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Teachers' reflections on linguistic diversity in the linguistic and semiotic landscapes of Swedish-medium ECEC units in Finland

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ABSTRACT: This article examines teachers' reflections on their practices regarding linguistic diversity in linguistic and semiotic landscapes (LSLs) in Swedish-medium early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland. Data comprising 14 videos and written assignments were collected during in-service training for ECEC staff. Based on a qualitative thematic analysis, four practices related to the interplay between the language of instruction and children's other languages were identified and related to different spatial frameworks in the physical learning environments. The findings reveal a distinct promotion of the language of instruction throughout the landscapes. Linguistic and semiotic resources were produced or emplaced by the teachers to enhance interaction in and learning of the language of instruction for all children. Other languages were displayed, especially in the entrance hall, with caregivers as the primary audience, welcoming the families to the unit and providing a means of disseminating information, but not as a learning resource for the whole group. While the study reveals that teachers are aware of the potential of using LSLs as a part of their pedagogical work, it also reveals a lack of systematic planning when it comes to developing the landscape to support language awareness for all children.

Keywords: *Swedish-medium ECEC in Finland, linguistic and semiotic landscapes, linguistic diversity, teacher reflections*

Introduction

What is the interplay between a lesser-spoken official language, the national majority language, and new minority languages in the linguistic and semiotic landscapes (LSLs) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in a bilingual country with increasing linguistic diversity? Finland, the national setting of our study, is a constitutionally bilingual country, with Finnish and Swedish as national languages (Constitution of Finland, 1999; Language Act, 2003). In education, national bilingualism entails parallel Finnish- and Swedish-medium educational tracks, with both Finnish and Swedish as the languages of instruction and administration. Although both language tracks incorporate studies in the other national language—and at least one other language—as language subjects in school (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2014), the educational system can be described as parallel monolingualism (e.g., Heller, 1999). Increased immigration – and hence the introduction of new minority languages in society – occurred later in Finland than in other Nordic countries (Heleniak, 2016). Today, the number of people in Finnish society with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is increasing, constituting 8.9 percent of the Finnish population in 2022 (compared to 4.9% in 2012; Official Statistics of Finland [OSF], 2023). The same percentage therefore also applies to educational contexts, including ECEC.

In line with the common European policy vision for education, Finnish policy documents on ECEC view cultural and linguistic diversity as a resource and emphasise language awareness in education for all children (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Lähdesmäki et al., 2020). Consequently, both children with multilingual backgrounds and so-called monolingual children have the right to access and develop language and cultural awareness as part of ECEC (see e.g., Hansell & Björklund, 2022). The Finnish core curriculum for ECEC (EDUFI, 2022) states that 'making multilingualism visible supports children's development in a culturally diverse world' (pp. 29–30). Therefore, increasing linguistic diversity and language awareness can be expected to become visible in the LSLs of ECEC units, too.

In this study, we focus on the linguistic diversity in the societal and educational context of Swedish-medium ECEC in Finland. Although Swedish is a national language, the Swedish speakers make up only 5.2 percent of the national population in Finland (OSF, 2023). Swedish-medium education has traditionally been regarded as an important forum for strengthening Swedish at the national level, where it is a minority language, through the creation of so-called Swedish rooms (Bergroth & Palviainen, 2016; Kovero, 2012). As many bilingual Swedish-Finnish families today tend to choose the Swedish-medium educational track for their children (Finnäs, 2015; Saarela, 2021), approximately 40

percent of children in Swedish-medium education at the national level are bilingual in Swedish and Finnish, although with significant regional variations (Nummela & Westerholm, 2020). While Finnish is the more common language for the integration processes of migrants (Creutz & Helander, 2012), linguistic diversity is increasing in Swedish-medium ECEC through the inclusion of children with first languages (L1s) other than Swedish or Finnish. This brings about various majority and minority positions: i) The Swedish language used as the medium of education in areas where Swedish represents the local numeric majority, while still being the national minority language numerically, ii) Finnish as the numeric national majority language and learnt as the first other language by a large number of children, iii) English as the global language, and iv) new linguistic minorities as L1s for a growing part of the population (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). Educational staff try to achieve a balance between the need to support Swedish and to include other languages to meet the aims of cultural- and language-aware pedagogies.

The aim of this article is to examine the reflections of ECEC teachers on their practice regarding linguistic diversity, with a focus on the LSL. The main research questions have been formulated as follows:

1. Which physical learning environments do teachers orient towards in their reflections, and what activities do they relate these to?
2. What target groups and language practices do teachers identify in the linguistic and semiotic landscapes?

Linguistic and semiotic landscape in ECEC

For the past several decades, linguistic landscape (LL) studies have examined visual multilingualism (see Gorter & Cenoz, 2021 for an overview). The definition of LL has both elicited much discussion (e.g., Gorter, 2018) and highlighted certain constants, as reflected in the aim and scope of *Linguistic Landscape: An international journal* since 2015: '[the] field of Linguistic Landscape (LL) attempts to understand the motives, uses, ideologies, language varieties and contestations of multiple forms of "languages" as they are displayed in public spaces' (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2023). LL has its origins in studies of public spaces, such as cities, but research in other *scapes* has been conducted and published widely. For example, linguistic *soundscape* comprises studies of spoken language within the LL (e.g., Pappenhagen et al., 2016; Scarvaglieri et al., 2013).

