



Swedish-English preschool as a site for the collaborative discovery of bilingual meanings

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines spontaneous conversations about word meaning in a bilingual preschool in Sweden. This qualitative empirical study is grounded in an ethnomethodological theoretical framework and contributes to research on multilingualism by using a sociocultural lens to examine mundane linguistic experiences of very young children who learn to speak in more than one language. The data comprise video-recordings of naturally occurring interactions among teachers and children in a Swedish-English preschool with a one teacher-one language policy. The data were collected during ethnographic fieldwork in an urban area in Sweden. Approached with multimodal interactional analysis, the data draw attention to teachers' everyday didactics, including their professional strategies for initiating spontaneous vocabulary work and orchestrating multiparty engagement in the collaborative discovery of meaning, and children's participation. The analysis discusses strategies for providing word definitions and demonstrates mundane institutional contexts outside of the classroom setting where such interactions were possible. Both teachers and children engaged in vocabulary exploration by using words in a situated, locally meaningful way. The study highlights that the teachers followed the preschool's language policy and embodied monolingual identities, while orienting to children as multilingual learners and supporting their language development.

Keywords: *bilingualism, vocabulary, preschool, interaction*

Introduction

Early years are formative for children's language learning and language socialization (e.g., Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Tomasello, 2009), including vocabulary development, which is particularly important to future literacy (Heath, 1982; Snow, 2017). From a sociocultural perspective, vocabulary learning occurs in interaction (Nelson, 2009). In relation to emergent bilingual children, there is a rich body of research in family contexts that demonstrates how mundane interactions, such as mealtimes, book reading, or play situations contribute to children's vocabulary learning across languages (e.g., Abreu Fernandes, 2019; Döpke, 1992; Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015). There is less understanding of the interactions that contribute to vocabulary teaching and learning in bilingual institutions of early childhood education and care (cf. Sun & Yin, 2022). In the Nordic countries, including Sweden, institutions of early childhood and care (ECEC) are universally available to children aged approximately 1–5 years (Nomesco-Nosoco, 2022). These institutions constitute an important environment for children's socialization and learning. The development of language and communication skills is stated as the central goal of their curricula (e.g., Skolverket, 2018), which makes these institutions a productive site for studying child language.

The present study aims to contribute to research on multilingualism by applying a sociocultural lens (e.g., Bateman & Church, 2017; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000) to the linguistic experiences of very young children (1–5 yo) in a bilingual ECEC institution in Sweden. Situated in a Swedish-English *förskola* 'preschool' with a one-teacher/one-language policy, this study is driven by the research questions of i) what mundane institutional routines lead to the exploration of word meaning and ii) how spontaneous vocabulary teaching is interactionally organized in a bilingual ECEC setting. Multimodal interactional analysis of ethnographic video-recordings (Broth & Kevallik, 2020; Deppermann, 2013; C. Goodwin, 2018) is used as the research method.

Vocabulary work in adult-child interactions

Conversations about word meaning are ubiquitous in adult-child interactions in both familial and educational contexts. For very young children, research has mainly focused on parent-child interactions, showing that discussions about word meaning have didactic (e.g., Clark & Wong, 2002), but also conversational goals of displaying, challenging, or proving one's knowledge (Blum-Kulka, 2002; M. H. Goodwin, 2007; Searles & Barriage, 2018). In familial contexts, children have been shown to contest the novice role, striving instead to establish an egalitarian participation framework (cf. Pontecorvo et al., 2001). As a "collaborative and symmetrical" genre, explanatory talk is particularly relevant for

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children's participation from the position of a knowledgeable speaker (Blum-Kulka, 2002, p. 89). By engaging in explanatory talk, parents and children jointly build a "culture of collaborative learning" (Nicolopoulou & Cole, 1993, p. 284), with children's vocabulary learning situated within the "occasioned knowledge exploration" (M. H. Goodwin, 2007, p. 97).

Studies focusing on how vocabulary is taught *in situ* and learned in educational contexts have primarily looked at classroom interaction settings, including adult L2 learners (Mortensen, 2011; Waring et al., 2013), school-age children in a heritage classroom (Stoewer & Musk, 2019), or young immigrant children learning the societal language (e.g., Cekaite, 2020; Grøver et al., 2020). Looking at teachers' practices for vocabulary work, Waring et al. (2013) differentiate between "analytic" strategies, that is verbal and text-based definitions, and "animated" strategies, including demonstrations and enactment. Teachers' choice of strategies has been interpreted as determined by the vocabulary type, namely that abstract nouns and verbs prompt "definitional information" and other types of words lead to contextual information (Waring et al., 2013, p. 262). With its focus on teachers' actions, this analysis has not addressed students' responses or their material environment as a tangible resource that may have contributed to the unfolding interactional sequences around word meaning. In contrast, studies looking at "impromptu vocabulary work" in classroom settings have emphasized joint efforts among the teacher and learners to identify and define unknown words (Stoewer & Musk, 2019; see also Mortensen, 2011; Li Wei, 2013). Mortensen refers to this collaborative educational practice as "doing word explanation" and highlights students' participation in "creating the frames for their own learning opportunities" (Mortensen, 2011, p. 157). In educational contexts, the negotiation of word meaning among teachers and students contributes to a "dynamic participatory engagement" (Li Wei, 2013, p. 171) that enables the practicing of bilingual identities (Stoewer & Musk, 2019) and enculturation (Cekaite, 2020).

The present study extends the research on vocabulary teaching in L2 classrooms by examining teacher-child interactions in the setting of a bilingual preschool in Sweden. For young children, the institutional context of a preschool constitutes a rich environment for language learning and socialization outside of their home. This environment is characterized by a variety of interactional constellations in multiparty participation frameworks, and comprises a range of structured classroom-like activities, e.g., circle-time, book-reading, crafting, as well as "free play," and care routines, e.g., dressing or mealtimes (Alstad & Mourão, 2021; Boyd & Huss, 2017; Schwartz, 2022). By observing these preschool interactions *in situ*, the present study focuses on participants'—children's and teachers'—orientations to languages as a semiotic system.

