. We don't leave the room" (Rf). Teachers at Ridge School pointed out that it was not always possible to teach the same lesson to three different groups, even if they were on the same course. All groups are different and there are always adjustments that need to be made. After a year of this situation, Ria still expressed a need to focus on planning and organisation: "It's kind of a jigsaw-puzzle to fit this all together [...] I have to say that pedagogy comes a bit second right now." Ha added another aspect of repeated teaching in that it demands more record keeping: "I need to plan for what they've done at home, so you are writing all the time. It's a lot of documentation to keep in mind."

Teachers expressed various frustrations concerning the teaching situation, including how the use of digital tools had affected their classroom work. Rc said:

I can't think about teaching pedagogically but have to, all the time, based on that time pressure perspective, think about how I can put something in that kind of puts out fires every day [...] I don't feel I've got the time to plan how they will learn a second language [...] I'm not getting this equation together. That's how I feel. [...] Much more time and consideration is needed for the planning now [...] it's a lot of work [...] I'm so tired, hardly any Christmas holidays or anything. In other words, I feel now it's starting to get a bit shaky [...] my energy is about to run out [...] we need to be so quick and efficient but the students who need long time for simple exercises and much repetition, it's difficult to get this time.

They described how their collegial collaboration had been affected. Some claimed they collaborated more because of the challenges presented by the pandemic, describing how they helped each other with practical and technical issues like organising students on WhatsApp, and with the type of work students could do at home, such as sharing access to videos and other resources. One example from Hill School is how they came to use WhatsApp. Although the choice of this tool was the result of collegial dialogue, it was also chosen because it was close at hand at the start of the pandemic, a time when rapid decisions had to be made. At the same time, some teachers said that collegial collaboration became more difficult. They were no longer allowed to share offices and had to work alone, either in their classrooms or at home: “we keep a bit to ourselves so as not to spread the infection, and thus I mainly sit here [in the classroom]” (Rd).

That the physical demands of the job also changed, was mentioned by Hc, who initially read all of her students' work on WhatsApp using her mobile phone until a colleague showed her how to perform the task on a computer instead: “I got such a pain in my neck, I got such a wryneck, as I was going to write to everyone there”. One positive experience that Ha brought up was that in-service training took place online, thus making it more accessible. Not having to travel made it possible for Ha to participate in in-service training to a larger extent than before the pandemic.

In summary, teachers expressed the impact of the initial phase of the pandemic on their teaching in terms of the short notice they were given concerning organisational changes and the need to try out various solutions before transitioning to a mainly online and small group teaching model. They highlighted the constant changes they faced and how they were forced to change their teaching practice because of decisions taken at both national and local level. When describing the impact on teaching, they emphasised how changing restrictions and switching between classroom and digital teaching left teaching arrangements in a state of flux. The decreased number of classroom teaching hours had an impact on how they taught. Both positive and negative effects on teaching were mentioned. For example, teachers acknowledged that opportunities for individual feedback had increased even though they felt that the overall quality of teaching had deteriorated. All the teachers stated that the situation had increased their workload.

Experiences of the increased use of digital media in teaching

Due to the initial abrupt changes, teachers had to invent new ways of communicating with their students through digital media. Initially, teachers at Ridge School chose to use WhatsApp and helped students upload the app to their mobile phones. Both Ridge School and River School used a blog. One significant effect of digitalisation was the urgent need to teach digital skills, often to students who had limited existing digital competence. While Rb noted the amount of work her school needed to do to develop students' digital competence, she acknowledged that these skills were also useful in everyday life. Rc described students being asked to bring their mobile phones to school so that teachers could check whether they could handle the new digital tools. In contrast to Rb, Rc said that all her students were already familiar with social media and basic searches on Google and YouTube but were unfamiliar with email. Ha also felt that students were already familiar with using computers. She said that she had not experienced many problems but did acknowledge that students might need support with logging in, double-clicking with a mouse and understanding how a cursor works. While she felt that the students learned quickly, she stressed the importance of repetition and routine. Hb also pointed out the sudden importance of teaching what she called "handcrafts": practical instruction in turning on the computer, searching the internet and source criticism. Students now needed to be more aware of what sources could be trusted and which tools were good for translation.