The study of linguistic (and semiotic) landscapes within the field of education has gained popularity, especially after the concept of 'schoolscape' was proposed by Brown (2005, 2012). Brown (2012) originally defined schoolscape as 'the school-based environment

where place and text, both written (graphic) and oral, constitute, reproduce, and transform language ideologies' (p. 282). Schoolscape was introduced as a framework to study the material use of language(s) in schools and the ways in which language strengthens and/or interrupts the prevailing linguistic, social, and political ideologies (Brown, 2012). Since its introduction, the notion of schoolscapes has been broadened (Szabó, 2015) and examined in linguistically varying learning environments, with a focus on language policy. The language policy perspective has been applied to minority languages in the schoolscape (e.g., Laihonen & Tódor, 2017; Szabó, 2015), to bilingual programmes including language immersion (e.g., Dressler, 2015; Gorter & Cenoz, 2015; Pakarinen, 2020; Pakarinen & Björklund, 2018), as well as to language education policy and multilingualism (e.g., Menken et al., 2018). While Brown (2012, 2018) applied the notion of schoolscape in both kindergarten and elementary school, and while the main body of research on schoolscapes has been conducted in schools, ECEC studies have evaded the concept. One possible reason for this was identified by Pesch (2021), who pointed out that ECEC as a learning environment differs from school, primarily on the basis of separate curricula and varying pedagogical approaches to daily activities.

In 2021, the notion of 'educationscapes' was introduced as a broadened approach to schoolscapes. Krompák et al. (2021, p. 16) state that the notion of linguistic schoolscape relies heavily on 'a prototypical educational institution' such as an elementary school. However, educationscape consists of schoolscapes alongside other educational spaces. Krompák et al. (2021) refer to educationscape as 'the mutually constitutive material and social spaces in which linguistic and symbolic resources are mobilised for educational purposes' (p. 16). In the Finnish context, schoolscape studies have been more prevalent than studies of other educational spaces (Laihonen & Szabó, 2017, 2023; Pakarinen, 2020; Pakarinen & Björklund, 2018; Savela, 2018; Szabó, 2018).

The semiotic landscape covers the visual learning environment, where language is used together with other modalities such as pictures and text (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Pesch, 2021). In line with Jarworski and Thurlow (2010), researchers began to adopt the semiotic landscape as an extended notion in LL studies, taking into consideration non-linguistic elements and components of different spaces, as well as spatial and visual communication (Laihonen & Tódor, 2017; Savela, 2018; Szabó, 2015). Although the concept of semiotic landscapes has been criticised (see Gottdiener, 2012), it has offered a theoretical framework for studying the spatial repertoires in schools and ECEC.

In this study, we utilise the notion of LSL to explore language and educational practices in ECEC. While we acknowledge that language is included in the original definition of 'semiotic landscape' by Jaworski and Thurlow (2010), with LSL we address the notion of separate languages in ECEC learning environments. At the theoretical level, we

nonetheless position our study among the previous ESEC research (see Pesch, 2021; Pesch et al., 2021). While studies of LSL in learning environments have been conducted in numerous geographical contexts and education programmes (see above), fewer studies have been conducted in relation to ECEC.

The context of our study, Swedish-medium ECEC in Finland, can be described as following the so called 'Nordic model', which combines education and care for children aged 0–5 as a universal service, building on an educational philosophy that emphasises an informal, play-based, and child-centred approach to teaching and learning (Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006). Therefore, the body of research that we present below builds largely on studies in the Nordic context.

Norwegian researchers were pioneers in the field of LSL in ECEC. Without identifying the concept of any particular 'scape', Granly and Maagerø (2012) investigated multimodal texts in Norwegian ECEC. Their study comprised central elements of LL studies in relation to data collection by photographing the walls and floors, using video to record observations, and interviewing teachers and children. Their findings emphasised a certain text culture characterised by the placement, content, and representation of the (multimodal) texts on the walls. However, the interviews with the teachers revealed that no strategy existed for displaying multimodal texts in the spatial repertoire; in other words, the selection and emplacement of the texts were more spontaneous than planned (Granly & Maagerø, 2012).

While studies of the overall linguistic and semiotic components in ECEC as learning environments are essential for our study, it is also important to acknowledge the minority language perspective. Although Swedish is a national language in Finland, at the national level it is a numeric minority language, actualising different dynamics than in the case of a majority language. In minority language ECEC in Norway, Pesch (2021) examined the use of Norwegian and North Sami in the LL and whether practices related to semiotic resources differed in the spaces within the ECEC units. Different strategies were utilised when addressing only the caregivers or the children. Pesch (2021) also addressed the topic of multilingual children and teachers' experiences in working with multilingual families. Moreover, Pesch et al. (2021) dealt with linguistic and cultural diversity in ECEC, and their findings revealed divergent practices for integrating diversity in daily activities—for example, omitting the national minorities in the landscapes. This outcome gives a point of comparison when discussing diversity in the LSL of the Finnish ECEC groups in our study. In addition, LSLs in ECEC have been examined in the context of revitalisation of the Māori language in New Zealand, for example (Harris et al., 2021), of South and Lule Sami in Sweden (Straszer & Kroik, 2021), and of Northern Sami in Finland (Pachné Heltai & Bartha, 2017).