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Bilingualism and early childhood education in Sweden

Early childhood education and care in the Nordic countries is characterized by nearly universal, governmentally subsidized access for children, as well as high standards of teaching due to post-secondary teacher education. Moreover, there is a longstanding tradition of supporting children's multilingual development due to these countries' official bilingualism, as Finnish and Swedish as the two official languages in Finland (e.g., Hansell & Björklund, 2022; Mård-Miettinen et al., 2018; Palviainen & Mård-Miettinen, 2015), or the efforts to support national minority languages in Norway (e.g., Kleemann, 2021; Pesch et al., 2021; Todal, 1998) and Sweden (e.g., Belancic & Lindgren, 2020; Olgaç, 2019). In recent decades, there has been greater awareness of children's multilingualism due to immigration and heightened interest in pedagogies that support children's learning of the national language in their early years prior to starting compulsory school (e.g., special issue on multilingualism in ECEC in Norway Alstad et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a growing understanding that multilingualism and an immigration background characterize not only children but also teachers in ECEC in the Nordic countries. This represents both challenges in terms of the teachers' mastery of the national languages, and opportunities for developing their "critical multilingual awareness" (Alstad & Sopenan, 2021, p. 30; see also Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Tkachenko et al., 2018).

As in other Nordic countries, in Sweden, the majority of children from one to five years old attend *förskola* 'preschool', spending approximately 15–40 hours a week there, depending on their parents' employment status. Similarly to Norway (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), Finland (Utbildningsstyrelsen [Finnish National Agency for Education], 2022), Denmark (e.g., Ministry of Children and Education, 2020), or Iceland (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011), the ECEC curriculum in Sweden (Skolverket, 2018) emphasizes language teaching and learning in terms of children's ability to communicate and exercise their right to participation, both of which are presented as essential for future literacy (e.g., Bateman & Cekaite, 2022). In the curriculum, the Swedish language is assumed as the default medium of instruction and communication, along with Swedish Sign Language. Moreover, for children of non-Swedish descent, the curriculum declares support for their *modersmål* 'mother tongue', although it does not specify pedagogical practices to achieve this goal (Skolverket, 2018, p. 14). Overall, the curriculum formulates intended learning outcomes rather broadly, allowing great room for interpretation around how children's communicative skills can be supported and assessed.

Research on bilingualism and multilingualism in Swedish preschools has focused primarily on children with an immigrant background, and dealt with the questions of integration (Åkerblom & Harju, 2021; Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017) and teaching Swedish

as a second language (Björk-Willén, 2018, 2022; Cekaite & Evaldsson, 2017). Axelsson and Juvonen (2016) point out that, although multilingual experiences—including the officially recognized minority languages and foreign-language education in schools—have been widespread in Sweden and other Nordic countries, the large number of children with immigration backgrounds who entered the country after the refugee crisis of 2015 has posed new challenges for research and practice of Swedish as L2. For example, Åkerblom and Harju note that, despite the Swedish preschool curriculum declares support for diversity in language and culture, in preschool practice, the established norms are monocultural and monolingual, which results in teachers and policy-makers treating non-Swedish children as “lacking” and in need of restrictive, compensating pedagogy (Åkerblom & Harju, 2021; also Harju & Åkerblom, 2020). Analyzing preschool teachers’ attitudes toward working with multilingual children in preschool, Fredriksson and Lindgren Eneflo (2019) highlight that the Swedish teachers in their study demonstrated supportive attitudes toward the goal of multilingualism, they, however, displayed uncertainty regarding the implementation of multilingualism in practice, particularly due to their lack of expertise or familiarity with languages and cultures other than Swedish. Bylund and Björk-Willén (2015) illustrate how such linguistic dilemmas become visible in preschool teachers’ professional practice with the example of a reading activity in a preschool where a Swedish teacher reads aloud from book in a language that she does not know (Spanish). Their analysis emphasizes that native competence in language is not the exclusive prerequisite for teaching a language, and instead, the teacher’s skillful organization of “a collective arrangement” for language learning creates opportunities for “multilingual becoming” among both adults and children (Bylund & Björk-Willén, 2015, p. 89).

Studies on the education of preschool teachers have highlighted that the topic of bilingualism is complex and requires further research on both language ideologies and early childhood language education (e.g., Hedman & Lubińska, 2022). In a survey of attitudes toward bilingualism in education in Sweden, Paulsrud et al. (2023) emphasize that the national language policy and its enactment do not match. For example, university instructors in preschool teacher education perceived the Swedish language skills of students with immigrant backgrounds as insufficient for teaching in preschools. In turn, student teachers in the same preschool education programs stated that they felt unprepared for working with bilingual children. Along with the finding that language presents a problematic issue in the Swedish preschool context, this study has drawn attention to the complexity of a context in which both teachers and children may speak languages other than Swedish, and how they can work together to co-create meaning.

Few studies have investigated preschools with bilingual pedagogy in Sweden; for example, a trilingual Swedish-English-Spanish preschool (Björk-Willén, 2006), bilingual

Spanish-Swedish (Bylund & Björk-Willén, 2015), English-Swedish and Finnish-Swedish (Boyd et al., 2017) preschools. These studies have demonstrated that preschool routines and interactions with teachers and peers contribute to children's language learning, emphasizing the collaborative and multidirectional nature of this process. Moreover, recent studies have pointed out the particular status of English as a lingua franca among very young children, while admitting to little understanding of the factors that contribute to children's English proficiency (e.g., Sylvén, 2022). In comparison to monolingual Swedish children, children with a non-Swedish background have been shown to use English for defining their belonging to a certain peer group (Larsson et al., 2022). Set in a Swedish-English preschool, the present study aims to expand our knowledge about how teacher-child interactions may systematically contribute to children's bilingualism in Swedish and English, with specific attention being paid to talk about word meaning in the midst of routine preschool activities.