Both Ridge School and Hill School allowed SFI students to borrow a school laptop. At Hill School, the application Teams was installed and set up so that students would see a sign-in pop-up message when the laptop was switched on. Several teachers claimed that students' digital competence increased with time. Ria noted that, while at the start of the pandemic it was difficult and time consuming for her students to deal with things such as software updates, over time this was something they became accustomed to and which they now use when they encounter problems. Hc mentioned this development:

So, this is a giant step forward for them now that they have a computer of their own and they know the technique, that they manage this with Teams to, well, raise their hand there, mute the microphone. So, the students have really been learning now and I feel very happy, and they notice you are proud and they are kind of proud to have a computer and that they have learned this. So, you can see that they have kind of grown in this area, and that is sometimes the most important thing, that you can be digital.

The development of teachers' own digital competence was also discussed. For those teachers who had less experience, the pandemic actualised a need to learn more about digital tools. As Hc said:

Yes, I (laughs) now, you start to learn. Yes, but it feels a bit funny. It's also new to me. I'm quite used to these Zoom meetings and such but then there are others who arrange them because I participate quite a lot on webinars myself outside work so I'm quite used to that but there is much that I also need to learn in my old age (laughs) [...] You learn something new.

Among the things Hc learned was not to post too many things at once: “I can’t post five things on one day. Then they’ll only do the last thing I post.” At River School, teachers talked about how the use of digital tools required them to consider GDPR. When using a blog to post information, they preferred it if students did not post on the blog because the content was public. Instead, they encouraged students to send text messages. One difference that the teachers noted was that body language became less useful as a teaching device, making it more difficult to explain content to the students. On the other hand, as Ria pointed out, teaching from home meant she was able to fetch objects to illustrate what she was talking about. Hc mentioned that when students had a question which they wanted help with: “They take a photo and post their notes to me. They also know how to take screenshots. I don’t know how to do that (laughs), so I’ve been thinking about having them teach me.”

At Ridge School, the teachers selected different digital tools for teaching and communicating with different groups. Ric found that the readings in the audio files that accompanied the textbook were too fast for her students to keep up with, so she started to make her own recordings, reading at a slower pace. Ha said that video meetings with students were important during the pandemic because they gave students an opportunity to connect with another human being.

So, there was considerable variation between schools and between teachers regarding the use of different digital media and the extent to which teaching was performed digitally. While Vc and Hc wanted their digital teaching to be as close to their classroom teaching as possible, some teachers recognised the positive effects of shifting to digital teaching for their students. For example, Hc felt that the absence of a teacher in digital teaching meant students could not always rely on the teacher; instead, they had to help one another, leading to greater interaction between students. Ria made a similar observation:

They’ve been sitting in pairs [...] they work intensively and read and talk with each other and ... and it is also a way to understand that I can actually learn a lot from my friend too.

Ha described how one of her students worked really hard on his reading, as he was keen to move up to course B. The fact that all his work was saved in WhatsApp helped her to manage his aspirations:

And it works like documentation too so that you have it saved in WhatsApp, what they have read and recorded. One student who really wanted to show that “I want to go to the next step, I am kind of ready for it” well, he read and read the same text three times, but he sent all three [of the recordings of him reading the text] to me as well. (laughs) And the first time, he got stuck on some word, and on the next, he got stuck again but a little bit better, and then the third time he got it right and like this “Now teacher, good” (laughs).

The teachers expressed other positive effects of digital teaching. Hc said that she will now sometimes send a student out to take a photograph of an object, something that she would not have done in an ordinary situation. Ha and Hf said that

digital teaching has given them insight into the everyday lives of students in a way they did not have before.

In summary, the teachers' discussions about the increased use of digital media required of them during the pandemic include reflections on competence and developing competence, mainly among students but also among themselves. The interviews show that the use of digital tools varied from school to school and from one course to the next, and that teachers struggled to find ways to cope with the changing nature of the challenges they faced.

Reflections on which experiences will prove useful for future teaching

In their reflections, teachers mentioned a few things that they had learned and that they wanted to continue applying in their teaching. Va said that, while the whole process had been demanding, she had learned a lot, some of which she hoped to put to good use after the pandemic. Rb found that group interaction was actually better in Teams than in the classroom and that the ability to project a text on to a screen helped her to divide or highlight words, something that helped her to teach reading. When students were eventually allowed back into school, she therefore decided to continue teaching on Teams one day each week. She was keen for students to maintain their digital skills and wanted to use the possibility of grouping students, which she felt worked better on Teams: "So I feel oh wow this works better on Teams than in the classroom (laughs) and it's a bit cool."