Research design

The study examines the LSL of Finnish ECEC units from an emic perspective, highlighting teachers' views on languages and other semiotic resources in the physical learning environment (Laihonen & Szabó, 2017). The LSL of the ECEC unit is regarded as a space in which linguistic and semiotic practices are constructed through pedagogical work and everyday activities. While the teachers play a primary role in constructing these practices, children with different language and cultural backgrounds co-construct the landscapes (Pesch et al., 2021). The focus is on the functions and roles of languages for different people participating in the activities in ECEC as a learning environment. The study strives to broaden the field to include ECEC and its vital importance as a learning environment for L1 and second language (L2) acquisition.

Context of the study – the in-service training

The study was conducted in the context of in-service training for ECEC and preschool teachers and other pedagogical personnel, with a focus on Swedish as L2. The authors were all engaged in the planning and execution of the in-service training that was built on colloquial learning, where several personnel from the same ECEC unit or team participated via distance studies on a virtual learning platform (itslearning). The in-service training was divided into three modules focusing on i) language awareness in ECEC, ii) multilingual language development, and iii) Swedish as L2.

In this study, the focus is on the first module, and specifically the part that emphasised LSL. The topic was introduced in a video lecture lasting 23:5 minutes. The lecture briefly addressed language awareness in ECEC (which was also the main topic of another lecture in the module), followed by research-based information on LSL. The lecture also discussed why LSL should be explored and how this could be done. Lastly, some examples of LSL from different ECEC contexts – primarily from Finland – were presented.

The lecture was followed by an assignment in which the teams had to document and reflect on the LSL within their own ECEC group in relation to linguistic diversity in short video recordings, preferably lasting approximately five minutes. To secure the integrity of other staff and children, the participants were asked to make the video recording without showing any people in it. This task was assigned to all teams participating in the in-service training, but it was voluntary decision whether to permit the researchers to use the recordings as research data. The participants were informed of why the data were being gathered, their rights to refuse participation without any consequences, and of the ethical guidelines followed in this study.

Data and participants

The primary data of this study comprise video recordings made by teaching staff from Swedish-medium ECEC groups, including two language-enriched groups with Finnish as the target language, complemented by written assignments of the languages present in the groups as secondary data. A total of 30 teachers from 14 groups, representing seven ECEC units, gave their permission to use the video recordings as research data. The data therefore consist of 14 videos with a total length of 45:27 minutes. The videos vary in length between 1:25 and 7:28 minutes, with an average length of 3:15 minutes. The recordings were transcribed with a focus on the content of the verbal statements, as well as on what was shown for the camera. The recordings followed a similar pattern: teams guided the viewer through several locations in the unit, emphasising the spaces where they interacted with the caregivers and children. The process bore a resemblance to the walking tour method (Garvin, 2010) and the tourist guide technique (Szabó, 2015); in other words, the teachers in our study commented on the languages and other semiotic resources that appeared on the walls and highlighted various practices and the inclusion of material objects.

The participants were teachers from 14 groups representing seven ECEC units in bilingual (Finnish–Swedish) municipalities in Western Finland. The sample included groups of children aged 0–3 and 3–5, as well as a preschool group (aged 6). Two groups (G2 and 3) implemented a language-enriched programme (see e.g., Hansell & Björklund, 2022; Mård-Miettinen et al., 2023a, 2023b for more information on language-enriched ECEC in Finland). The programme involved bilingual Swedish-Finnish communication, with teachers speaking both languages during the day.

The ECEC in all the study units related to regions in which Swedish was the (de facto) majority language, with the other L1s of the children and teachers being in the minority. The linguistic diversity among the staff and the children varied between the participating groups, but multiple languages were present in all groups, ranging from two to eleven languages in addition to Swedish. Most of the teachers were Swedish speakers, many of whom spoke a Finnish–Swedish dialect specific to the geographical area of the ECEC unit concerned. A few teachers were bilingual, speaking both Swedish and Finnish. In addition to Swedish and Finnish, other L1s among the staff in these groups were Bosnian, Italian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese.

The proportion of children with Swedish as at least one of their L1s varied between 42 and 92 percent. The teachers referred to the fact that there were several bilingual children, usually Swedish–Finnish, but also Swedish and another language. Teachers further highlighted local dialects as the L1 of some so-called monolingual Swedish

children. While Swedish-speaking children were often in the majority in the ECEC units, the percentage of children with L1s other than Swedish ranged between 8 and 58 percent. The data also revealed that some ECEC units had both teachers and children with the same L1 other than Swedish.

Methods

The linguistic components of spatial communication in the participating ECEC units were examined by identifying language(s), content, and semiotic resources in material elements, such as pieces of paper, posters, and other objects exhibited in the video recordings. The identification of languages was carried out by categorising them into languages of instruction (Swedish) and other languages. The display of other languages was then contrasted with the information on children's L1 to identity distinct minority languages in the respective ECEC units and groups. The semiotic components of spatial communication were studied by categorising the material elements as text only, text with an image, or image-only signage.