Research site

This paper is based on an analysis of video-recordings of naturally occurring interactions in a bilingual Swedish-English preschool in Sweden. The data were collected in ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation during two periods of two weeks each, in March and September 2020. The preschool was located in an urban area in Sweden and accommodated 50 children aged between one and five years. The staff consisted of university-educated teachers, teaching assistants, and substitute teaching assistants. Since there was no observable difference in how the staff interacted with the children or with each other in relation to their specific employment status, in this paper they are all referred to as teachers. Children and teachers addressed each other by first names.

Both children and teachers came from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and all the teachers presented themselves as multilingual. In the preschool entry hall, a large wall collage with the teachers' and children's photographs and flag stickers displayed their countries of origin and, by extension, their *modersmål* 'mother tongue' (see Figure 1). Notably, some children and teachers identified with one country of origin, while others had links with multiple countries, reflecting the complex relationship between the notions of identity, home language, and country of origin (cf. Aleksić & García, 2022 on problematic ideologies connecting nation flags to languages).

Most of the children began attending the preschool at the age of one year, and it was their parents who provided the preschool with information about their home language(s) and countr(y/ies) of origin. Moreover, the children had access to bookshelves containing books in languages other than English and Swedish brought in by parents (see Figure 1).

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While in most cases the teachers could not use these books for reading, they enabled other literacies to be made visible. There were also books containing stories and fairy tales from the countries with which children and teachers identified, translated into English and Swedish, and these were regularly used in group reading activities.



FIGURE 1 Display of multiculturalism in the Swedish-English preschool.

The preschool had a one-teacher/one-language policy, whereby each teacher spoke one assigned language, English or Swedish. While this language policy was not explicitly enforced by the preschool regulations, it was enacted through the organization of daily routines, a weekly schedule (see Figure 2), and staff recruitment practices.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
7.30-9.00 <i>Free activities</i>	7.30-9.00 <i>Free activities</i>	7.30-9.00 <i>Free activities</i>	7.30-9.00 <i>Free activities</i>	7.30-9.00 <i>Free activities</i>
8.00-8.30 BREAKFAST	8.00-8.30 BREAKFAST	8.00-8.30 BREAKFAST	8.00-8.30 BREAKFAST	8.00-8.30 BREAKFAST
9.00-9.30 CIRCLE TIME SWEDISH	9.00-9.30 CIRCLE TIME ENGLISH	9.00-9.30 CIRCLE TIME SWEDISH	9.15-9.30 <i>Short CIRCLE TIME</i>	9.00-9.30 CIRCLE TIME ENGLISH
<i>We talk about weather and other things</i>	<i>We talk about weather and other things</i>	<i>We talk about weather and other things</i>	OUTING	<i>We talk about weather and other things</i>
Introducing the week's letter and four words in Swedish	Introducing the week's letter and four words in English	Choose Show and Tell	STORY TIME on OUTING: Odd weeks English and even weeks Swedish	Choose Nalle Maya
9.30-10.45 PARK/MOVEMENT Fruit in the park	9.30-10.45 PARK Fruit in the park	9.30-10.45 PARK Fruit in the park		9.30-10.45 PARK Fruit in the park
11.00-11.30 STORY TIME SWEDISH	11.00-11.30 STORY TIME ENGLISH	11.00-11.30 STORY TIME SWEDISH		11.00-11.30 STORY TIME ENGLISH
11.30-12.00 Lunch	11.30-12.00 Lunch	11.30-12.00 Lunch		11.30-12.00 Lunch
12.00-13.00 <i>Rest time</i>	12.00-13.00 <i>Rest time</i>	12.00-13.00 <i>Rest time</i>		12.00-13.00 <i>Rest time</i>
13.00-14.30 <i>Teaching situations/ Undervisnings tid</i>	13.00-14.30 <i>Teaching situations/ Undervisnings tid</i>	13.00-14.30 <i>Teaching situations/ Undervisnings tid</i>	WE WILL BE BACK AT 15.00	13.00-13.45 <i>Free activities</i>
<i>Estetiska emne/ Aesthetic subject</i>	13.00-13.20: <i>Maths Music/</i>	<i>Naturvetenskap Science/IT</i>		13.45-14.30 <i>Staff reflection (short documentaries)</i>
<i>Språk/Language IT/Drama</i>		<i>Arts</i>		
14.30-15.00 <i>Snack</i>	14.30-15.00 <i>Snack</i>	14.30-15.00 <i>Snack</i>	14.30-15.00 <i>Snack</i>	14.30-15.00 <i>Snack</i>
15.00-17.00 <i>Free activities</i>	15.00-17.00 <i>Free activities</i>	15.00-17.00 <i>Free activities</i>	15.00-17.00 <i>Free activities</i>	15.00-17.00 Reflection with children
				13.45-14.30 <i>Free activities</i>
17.00 Fruit	17.00 Fruit	17.00 Fruit	17.00 Fruit	17.00 Fruit

FIGURE 2 Language in the schedule of the Swedish-English preschool.¹

All the Swedish-speaking teachers had a good command of English, as is typical of the urban, well-educated population in Sweden, but they spoke English only when communicating with other adults. English-speaking teachers were from a broad range of

¹ The table is recreated for readability, spelling is preserved as in the original.

countries worldwide and had varying levels of proficiency in Swedish, related to their length of stay in Sweden. Notably, the weekly schedule that the preschool headmaster shared with the researcher was written in English with some Swedish translations, which could be interpreted as an accommodation strategy for English-speaking staff who had limited proficiency in Swedish. As the schedule shows, the language of instruction and the responsible teacher alternated daily, which meant that structured activities, including circle-time and book reading, were conducted in both languages to a roughly equal extent. Following the national curriculum, as well as the special needs of some children, elements of Swedish Sign Language² were regularly incorporated into the teaching. During the observations, the teachers consistently followed the preschool language policy; the children, however, were not explicitly prohibited from or reprimanded for the use of any of the language available to them. In peer interactions during free play periods, the children mainly used Swedish, while the teachers primarily spoke English with each other.