Having found that students had learned to take more responsibility for their learning during the pandemic, teachers at Hill School said that this was something they wanted to develop further. Hf wanted to keep using WhatsApp and students' mobile phones in her teaching when the pandemic was over: "(laughing) It's the thing that we use for communication today." She also intended to develop ways to get students to record themselves reading a text and send her the audio recording, as this would help her to quickly give them individual feedback. Hc stated that her team at Hill School have talked about using digital tools more in their teaching and that they have been inspired to do so. She also felt that her students were proud about developing digital skills.

So, although teachers expressed feelings of stress and being under pressure, they also mentioned experiences that they considered to be valuable.

The stability and dynamics of teachers' beliefs

In this second step, the findings from the first step are analysed in order to identify signs of stability and dynamics in teachers' beliefs (Fives & Buehl, 2012). A complex picture emerges in which teachers miss out on many things due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, while at the same time they creatively search for new ways of teaching.

Stability in beliefs about the importance of social interaction

Teachers express mostly stable beliefs about literacy and social interaction for language learning, where exercises, feedback, social interaction and explicit instruction are perceived as important. When they talk about social interaction, it clearly is something that was important to them before the pandemic and remains so today.

When they are unable to do what they did before the pandemic, they strive to manage the situation by creating alternative ways to do the same or similar things. Initially, they find alternative ways to hand out exercises to students and to give feedback on their work. They test peer interactions between students while maintaining social distancing in the classroom and they try to teach more intensively during the short period they are able to have their students physically present in the classroom. However, they also mention things that they would like to do but which under these conditions are impossible, such as study visits, group work, giving students quick feedback on their work and following it up. Teachers are aware of the risk of students becoming isolated due to the pandemic, and that few students have opportunities to interact in Swedish outside school. They stress that students need opportunities to interact in Swedish – that is, to practise speaking the language – and that they are unable to find ways to arrange this. Only a few of the teachers seem to have found ways to make students interact orally.

Dynamic beliefs and the creative use of teaching tools

On the other hand, the teachers' beliefs were more dynamic when it came to finding creative new teaching practices and tools, and to a certain extent when it came to digital competence. Teachers adapted their own classroom teaching to include more explicit instruction combined with more elaborated homework, something that increased the importance of various digital solutions and created the demand to teach new content, i.e., how to use tools such as email, blogs and WhatsApp. The increased use of digital tools also required teachers to develop their own knowledge and share their experience and knowledge with colleagues. Dynamic thinking is particularly apparent when it comes to developing tools and practices for students' homework, such as using new applications, making videos, structuring blogs and creating routines for students to practise their reading and pronunciation.

So, teachers' beliefs about the content of teaching expanded to include their own and their students' digital skills. Teachers also demonstrated great willingness to change their beliefs regarding the organisation of teaching, such as adapting their classroom instruction and finding new ways to organise students' independent learning. This included giving students greater independence thus increasing the individualisation of teaching, something that they believe benefited the learning of some, but not all, students. The perceived importance of physical gatherings decreased, and some teachers expressed a sense of losing control and

mentioned the vulnerability of students who suffer from mental illness and isolation.

Discussion

Teacher beliefs expressed by these teachers show signs of both stability and dynamics. The situation during the COVID-19 pandemic was stressful for everyone in the SFI environment. The teachers who took part in this study discussed both the challenges that they themselves faced and those that, as they understood it, confronted their students. While the pandemic and the decisions taken at governance and management level were beyond their control, they actively shaped and reshaped their teaching, demonstrating that their beliefs were dynamic. What stands out from the interviews is the readiness of teachers to collaborate, to reflect on their practice and search for solutions to problems, including a willingness to create new ways of teaching. Irrespective of perspective, nobody should claim that teachers' beliefs are either totally stable or totally dynamic, but they exist in a continuum in a complex, integrated and multidimensional system of beliefs and other phenomena (Fives & Buehl, 2016).

Some beliefs are more stable than others and thus more difficult to change, for better or worse. Whether the dynamism of their beliefs was a result of the pandemic or characteristic of their pre-pandemic practice is not something that this study can reveal. At the same time, the teachers' beliefs remained stable in as much as they retained a core belief in the necessity of social interaction for language development, something that did not change despite the impact of the pandemic on their teaching.