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The first author completed the preliminary coding and initial theme generation. The authors then rewatched the videos – both separately and together – and made notes on and discussed the occurring themes. Finally, the themes were refined and defined to their current form by all the authors working together. While examining the videos, we observed some discrepancies between the visuals and the narration provided by the teachers. Although the assignment was to document the LL of their own ECEC group and hence showcase the linguistic diversity within the group, the narration was at times more descriptive of the LSL and the language background of the staff and the children than the videos themselves. We then utilised the same teams' written assignments as secondary data. This led to a comparative analysis of the visuals, the narration, and the complementary written data produced by the teachers during the in-service training.

Finally, the transcription excerpts chosen for this study were translated into English. Since focus was placed on the content of what was recounted by the teachers rather than interaction or paralinguistic features, any colloquial expressions were replaced with general expressions. In addition, the translations presented in the Findings section were punctuated.

Findings

We identified the following four main themes in the thematic analysis of the data: i) acknowledgement of other L1s, ii) communication with caregivers, iii) emphasis on the language of instruction, and iv) support for (language) learning and comprehension. Before presenting these, we begin by stating the overall findings regarding languages in visual communication on the basis of the 'spatial frameworks' concept (e.g., Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Kallen, 2008, 2010). The spatial frameworks were identified based on spaces mentioned by the teachers or physical learning environments seen on the recordings. The spatial frameworks recurred throughout the data and can be described as typical for Finnish ECEC. The spatial frameworks were not always physically separate rooms, since the same locations could be used for multiple purposes. In this study, each spatial framework was a space in which certain recurring activities were performed and with which a certain languaging could be associated. In previous studies, concepts such as official and less official rooms were employed to discuss various spaces for pedagogical work, free play, and other activities (e.g., Granly & Maagerø, 2012; Pesch, 2021).

The four prominent spatial frameworks identified in the data were i) the entrance hall, ii) the caregiving facilities, iii) the assembly room, including the room for free play, and iv) the canteen. The entrance hall is a space where the caregivers and the teachers meet at the beginning and often also at the end of the day. Languaging, including information about the daily schedule and other activities, is recurring. Close to the entrance hall are the caregiving facilities used for the (un)dressing of children between the indoor and outdoor activities. Bathroom(s) are included in the caregiving facilities, as handwashing and other hygienic routines are practiced there. These frameworks are available primarily for the caregivers. With regard to the assembly room, including the free play area, and the canteen, the spatial frameworks are often situated within the same physical location. Teacher-led activities were conducted in a part of the assembly room, while the rest of the room was designed for free play. With its specific languaging, the canteen was studied as a spatial framework on its own, rather than as a part of the assembly room, although it was most often physically located there – in the sense that the same tables were used both for meals and other activities, such as crafting.

The findings revealed a practice difference between the ECEC groups, based on the status of the language(s) other than the language of instruction. Ten of the twelve groups were purely Swedish-medium groups, including some children whose L1 was Finnish or one of the new minority languages. Swedish was the predominant language of the LSL, while other languages were present to a lesser extent. The two language-enriched groups operated differently. In these units, most of the communication in the LSL was bilingual.

In addition, the teachers communicated with the children in both Swedish and Finnish on a daily basis. Languages other than Swedish and Finnish were seldom documented as a part of the landscape in these two groups. However, semiotic resources such as images and (national) flags were displayed on the walls in all groups and in all spatial frameworks.

Acknowledgement of other L1(s)

Quantitatively, most occurrences of languages other than Swedish were showcased in the entrance halls. All teachers highlighted the immediate contact with other languages alongside Swedish when entering the ECEC units/groups. The participating groups had a practice of welcoming the children and their caregivers by greeting them with welcoming phrases in their L1 on doors, windows, and walls. The symbolic representation of diversity in the form of welcome posters supports previous research on semiotic landscapes in linguistically and culturally diverse ECEC (Pesch et al., 2021). Most units were already implementing the practice, while others were in the planning stage, as Excerpt 1 showcases.

> (1) 'Here in our entrance hall, we will still display different languages […] "Hi" and "welcome" in the languages the caregivers and children speak in this unit.' (G1)

In many cases, the welcome phrase was accompanied by a national flag. While the use of flags can make the spatial framework more colourful and visual, expressing linguistic and cultural diversity via national flags can be regarded as a problematic strategy (Aleksić & García, 2022; Pesch et al., 2021). However, displaying national flags associated with a specific language is still a documented means used in the LSL of ECEC units and schools (Pesch, 2017; Pesch et al., 2021; see also Laihonen & Szabó, 2017).

The linguistic diversity of the group was also illustrated either by having a drawing of the planet Earth next to a welcome sign in English or by displaying different languages written on the walls. None of the groups had an extensive display of all the different languages spoken by the caregivers and the children in the entrance hall; instead, they tend to acknowledge the most frequently spoken languages (e.g., Vietnamese, Bosnian, and Finnish) in the group or unit. In our study, however, the welcome phrase in Swedish was usually written in the largest or most colourful letters. Furthermore, the written Swedish was prominently positioned on the walls, with the other languages surrounding it, thus emphasising the language of instruction as a central part of the LSL.

While Swedish was unanimously classified as the language of instruction and the object of language learning, children's L1s were not restricted to the entrance hall or its immediate vicinity. The multilingual practice was often extended from the entrance hall

to the assembly corner. For example, one group reproduced welcoming phrases in the spatial framework for assembly, too. According to a teacher, the phrases were accompanied by a world map showing the countries of origin of the languages and the flags of those countries, thus reflecting the linguistic diversity of the unit. Several teachers also stated that greetings phrases in children's L1s were displayed on the walls of the assembly corner. Furthermore, the phrases were even spoken out loud in many groups, as pointed out in Excerpt 2.