Data collection and analysis methods

The data for the present study were collected during ethnographic fieldwork and includes participant observations, informal conversations with teachers, visual documentation (photographs), and video-recordings of preschool routines. The researcher visited the preschool for nine consecutive working days in March 2020 and ten consecutive working days in September 2020. The recording occurred continuously from 8 am to 4pm, capturing interactions in the cloakroom, during mealtimes, circle-time, book readings, outdoor play, and transitions between these activities. Children were not recorded during rest time. A handheld camera was used when recording outdoors; a camera on a tripod was used during most indoor activities. When possible, two cameras (one hand-held by the researcher and one stationary on the tripod) were used to capture group activities unfolding simultaneously in different rooms within the preschool. The video data resulted in approximately 80 hours of recordings.

The collected data were approached within the ethnomethodological theoretical framework (Heritage, 1984) employing the method of multimodal conversation analysis (Broth & Kevallik, 2020; Deppermann, 2013; C. Goodwin, 2018). The primary data set for the present analysis consists of 20 episodes of spontaneous—that is, unplanned—interactions about word meaning (different words for each episode). Planned educational activities focusing on teaching specific vocabulary, such as the introduction of the “word

² During my observations, the teachers referred to Swedish Sign Language as “*teckenspråk*” and “sign language.” In practice, the teachers introduced support signs (*stödtecken*) as “the sign of the week” and used supporting images illustrating signs (*bildstöd*).

of the week” during daily circle-time meetings, alphabet-learning activities in English and Swedish, or vocabulary teaching for a thematic project—for instance, occupations, gardening, or music instruments—were excluded from the present analysis due to not being spontaneous interactions. This collection does not represent all instances of spontaneous vocabulary work that can be found in the recorded data, but instead reveal “different aspects or features” of the phenomenon in focus (Sidnell, 2010, p. 31). The length of these episodes varies from a few seconds when, for example, a teacher highlights a particular word and provides a synonym (e.g., Excerpt 1) to 5–10 minutes when multiple children participate in a discussion about the word meaning while simultaneously engaging in another, often manual/physical task (e.g., talking while walking in Excerpt 4). The selected episodes were transcribed and analyzed in terms of their context, sequential organization, and linguistic features (cf. Sidnell 2010, p. 34). Five excerpts from this collection are used in this paper as “best cases in which the phenomenon of interest is most visible” (Sidnell 2010, p. 34) to illustrate the main findings of the analysis. The transcription conventions are based on the system outlined by Sacks et al. (1974), and Mondada (2018) for embodied actions; a transcription key can be found in the appendix (see Appendix 1). To aid readability of the bilingual data, written language conventions are followed in the transcripts. All names in the transcripts are pseudonyms.

This research project has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Informed consent was obtained from the teachers and children’s guardians who signed the written form; children were verbally informed about the research project and their rights in relation to participation. Informally, participants’ consent was negotiated continuously (cf. Ericsson & Boyd, 2017); the recording was paused when teachers or children displayed distress or unwillingness to be observed.

Findings

The following sections will present analytical findings suggesting that spontaneous explanatory talk, including discussions about word meaning, was a mundane, daily practice in the observed preschool. It will be demonstrated that the teachers initiated spontaneous vocabulary work in various interactional contexts and provided: i) analytic definitions, through word substitutions, synonyms, or labelling objects, and ii) animated definitions, by demonstrating physical objects or gesturing. Further, the interactional organization of these exchanges will be discussed, including teachers’ and children’s strategies for initiating talk about word meaning and their situational context. Specifically, mundane transitional activities, such as waiting in line, dressing in the cloakroom, or walking to a playground, provided children with opportunities to establish longer dyadic interactions with teachers, ask for help, or initiate a conversation on a topic

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of their choice, including word meaning. Although teachers initiated such talk more often than children, the children were able to build on their multilingual competence when participating in these interactions.

Teachers' spontaneous vocabulary work

Analytic word definitions

Teachers habitually monitored ongoing talk for potentially unknown vocabulary. Book reading was one of the activities that supplied teachers with new words to be highlighted and contextualized. The following example, Excerpt 1, illustrates how the teacher uses synonyms and verbal descriptions to provide an analytic definition of the participle *kokande* 'boiling' (line 01) to a group of 1–2-year-old children.

Excerpt 1: kokande vatten 'boiling watter'

Swedish-speaking teacher (T, Annika), nine 1–2-year-old children (CH), three other teachers (two English-speaking, one Swedish-speaking).