The interviews were conducted as part of a research project in which teachers' own reflections were part of the study. Knowing this may have influenced them to tone down their complaints and downplay their frustrations. In general, they gave the impression of trying to keep their spirits up and maintain a positive state of mind, although they clearly struggled with their task. Like the teachers in the study by Nilsberth et al. (2021), the teachers in this study emphasised the enormous effort required to keep teaching during the initial phase of the pandemic in what, in our understanding too, might be described as a *crisis organisation*. However, like the teachers in Ghanem (2023), our teachers demonstrated the ability to manage the situation by finding creative new solutions.

There are contrasts in how teachers talk about the pandemic. In their quantitative study, Casacchia et al. (2021) draw conclusions regarding the relationship between teaching load and appreciation of the new learning situation. Such conclusions cannot be drawn from this study, which must consider the specific challenges associated with teaching in the context of SFI Study Path 1, such as the vulnerability of some students, the risk of social isolation, and the relatively low level of digital competence of many of the students. While the teachers in this

study highlighted their increased workload, their own fatigue and the negative impact on students' language development, they also stressed positive outcomes such as new ways of teaching and increased evidence of students learning independently. In light of the above, our overall impression is that these teachers express dynamic beliefs.

No lockdown was ever imposed in Sweden, so teaching was never suspended completely for long periods during the pandemic. That said, the abrupt switch to new ways of teaching and the frequent changes due to the pandemic meant that it was still a struggle for these teachers to continue their work. Like Hodges et al. (2020), we find the term *emergency remote teaching* suitable to describe the strain placed on teachers in Sweden during the pandemic. This study shows that while teachers were expected to follow directives issued nationally and locally, they also had the space to create their own solutions and be active in the process. Still, descriptions in our interviews such as “a black hole” (Rib), that their “energy is about to run out” (Rc) and that they were “starting to get a bit shaky” (Rib), suggest that teaching during this period had a negative impact on teachers' mental wellbeing. The feelings of stress expressed show that stability may save teachers' time and help them prioritise in other ways.

Teachers and students in the SFI programme face many challenges. This study reveals teachers who were ready to reflect on and develop their teaching in line with changing conditions. However, like Malessa (2023), we contend that the demands placed on teachers and students during the pandemic were likely to have a negative impact on educational outcomes in general and the development of students' Swedish language proficiency in particular. While the teachers interviewed in this study did not set out to air complaints, they clearly believe that the short time their students had in the classroom and the sudden demand for digital competence, in combination with social isolation, are likely to have had a negative impact on their progression as L2 learners. Although face-to-face learning is preferred, our study uncovers that the teachers have strong beliefs in digital media in SFI teaching and that they can provide teaching activities that could lead their students to be more autonomous learners. When the context is changed their beliefs appear more explicitly, the awareness increases, and collective reflection becomes necessary (Levin, 2015). When beliefs are challenged new knowledge is also constructed.

Conclusion

We conclude, as did Nilsberth et al. (2021), that the readiness of schools to cope with this crisis was reliant on the professional competence of the individual teacher and her or his ability to act independently. We also conclude that, in part at least, the stress felt by teachers was due to their refusal to lower their own

professional standards and disregard what they believed to be their students' needs.

Adult literacy education for migrants is still a developing field. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on teachers professionally, and through this study teachers were afforded an opportunity to reflect on literacy education for this specific group of students, including in the future. In these politically and economically challenging times, LESLLA students need effective and empowering education more than ever, not least access to digital tools and competence of high quality (Malessa, 2023). The teachers specifically emphasise the importance of both basic academic skills and social and psychological needs for these students. The results of this study show that, to some extent, it is possible to redesign adult literacy education without changing the essence of teachers' beliefs about what is the core of basic literacy education. Barriers to digital literacy among both teachers and students have been overcome, and changing conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated in various ways that teaching may be both more and less student-centred. The study shows that the teachers have quite common epistemic beliefs (Conley et al., 2004) about knowledge and knowing related to language and language education. These beliefs do show some change over a relatively short period of time, and it seems likely that collective reflection during quite extreme circumstances can strengthen teachers' sense of professionalism.

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