> (2) 'In our assembly corner, we have our weekly schedule [on the wall] and we begin each assembly by saying good morning in Swedish, sign language, Finnish, English, Estonian, and Albanian.' (G5)

The assembly corners and rooms for free play sometimes also contained other written examples in other languages, often combined with related images, as in Excerpt 3.

> (3) 'We have Vietnamese as the largest minority language [in the group]. So here we have some animals in Vietnamese con khỉ, chó, con mèo.' (G6)

In this group, acknowledging the several children with Vietnamese as their L1 was achieved by placing non-teaching materials in Vietnamese on walls at the children's eye level. In the video, the teacher showed a sign displaying words written in both Swedish and Vietnamese, paired with an image of each animal – for example monkey (*con khỉ*), dog (*chó*), and cat (*con mèo*). The sign was produced by the teaching staff themselves, and the teachers exhibited their knowledge of Vietnamese by pronouncing the words without hesitation.

The practice of showcasing L1s other than Swedish was widely discussed by the teachers. One of them stated that with a view to a holistic approach, 'having a good first language supports language learning'. To highlight this practice, some units placed materials in languages other than Swedish as tangible objects on the floor (e.g., song cards) or as posters on the walls, displayed at the eye level of the children.

Communication with caregivers

As discussed above, the entrance hall was the spatial framework with most evidence of multilingual practice. It represented a multilingual spatial framework that highlights the need for communication between the teachers and the caregivers. To be able to convey a message relating to daily routines, such as need for clothing items or diapers, the teachers often used written aids, sometimes combined with spoken words in other languages.

(4) 'Here we have some translations. Gloves [reads aloud the Vietnamese word from a sheet hanging from a noticeboard] and so forth. You can look at this if you need to communicate with the caregivers.' (G6)

(5) 'Then we have signs to indicate to the caregivers when there are no diapers left; [the signs are] in different languages so that they understand'. (G7)

The teachers often showcased written aids to help them to interact with caregivers with limited knowledge of Swedish. Translations of words and phrases for everyday items such as clothes were provided as a support for the interactions. The teachers predominantly showcased written aids, as in Excerpt 5, where the visuals show a sign in the form of a colourful paper containing the text *Trebam jol pelena* (Croatian for 'I need more diapers'), with the Swedish translation written below. The teachers indicated that they had created the aids themselves. Previous research in other ECEC contexts has also highlighted cooperation with caregivers in producing materials with phrases in languages other than the language of instruction (Pachné Heltai & Bartha, 2017; Pesch et al., 2021).

Another way of communicating with the caregivers was by placing information on doors/walls or on a noticeboard placed in the entrance hall. This information was typically directed towards all caregivers. Most of this information was in Swedish, but also other languages can also be included.

(6) 'We have a large text in Swedish, which is our main language, but [the sign] has been translated into only one language, and that is because these caregivers do not know Swedish yet.' (G4)

(7) '[W]e have children with eight different languages. We have some information for the caregivers and here we have different [languages]. Well, it is in only three languages – in Swedish and in two in other languages.' (G5)

The teachers do not generally communicate about all routines in the children's L1s, but special events in the ECEC group may also be conveyed in languages other than Swedish. In Excerpt 6, the teacher presented a sign on a door in the entrance hall containing information about a theatre group's visit to the ECEC unit. The sign contained the name of the group and the date and time of the visit in two languages – Swedish followed by Vietnamese. The teacher pointed out that Vietnamese was included because the caregivers were still learning Swedish. However, several units had displayed a weekly newsletter for the caregivers, written only in Swedish, on noticeboards in or near the entrance hall.

When languages other than Swedish were used, a number of different languages were evident. Immediately before showing the noticeboard in the video, the teacher in Excerpt 7 mentioned the number of different L1s in the group. While presenting the texts and other material elements on the noticeboard, the teacher acknowledged that the messages

aimed at the caregivers were in only three languages. The signs were in Swedish, Ukrainian/Russian, and Vietnamese, but in no other languages. The underlying practice of selecting languages for communication highlighted in the excerpt above was observed in other groups as well. The chosen languages acted as *de jure* majority languages in these groups, alongside the language of instruction.

An important aspect reported by the teachers was that choosing which languages to use was done in accordance with the caregivers' repertoire. When Swedish was not an alternative for the caregivers, the teachers sometimes made use of English as a lingua franca (see also Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023).

> (8) 'We, the staff, also communicate with the children's caregivers primarily in English, because most of the caregivers in our group have a mother tongue other than Swedish, and some of the caregivers understand English a little better than Swedish.' (G6)

The visuals in the recordings specifically showed the children's L1s as part of the landscape in the entrance hall. However, in some contrast to Pesch (2021), the languages used in addition to Swedish were intended to inform or instruct the caregivers. In addition to welcoming the caregivers to the premises, different languages were used to communicate practical information between the teachers and the caregivers. In some groups, issues relating to clothing, requests for more diapers, and announcements about upcoming events were also expressed in languages other than Swedish. In such cases, written messages were displayed in the children's wardrobes or on a noticeboard in the entrance hall. This practice was related to the knowledge of Swedish among the caregivers. The teachers stated that the information was provided in a specific language if there were several caregivers with a certain L1, or in English if the teachers presumed that not all caregivers might understand the information in Swedish. As far as oral communication was concerned, the teachers specifically referred to the practice of combining Swedish and the caregivers' L1 in the dialogue, supported by written translations.