01 T: +"**och över elden stod en kittel med +#KO:-KAN-DE vatten.**"
and above the fire stood a pot with boiling water
 +looking at the book page-----+gaze to children->
 fig #fig.1.1



fig.1.1

02 T: +**Så det var jätte jätte varm. Det var aj!**+
So that was very very hot. That was ouch!
 +gaze to children----->+

03 (2s)
 t +gaze to the book->
 t ±turning page in the book±

04 T: +**AJ, AJ, AJ sa varm- vargen, och brände sig,**
Ouch, ouch, ouch said the war- wolf, and burnt himself,
 +gaze to the book----->

05 T: **och han sprang däri[från, och då lekte dem tre små grisarna lyckligt+**
and he ran way, and then the tree little pigs played happily
 ----->+

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- 06 Child [Aj aj!
Ouch ouch!
- 07 T +i alla sina dagar."
through all their days
+gaze to children

While reading the book, the Swedish-speaking teacher displays her orientation to the children as language learners and highlights the word *kokande* “boiling” by speaking with increased volume and slower pace (line 01). With the affectively laden descriptive phrase *jätte jätte varm* ‘very very hot’ and the interjection *aj* ‘ouch’ (line 02), the teacher offers an analytic definition of the abstract concept of boiling water. The teacher defines the word using verbal and embodied resources that she perceives as being accessible to the children. Thus, the teacher demonstrates her attention to the children’s linguistic competences and attempts to ensure a shared understanding and engagement in the book reading, which one of the children displays when repeating the interjection *aj aj* ‘ouch ouch’ (line 06) as a commentary on the unfolding story.

This interaction illustrates everyday didactics in the preschool setting, where the teachers habitually monitor and mediate verbal output in relation to the co-present children and their need to achieve an understanding of the ongoing interaction. Such analytic definitions could contribute to socializing children in attending to relationships between different words and provide opportunities to increase children’s metalinguistic awareness.

Word definitions through demonstrations

When material resources were available, such as objects or images, definition through demonstration was a productive resource for ensuring children’s understanding. Excerpt 2 illustrates a teacher’s language teaching efforts during the mundane preschool routine of dressing. When one of the children, Laura, struggles to put on her fleece jumper, the teacher treats this not only as an issue with a manual skill, but also as the child’s unfamiliarity with the word *zip*, and provides the word definition through demonstrating the referent and modelling the word’s pronunciation.

Excerpt 2: zip

English-speaking teacher (T, Maya), Laura (3yo), Lucy (3yo).

- 01 (2s) &+
laura &with her fleece jumper on, putting on her windbreaker
t +gaze to Laura->
- 02 T +You can \$zip up your jumper. Zip \$this up.+
+gaze to Laura-----+
\$doing zipping up gesture \$points and touches Laura’s zip

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03 (4s)&*+
 laura &trying to connect the zipper,
 *gaze at her hands
 t +looks to another child

04 Laura *Can you help me +please?+
 *gaze to Teacher
 t +looks at Laura+

05 T +&Yeah, come here, I will help you.
 +looks at Lucy
 &unfolding Lucy's jacket

06 T &Here. +Put your arm in the sleeve.+
 +gaze to Lucy-----+
 laura &puts Lucy's jacket on the bench.
 &steps toward Teacher

07 T +&This is called a zip, Laura. +Can you say zip?
 +gaze down to Laura's zip-----+gaze to Laura's face
 &closing Laura's zip->

08 Laura *°(zip).
 *gaze at Teacher->

09 T +&Zip.
 +gaze at Laura's face->

10 Laura *(zip).
 *gaze at Teacher's face->

11 T #&*[Z- z- zip. Zip.
 +gaze at Laura's mouth->
 laura *----->
 fig #fig.2.1



fig.2.1

13 Laura [&(zip).*
 ->*
 t &finishes closing Laura's jumper&

14 T +&Okay.
 +gaze away from Laura
 laura &steps away from Teacher

The interaction in Excerpt 2 occurred in the cloakroom while the children were dressing for outdoor play. When Laura attempted to put on her windbreaker, the teacher issued her with the directive *zip up your jumper* (line 02), then immediately self-repaired and clarified the potentially unknown English word *zip* by pointing at its referent (line 02). After struggling with the task (03), Laura approached the teacher with the formulaic request for help *can you help me please* (line 04), to which the teacher responded by both assisting her with the manual task and teaching her the new word. Laura's initial attempt to close the zip and her subsequent request in English could be interpreted as a display of both her understanding of the teacher's language preference and the teacher's directive. The teacher, however, proceeded by explicitly naming the object with the phrase *this is called* and requesting the child to repeat it with *can you say* (line 07). By highlighting the word's pronunciation in this spontaneous interaction, emphasizing its articulation, and eliciting the child's repetition, the teacher continued the mundane pedagogical practice by connecting material affordances from children's everyday life to language learning.

Interactional organization of spontaneous vocabulary work

Teachers' questions

In the analyzed data, teachers used questions in the format "Do you know what ... is?" to make the relationship between a specific lexical item and its referent explicit. Children demonstrated their familiarity with this practice and treated this question as an invitation to participate rather than an evaluation of their knowledge. The children showed their familiarity with the practice by volunteering answers, including "no," and taking turns when responding, as in the following Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3: folder

English-speaking teacher (T, Maya), Maria (4 yo), Lea (3 yo), Annie (3 yo), co-present children (CH, 3-4 yo), co-present teachers (T2, T3).

This interaction began when the teacher was announcing the schedule for the afternoon activities, while looking at their personal folders containing projects, drawings, and photographs. The teacher highlighted the word *folders* (line 01) with a distinct articulation, followed by the explicit information-seeking question: *Do you know what your folders are?* (line 02). This question had a twofold referent, accounting for the situation of the word being unfamiliar or the children not seeing their personal folders yet. By responding with "no" (line 03), the children confirmed the teacher's anticipation that the word *folder* would require explanation. Moreover, through their responses, the children displayed their understanding of the question format as not an evaluative question that demands a correct answer, but rather as a genuine information-seeking question. By announcing *we gonna show* (line 04), *we're going to look* (line 05) and

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delaying the word definition, the teacher secured the children's "joint attention" (Kidwell & Zimmerman, 2007), which they displayed with sustained eye gaze and vocalized excitement (line 06). The teacher returned to the promised explanation at a later point during that day, when the children were gathered in a different room with their personal folders. She first confirmed that the children were not familiar with the object itself (lines 79–80) and then connected the new vocabulary item *folder* to the tangible object (line 83). Notably, when Lea erroneously responded to the teacher's question *Who is this for?* (line 84) by repeating the word *folder* (line 85), she displayed her understanding of the interaction as a pedagogical practice involving designedly incomplete utterances (Koshik, 2002). The teacher, however, was expanding vocabulary work to literacy practice by encouraging the children to read the name on the folder, which was recognized and performed by Annie (line 87).

01 T And then we're going to go and look at our #FO:L-ders.=
fig #fig.3.1



fig.3.1

02 T =Do you know what your folders are?
03 CH No:..
04 T No? Well we gonna show you today.
05 T And we're going [to look at the project that we did-
06 Maria [.HHH!

(approximately 35 minutes later on the same day))
78 T \$Okay. Have you ever looked at these?
\$taking a folder from a shelf, taking a seat at the table
79 T +Have you ever looked at these?
+gaze at the children
80 CH °No.
81 T \$Do you know what #these are?
\$demonstrating the folder to the children
fig #fig.3.2

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Fig.3.2

- 82 CH No:?
- 83 T \$These are your fo:lders. \$So this one- sa:ys- for-?
\$opening the folder. \$demonstrating a name tag on the folder
- 84 T \$Who is this fo:[r?
\$pointing at the name tag on the folder->
- 85 Lea [Fo:lde:r.
- 86 T Wha- It says a name. Whose name is this?\$
->\$
- 87 Annie *Henri!
*reading the name on the tag
- 88 (3s)+\$
t +gaze at Annie, smiling
t \$nodding, giving Annie high-five55

The explanatory talk in Excerpt 3 illustrates how by using questions that explicitly connect words to their referents, the teacher was able to monitor the children's understanding and engagement. Moreover, by allowing the children to display their knowledge without being evaluated, the teacher encouraged their participation in the collaborative discovery of meaning.

Child-initiated vocabulary work in transitional spaces

While teachers routinely initiated spontaneous word definitions (see Excerpts 1–3), children also posed questions that launched explanatory exchanges. In the analyzed data, the children displayed their understanding that transitional activities, such as dressing in the cloakroom, walking to a playground, or waiting for others, constituted interactional spaces where they could initiate a conversation with teachers on a topic of their choice. In these exchanges, children appeared to orient to the discovery of meaning beyond word definitions. For example, with such questions as *vad är det för något?* 'what is this?' and *varför har du det?* 'why do you have this?', children were able to initiate sequences that required not just naming the referent for *det* 'this' but also verbalizing the function and/or

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causality of the referents. Child-initiated repair (Schegloff, 1992) of a teacher's utterance was another productive strategy for launching an explanatory exchange about a word and its referent. Excerpt 4, below, illustrates, how during a walk outdoors, a child questioned the teacher's use of the word *beach* as applicable to what she was looking at (line 03), which resulted in a joint discussion about the word's meaning.

Excerpt 4: home beach

English-speaking teacher (T, Liz), Katie (3 yo), Lucy (3 yo), Molly (2 yo), Fiona (2 yo).

01 T #+Can you see the beach Molly?
 +gaze to Molly
fig #fig.4.1

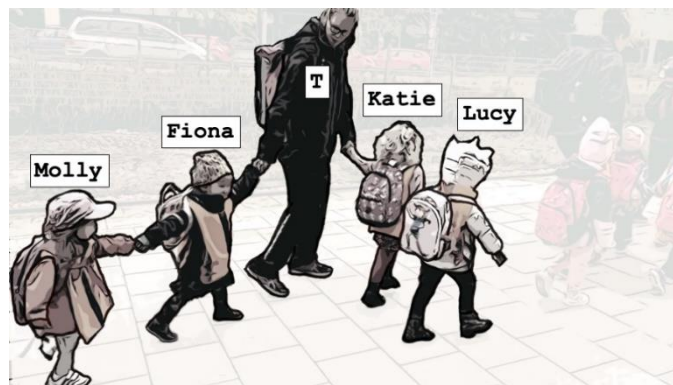


Fig. 4.1

02 (3s) *&\$
ch *gaze in the direction of the beach
ch &walking->
t \$walking->

03 Katie *It's a BE:Ach?
 *gaze in the direction of the beach, frowning

04 T Yeah. It's home beach.

05 (Katie) Yeah.

06 T +It's (okay). *It's water and sand.
 +gaze to Katie's head
katie ->*gaze to the road

07 T +And the forest behind it.
 +gaze to the beach

08 Fiona [°E:ew. And water and sand.

09 Lucy [+*We made all of (that).
 *gaze to the ground
t +gaze to the road

10 Molly °Oh [no:!

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- 11 Lucy [*In the science +(room).*
 gaze to Teacher-----
 t +gaze to Lucy->
- 12 T Science room? What's in the science room?
- 13 Lucy It's like wa:ter and [sa:nd,
- 14 T [Water and sand (yes)?=
- 15 T =We made water- We made mud in the science room.
- 16 T We mixed (up) water and sand. And we made our own- mud.

This interaction among the English-speaking teacher and four children unfolded as they were walking to a city park and passing a small lake. Although walking from the preschool to a public playground was a daily practice in the observed preschool, this walk by the lake was a special day trip for this group of children. The teacher was already familiar with the area, but for the children it was still to be discovered. When the teacher asked one the of the children, Molly, *can you see the beach?* (line 01), the co-present children were closely monitoring the teacher's talk and followed the direction of her gaze in looking for the beach (line 02). The children's view might have been limited by the bushes in front of the lake, or the small patch of sand by the lake might not have resembled their previous experiences of a beach, all of which was voiced in Katie's doubting *It's a BEA:ch?* (line 03). The teacher confirmed with an incremental repair that this was a *home beach* (line 04), expanding with an analytic definition that a beach is *water and sand* (line 06) *and forest behind it* (line 07).