Emphasis on the language of instruction

Swedish was the language of instruction in all groups, although two units operated bilingually, with Finnish as a target language for language-enriched teaching and thus functioning as a language of instruction in addition to Swedish. In the 10 predominantly Swedish-medium units, the teachers emphasised that the daily activities of all children were conducted in Swedish. By contrast, the two language-enriched units implemented a strategy of bilingual communication during the children's activities, as referred to in Excerpt 9 below.

> (9) 'The staff speak both Finnish and Swedish and they switch between both languages splendidly. Children receive a safe introduction to the other national language […] all activities are really conducted in two languages'. (G3)

In the language-enriched units, the teachers communicated with the children in both Swedish and Finnish. Learning both national languages in this manner was associated with the bilingual practice (e.g., Hansell & Björklund, 2022; Mård-Miettinen et al., 2023a, 2023b). In addition to the bilingual linguistic soundscape, the visuals and reports emphasised the relatively equal use of Swedish and Finnish for the signage in these two ECEC units. Although the visuals demonstrated that Swedish was given a slight preference, both languages were displayed side by side, especially in the assembly room.

With regard to languages other than Finnish, the data revealed that there were diverse relationships between the language of instruction and the children's L1s. On the one hand, the groups incorporated L1s other than Swedish into the landscape and in the daily routines, as illustrated in the previous section. On the other hand, the role of Swedish as the main language of instruction was repeatedly highlighted by the teachers in several units.

> (10) 'We have the written text for the children to learn the letters, to recognise the letters […] images with text in Swedish, because that is what the children will be learning in preschool and school, [to] decipher our letters to become good Swedish speakers'. (G4)

The emphasis on Swedish was further underlined by the teacher in Excerpt 10 by referring to the subsequent stages of children's education. Developing proper language and communication skills were regarded as fundamentally important by the ECEC teachers in general. To master Swedish to a certain level was regarded as necessary for the children when transferring to (pre)school.

To support the language of instruction, semiotic resources such as images and support signs were displayed together with text-only signage in the landscapes of the ECEC units. The semiotic landscapes were specifically utilised for discussing and managing the daily programme and schedule. Assembly rooms comprised central pedagogical elements, since the participating teachers recounted a detailed practice of emphasising the language of instruction during the assembly, when they typically discussed the date, day of the week, and weather, for example.

> (11) 'Here we have displayed all the days of the week and the programme of the day, which we will go through with the children with the help of some speech-supporting signs for those who do not have Swedish as their first language.' (G2)

As stated in Excerpt 11, the semiotic landscape with its images was seen as an aid that assisted the children to understand the daily programme. This practice underlined the emphasis that was placed on Swedish (and Finnish) as the language of instruction. The teachers highlighted the acquisition of routine phrases during assembly as a part of the language learning process. In addition to speech-supporting signs, other visual aids such as single Swedish (and Finnish) words on paper—with or without illustration—were used to promote the children's language learning and use. According to a teacher, the practice of providing word support was a part of the LSL, and word support was further utilised in one-on-one interactions with the children.

Mealtimes were mentioned as providing opportunities for enhanced learning of the language of instruction. Phrases such as saying thank you for the lunch or the snack were supported with images and written texts in the canteen (Excerpt 12). Similarly, the development of (multilingual) children and their Swedish language skills was supported by displaying conversation prompt cards on the walls for the free play spatial framework (Excerpt 13).

> (12) 'So here we have a [conversation prompt card] glued to the dining table for children who need a conversation prompt card with images to easily show what they want to have. So then we can sit and discuss and look at the images while we eat.' (G5)
>
> (13) 'Here we have a card with different things to do in kindergarten. So if [you are] not able to say [it], you can come here and indicate what you want to do by pointing to the relevant item'. (G5)

Conversation prompt cards were said to be used frequently during mealtimes and free play, especially in situations where spoken Swedish was not an accessible resource for a child. According to the data, conversation prompt cards in the participating units included themes such as holidays and celebrations (e.g., midsummer, Christmas) and the seasons. Many of the prompt cards highlighted Finnish–Swedish culture in words and images, thus supporting not only the learning of the language but also the acquisition of the culture. Images, either as a part of pedagogical work or free play, were assigned a focal role in supporting learning. In line with the findings of Pesch et al. (2021), the teachers in our study acknowledged images as useful tools to enhance children's oral use of the language of instruction. Moreover, the practice exemplified the interaction between the children and the texts and images on the walls (see also Granly & Maagerø, 2012).