As Katie had accepted this explanation (lines 05–06), the other children demonstrated their engagement in this interaction through the subsequent commentaries. Fiona's affective commentary *e:ew. And water and sand* (line 08) overlapped with Lucy's narrative statement (line 09) connecting the teacher's abstract definition to the shared experience that Lucy herself, the teacher, and other children had had in their preschool life, namely their experiments with water and sand in the science room (line 11). The teacher, who at first displayed trouble in understanding (line 12), ratified Lucy's contribution to the ongoing explanatory talk by providing further details about the past event, i.e., their experiment in the science room (lines 14–16), and labelling it with a relevant, more specific, vocabulary item, i.e., *mud* (line 15). Thus, with the recruitment of words such as '*water*', '*sand*', and '*mud*', the teacher and children jointly contributed to the construction of the meaning of the word '*beach*', relating it to the observable phenomenon in their immediate environment, and connecting it prior knowledge.

This exchange demonstrates how children participate in explanatory talk and contribute to teachers' analytic word definitions by making the topic relevant to their knowledge

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about their phenomenal world and their previous experiences. In doing so, children build a discourse that is characterized by rich connections between lexical items and their referents. The multi-party setting of preschool interactions constitutes a valuable resource that teachers and children use in their collaborative discovery of word meaning.

Multilingual engagement in explanatory talk

As illustrated in Excerpt 4, both teachers and children used the multiparty setting as an opportunity for collaborative participation in spontaneous vocabulary work. Children's socialization in mundane pedagogical routines of vocabulary-teaching, as well as their metalinguistic awareness, were visible in their willingness to contribute to the explanatory exchanges about word meaning by drawing on their multilingual (Swedish, English, and Swedish Sign Language) expertise and the preschool's one-teacher/one-language policy. Excerpt 5 demonstrates how the English-speaking teacher elicits the children's definition of an object represented in a book illustration; when one of the children, Kevin, responds in Swedish, this allows the teacher to involve the co-present children in the discussion, highlighting their multilingual expertise as a valuable resource.

Excerpt 5: telescope

English-speaking teacher (T, Rosalina), Kevin (4 yo), Maria (3 yo), Tristan (4 yo), children (CH, 3-4 yo), co-present teacher (T2).

- 01 T \$And they were using something to look at the stars.
\$demonstrating the illustration in the book to the children->
- 02 T +What is that. What is this lo:ng one? What do we call that one?
+gaze to children->
- 03 Kevin °(**kikare**)
binoculars
- 04 T Good. Can you say it- Kevin?
- 05 Kevin [**Kikare.**
binoculars
- 06 CH [(xxx)
- 07 T Say it louder.
- 08 Kevin **Kikare.**
binoculars
- 09 T **Ki-ka-re.** And in Sw- in- In Swedish it's **kikare,**
binoculars *binoculars*
- 10 T But what is it called in English?
- 11 maria &raises hand->

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- 12 T \$The one we use like #this and look, look,\$
 puts the book down \$demonstrating looking through binoculars\$
 fig #fig.5.1



Fig.5.1

- 13 T &What is it called Maria.&
 maria &holds hand up-----&
- 14 Maria: Telescope.
- 15 T: Te[lescope?]
- 16 (Tristan) [°Telescope.
- 17 Tristan °Telescope.
- 18 T: +Mh:m?
 +gaze to the book
- 19 Tristan: It's like- +It's like the same like tell something.
 t +gaze to Tristan->
- 20 T But it's a-?
- 21 Tristan Telescope.
- 22 T Can we all of us say it?
- 23 CH Telescope.

While reading a story, the teacher draws the children's attention to an image representing a boat with a telescope on top of it, asking whether they know the name of this object (lines 02–03). One of the boys, Kevin, volunteers an answer in Swedish (*kikare* 'binoculars' in line 05). The teacher validates Kevin's answer (line 06), and demonstrates her understanding of the Swedish word when repeating it in Swedish (line 10) and animating binoculars—and not a telescope—with her gestures (line 14). With her request to translate the word into English (line 12), the teacher instantiates the preschool's one-teacher/one-language policy, yet does not follow it dogmatically. Instead, the teacher creates an interactional space where the children can take advantage of their bilingual expertise (cf. "translanguaging space" in Li Wei, 2011). Maria offers the English word for the item in the book illustration, that is *telescope* (line 17), with the teacher repeating it

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and, in so doing, highlighting the lexeme's pronunciation (line 18). Tristan repeats *telescope*, displaying his orientation to the routinized practice of vocabulary drills (line 19). Tristan then treats the teacher's emphatic interjection *m:hm?* (line 20) as a request for clarification and provides his explanation of the word *telescope* as an object that is *the same like tell something* (line 21). In doing so, Tristan builds on the sound analogy of *tele* and *tell*, which offers an important insight into children's emerging metalinguistic awareness and the discovery of word meaning and origin. Instead of evaluating Tristan's explanation, the teacher elicits participation from all the co-present children (line 24), encouraging them to practice their pronunciation of the new word. For both teachers and children, spontaneous vocabulary work that includes object labelling, explanations, and use of available languages, was a habitual practice contributing to "joint attention" (Kidwell & Zimmerman, 2007) and collaborative participation.

Concluding discussion

This study's objective was to examine bilingual educational practices, specifically spontaneous vocabulary teaching, in the setting of a Swedish-English preschool in Sweden. The rationale behind the study was built on the growing interest in bilingual pedagogy in early childhood, particularly in settings beyond the formal classroom, as well as the need to understand pedagogy in action and highlight children's participation. The study is situated in the context of Nordic ECEC, which is governed by the national educational authorities and characterized by high levels of teachers' education and nearly universal access for children. Similarly to other Nordic countries, the ECEC curriculum in Sweden (Skolverket, 2018) frames children's language development as the ability to communicate in the national language(s) with some level of support for other languages. This broad framing leaves the detailed language pedagogy open to teachers' interpretation. While previous studies in the Nordic context have investigated teachers' language ideologies and their beliefs regarding teaching methods, the present study adds to our understanding of pedagogical practices (cf. Lindquist, 2018 in Norway; Savijärvi, 2018; Savijärvi et al., 2022 in Finland).

This study has presented the findings of a multimodal interactional analysis of ethnographic video-recordings that show how teachers and children engaged in conversations about word meanings as a habitual practice during mundane routines, beyond structured classroom activities. Teachers monitored the ongoing talk and identified potentially problematic words, which they then addressed by providing analytic and animated word definitions. Locally available verbal, embodied, and material resources were used for these mundane educational purposes. Several features characterized the interactional organization of the spontaneous vocabulary work:

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teachers initiated such exchanges more often than children, particularly with questions in the format: “Do you know what ... is/means?” In doing so, teachers recruited co-present children into the collaborative discovery of meanings. Although they did so less often than teachers, children were also successful in launching explanatory sequences by addressing teachers with such questions as *vad är det för något?* ‘what is this?’ and *varför har du det?* ‘why do you have this?’, as well as initiating conversational repair of the teachers’ utterances (e.g., Excerpt 3). Transitional activities, including changing in the cloakroom, waiting in line, or walking to a playground, constituted a productive setting for child-initiated talk about word meaning. In comparison to a classroom setting, these activities allowed children greater access to teachers in terms of spatial proximity and choice of topic.

Moreover, the multiparty setting of the preschool constituted an important affordance for children’s participation in the discovery of word meanings. Children closely monitored ongoing interactions for the opportunity to join the explanatory talk from the position of a knowledgeable speaker and volunteered their definitions of problematic words. They readily exploited multilingual resources by offering word definitions in the languages available to them, particularly Swedish, English, and Swedish Sign Language. The findings highlight how teachers interactionally supported children’s multilingual participation within multiparty participation frameworks, while sustaining the preschool’s one-teacher/one-language policy and making word definitions relevant to a large group of children.

The results show that spontaneous vocabulary work represents everyday didactics in the bilingual preschool. Previous research on bilingual preschools has demonstrated that children’s peer interactions are an important site for language learning (cf. Björk-Willén & Cromdal, 2009), and the analysis in this paper further reveals how education “seeps” into mundane preschool interactions across activities and actors. The variety of situational contexts and routines in the observed bilingual preschool provide opportunities for practicing labelling, analytic “what-explanations” (cf. Waring et al., 2013), as well as “decontextualization”, “taking meaning from the environment,” and being “active information-givers” (Heath, 1982, pp. 71–73). The present study suggests that children’s participation in word definition and explanation sequences strengthens their understanding of the relationships between words and their referents, as well as their metalinguistic awareness of separate languages as an interactional resource. By responding to the teachers’ questions about word meaning, the children displayed both their knowledge of the local participation rules, their existing knowledge about the subject under discussion, and linguistic knowledge in multiple languages, which contributed to the children’s paradigmatic ways of thinking (cf. Blum-Kulka, 2002, p. 112) and enabled intersubjectivity and enculturation (Cekaite, 2020).

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The study presented here demonstrates that teachers strive to achieve the goals regarding children's development of language and communication skills outlined in the national curriculum amid bilingual pedagogy (cf. Skolverket, 2018). The study findings support interactional research on language acquisition, arguing that vocabulary learning occurs through use of that vocabulary in talk (Nelson, 2009). The findings highlight that the preschool is an important educational institution where classrooms and less formal spaces are not strictly divided, with a pedagogical motivation underlying teacher-child interactions in most mundane encounters. The bilingual pedagogy in the observed preschool relied on the teachers embodying monolingual speakers' identities, while the children acted as bilinguals who "take on the role of expert or novice as the situation, or word, warrants" (Searles & Barriage, 2018, p. 68). That is, while sustaining the implicit one-teacher/one-language policy, the teachers took advantage of a range of routinized contexts beyond structured classroom activities as a space where they could support children's development of the preschool languages. The study supports prior research that presents teachers' multilingual expertise as an important resource for supporting children's multilingual becoming (cf. Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Boyd et al., 2017; Boyd & Huss, 2017; Bylund & Björk-Willén, 2015; Velasco & Fialais, 2018), and further implies that teachers could benefit from training that would explain and connect their personal language learning experiences to their professional practice.

The focus on a single bilingual ECEC institution represents a limitation of this study, albeit justified due to the feasibility of the ethnographic micro-analytical method. Future research will benefit from sampling interactional data from multiple bilingual ECEC institutions, describing pedagogical practices across languages. The present study highlights the relevance of further exploring how institutional language policies and national curricula become implemented by teachers and children, how teachers make use of everyday learning opportunities, and how children act upon their right to participation and influence.

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Appendix 1 Transcription key

<i>CONVENTIONS</i>	<i>MEANING</i>
wo:rd	prolonged pronunciation of a sound
wor-	cut off, abrupt interruption of speech
[beginning of overlapping utterances
(.)	micropause, i.e. shorter than (0.5)
(2s)	pause length in seconds
(word)	unclear utterance
=	latching between utterances
(h)	laughter token
word?	rising intonation
word.	falling intonation
°word	pronounced quietly
WORD	pronounced loudly
<u>word</u>	pronounced with emphasis
English	utterance in English
svensk	utterance in Swedish
<i>English</i>	translation into English from Swedish, in the second line
"text"	reported speech, text read from a book
+	for gaze by T (teacher), beginning and end of the action
\$	for gestures and actions by T (teacher), beginning and end of the action
*	for gaze by children, beginning and end of the action
&	for gestures and actions by children, beginning and end of the action
->	temporally unfolding action
fig	integrated video frame grab
#	figures temporally positioned within the transcript