Support for (language) learning and comprehension

Possibly influenced by the focus of the in-service training being Swedish as L2, the participating teachers emphasised the language learning aspect of the daily pedagogical work in their groups. The assembly room and the canteen were spatial frameworks in

which learning the language of instruction was explicitly supported. In addition to linguistic resources, semiotic resources such as images and support signs were displayed on the walls – available for children to make use of. The teachers' reports made reference to the recurring practice of introducing different semiotic resources to the children. During free play, the conversation prompt cards on the walls offered an aid when children lacked the proper words or phrases; moreover, cards containing only images were offered as a starting point for free play. Therefore, the practices adopted in the various units underlined the socio-cultural and language-aware pedagogical background of the working principles in the Finnish ECEC (see similar discussion on Norwegian ECEC in Pesch et al., 2021). Children's interactions with each other were regarded as important for language learning for all children, and especially for those with Swedish and Finnish as L2.

While the social practice in the entrance hall remained primarily between the teachers and the caregivers, the LSL of the caregiving facilities exhibited a shift to teacher–child communication. Everyday routines incorporated an emphasis on the language of instruction (see the previous section), but also on language learning, especially through the semiotic resources on the walls at the eye level of the children. All the teachers highlighted the use of step-by-step guides for proper (un)dressing before and after outside activities in the caregiving facilities. This type of signage was further utilised to discuss the relation between the weather and certain clothing items. Overall, the teachers in this study displayed an understanding of different practices to promote the learning of Swedish (and Finnish) for all children. Learning and comprehension was supported by signage that contained nouns, adjectives, and verbs in the language of instruction, together with complementary images. In line with Pesch et al. (2021), referencing to the images on the walls was regarded as a way to enhance comprehension among both L1- and L2-speaking children. While the data revealed a recurring practice of placing certain signage on the walls, none of the teachers stated that their unit had any specific plan to follow when choosing or arranging such signage (see also Granly & Maagerø, 2012).

Some units in the study applied the notion of a separate 'language group' for several children with the same L1 other than Swedish. The language groups were named when discussing artefacts in the LSL, or when it came to separate activities for the language group concerned. The aim of the language group was to support the learning of Swedish as L2, for example by using signage and objects such as books and digital tools (see also Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023). The teachers had deliberately planned and created strategies to incorporate the L1 of the children into daily activities and hence to be used in conjunction with the language of instruction to assist understanding. On the other hand, children with the same L1 tended to speak their L1 rather than Swedish, and the language

group was seen to strengthen their Swedish both in ECEC and subsequently in (pre)school.

> (14) 'We have many languages in our group. Vietnamese is [in] the majority among the children. It is difficult to get them to speak Swedish because they have each other and understand each other. In the language group, we practise Swedish words in a playful manner, but as for the group as a whole it is Vietnamese that counts.' (G4)
>
> (15) 'Our goal is that all [children] will learn Swedish before preschool, but it is extremely difficult to get them motivated. We try to split up children with the same mother tongue to get them to use and strengthen their Swedish. We continue to utilise images and visual communication and so forth. We try to encourage the children with other mother tongues to teach us certain words in their languages.' (G4)

The teachers encountered a switch from Swedish to children's L1 during free play, especially in groups with a distinct language majority, such as Vietnamese—as in Excerpts 14 and 15. Several strategies were applied to encourage children to learn and to use Swedish. Creating linguistically mixed groups for free play and incorporating visual aids were seen as one solution (see also Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023), and explicit focus on Swedish in the language group as another. Although the teachers took significant measures to ensure the acquisition of the language of instruction, they still acknowledged the children's L1s and demonstrated that these were valued – not only as languages per se, but also as a means to support L2 learning.

While an appreciation of linguistic diversity was identified in the teachers' reports, a noticeable feature in all ECEC units was the focal display of the Latin alphabet in several spatial frameworks. The visuals showed two types of displays: either large, colourful paper letters hung on the wall in a row to form the alphabet, or separate signs with a combination of block letters and cursive handwriting, with a suitable image for the purposes of illustration (see also Granly & Maagerø, 2012). The teachers made the following references to the children's interest in the letters or images accompanying the alphabet:

> (16) 'The children tend to look at this big alphabet, trying to figure out the letter something begins with.' (G5)
>
> (17) 'We try to visualise the letters in our Swedish language as much as possible.' (G4)

In all groups, the images in the alphabet signs referred to Swedish words beginning with the letter concerned. Thus, the alphabet implicitly or explicitly referred to Swedish – also in the two language-enriched groups. Only one teacher described a different situation.

> (18) 'And then we have also worked with the alphabet, and a student wrote us the Cyrillic alphabet.' (G5)

As the teacher pointed out in Excerpt 18, the Cyrillic alphabet was not produced by the teachers but by a student. This strategy demonstrates that the promotion of linguistic diversity in LSL was applied if there was a resource who knew several languages. Overall, the teachers' practices to support children's reading development seemed to be oriented towards Latin script. The teachers' reports indicated a focus on reading and writing the alphabet from left to right, although some of the children had languages with right-to-left orientation as their L1, such as Arabic and Kurdish. Other writing systems such as Chinese characters, were not displayed in the landscapes.

With their strong emphasis on Swedish (and Finnish) texts on the walls, the ECEC units were supporting children's language learning and comprehension through the language of instruction. The assembly rooms for older children, in particular, fostered a linguistically rich environment before advancement to preschool and school. Learning to read the (Latin) alphabet was regarded as highly important and thus supported via the LSL. Other semiotic resources, such as numbers, were often part of the landscape – also in the caregiving facilities, as in Excerpt 19 below, where the teacher is referring to the bathroom.

> (19) 'And here we have some numbers we are practising to write and experiment with, [by] feeling them and counting with them.' (G5)

In addition to the assembly room and canteen, the teachers utilised the caregiving facilities, where the visuals showed numerous texts, posters, and images on the bathroom walls and in the corridors leading to the playground outside. A recurring practice was displaying numbers in the bathroom. Other signage, often combining written text and images, in the facility dealt with instructions for daily hygiene. Several teachers chose to refer to the signage in the bathrooms, thus emphasising the whole ECEC unit as a learning environment (see also Mård-Miettinen et al., 2023a).

Concluding discussion

This study set out to examine ECEC teachers' reflections on their practice regarding linguistic diversity in Swedish-medium ECEC in Finland, with a special focus on LSL. The landscapes were studied on the basis of video recordings and written assignments by teachers from 14 ECEC groups participating in in-service training. Our research questions dealt with the physical learning environments and related activities to which the teachers were oriented, as well as with target groups and practices for different languages in the LSLs.

The results reveal four spatial frameworks with different LSL and practices, namely the assembly room, entrance hall, canteen, and caregiving facilities. The predominance of

Swedish as the language of instruction was visible throughout all spatial frameworks, in two groups accompanied by Finnish, as the groups had Finnish as a target language for language-enriched ECEC (see e.g., Mård-Miettinen et al., 2023b for a description of language-enriched ECEC in Finland). This underlines the ECEC units as predominantly Swedish or bilingual Swedish–Finnish arenas (for further discussion on mono- and multilingual landscapes in ECEC, see Pesch, 2021). Other languages—primarily L1s for certain children in the group or English as a lingua franca—were displayed in more restricted contexts, such as in welcoming all to the ECEC unit in the entrance hall or in information for the caregivers.

Previous research on schoolscapes has pointed out the growing relevance of studies with a focus on visual socialisation of children and interpretation of visual signs as a social practice (e.g., Laihonen & Szabó, 2017). As an educational context, however, ECEC is featured seldom in research on LL and LSL. Our study constitutes a contribution to this field, as the analysis revealed recurring practices for the use LSLs in ECEC. Pictures and texts were used to support comprehension and learning of the language of instruction for all children. Linguistic diversity was demonstrated, especially in the entrance hall with its welcoming phrases in different languages, together with various flags connecting them with countries other than Finland (for further discussion on connecting languages and nationalities, see Aleksić & García, 2022; Pesch et al., 2021). Furthermore, multilingual practices made use of written documents and translations into certain languages, connected to images and recurring phrases related to the daily activities. These were presented alongside similar resources in Swedish.

The Finnish national core curriculum for ECEC (EDUFI, 2022) states that 'the learning environments promote children's linguistic development and language awareness and make cultural diversity visible' (p. 31). Our results indicate that the LSLs often address the linguistic diversity in the groups as a whole, but that different languages are assigned different roles and places in different spatial frameworks. In line with Pesch (2021), our findings highlight the complexity of (multi)lingual semiotic practices. Swedish, as the language of instruction (accompanied by Finnish in the language-enriched groups), is seen as a target language for all children and is given a central role in all spatial frameworks. Other languages displayed are primarily the L1s of the children in the various groups—or English, which is used as a global lingua franca. These other languages are used primarily to support the children's and caregivers' comprehension and learning of Swedish—not as resources for the group as a whole. Our study underlines that the LSL has the potential to constitute an important element for (language) learning and development for all children in ECEC, but this potential might not be fully utilised. The practices identified offer a useful point of comparison for future studies on how LSLs in

ECEC address and reflect linguistic diversity. To meet the goal of promoting language and cultural awareness for all children, it would be beneficial to make different languages visible and to draw all children's attention to them, thus making linguistic diversity a part of teaching, instead of it depending on the linguistic backgrounds of individual children (see also Hansell et al., 2020).

The current study has certain limitations, since the data were collected by participants in in-service training that focused on Swedish as L2. First, the topic of the in-service training could indicate that the participants might already have identified the need to develop language-aware practices and probably work in highly linguistically diverse groups. Therefore, the results might not represent an average Swedish-medium ECEC group in Finland. Second, while providing an insider perspective on the LSL (see also Laihonen & Szabó, 2017; Pesch et al., 2021), the teachers were not always systematic in their documentation of the spatial frameworks. This resulted in a selective view of the practices which could be enriched by a more systematic examination. The strength of examining the LSL from the teachers' standpoint is that their reflections reveal how they understand and utilise the learning environment as a part of their teaching activities.

This study has demonstrated that the LSL of the groups corresponded with Swedish-medium and language-enriched teaching, and that Swedish language maintains it primary position in the LSL. However, the teachers' reports raised the question of a linguistic soundscape (Scarvaglieri et al., 2013) and its relevance in educational settings in increasingly multilingual Finland. Future research would be needed to uncover the oral language practices in linguistically diverse ECEC units (see Pesch, 2017). Future studies on the linguistic soundscape perspective could shed light on the use of the language of instruction and other languages and reveal the soundscape's potential to enhance language awareness and learning for all children. Moreover, it would be of interest to study the LSL and linguistic soundscape from the children's and caregivers' perspectives, to examine how they understand and experience the landscapes and related language practices.

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