Journal of Early Childhood Education Research
Volume 14, Issue 2, 2025, 140–168
https://doi.org/10.58955/jecer.147607

JECER

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Teachers as linguistic role models: Language teaching in multilingual ECEC settings

Jeanette Koskinen[a] & Josefine Karlsson[b]

[a] School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Sweden, corresponding author, e-mail: jeanette.koskinen@oru.se, https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9362-8371
[b] School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences, Örebro University, Sweden, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8056-3561

ABSTRACT: This article examines ECEC teachers' beliefs about being linguistic role models and how these beliefs relate to their language teaching for multilingual children. Due to the increased language diversity in Finland, the demands on teachers have increased. Teachers are expected to be linguistic role models and create multilingual learning opportunities for all children. This study uses quantitative methods to examine the relationships between teachers as linguistic role models and language teaching for multilingual children. A questionnaire was answered by 42 ECEC teachers in Swedish-medium settings in Finland. Data was analyzed using chi-square tests to depict relationships between variables. Results show that teachers largely agree to be linguistic role models. This correlates with seeing adult-led play as important for language development and using dialogic reading as a teaching strategy. Play with peers was highly valued as a language development activity but not related to being a linguistic role model. Although planning reading activities was considered important, it was not related to being a linguistic role model. The latter may indicate that teachers need more knowledge on how these daily activities can become high-quality language teaching situations, especially when developing children's academic language skills.

Keywords: *early childhood education and care, language teaching, multilingualism, linguistic role model, ECEC teachers*

ISSN 2323-7414; ISSN-L 2323-7414 online. Early Childhood Education Association Finland.

Introduction

This article contributes insights into teachers' beliefs about their role as linguistic role models and how these beliefs relate to the language teaching they provide for multilingual children. Teachers' personal experiences and values often determine teaching (Kultti & Pramling, 2020). Therefore, it is important to gain insights into their beliefs about being linguistic role models. According to Tobin (2013), the question of language and language policy is one of the most active debates internationally in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Additionally, whether children should be brought up to be multilingual or whether education should focus solely on teaching them the language of instruction is a complex issue to resolve (Åkerblom, 2017). However, it remains a pressing issue in Nordic countries due to the increasing percentage of children who do not have the language of instruction as their first language. From a Nordic educational policy perspective, multilingualism is viewed as a resource and an enrichment for all children (Alstad & Sopanen, 2020; Bergroth et al., 2024; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Björk-Willén, 2022).

Finland, the national context of our study, is constitutionally a bilingual country with two national languages, Finnish and Swedish (Constitution of Finland, 1999; Language Act, 2003). There are parallel Finnish- and Swedish-medium educational tracks, with Finnish or Swedish as the language of instruction and administration. Although Swedish is one of the national languages, only 5.1 percent of the national population are Swedish speakers; therefore, it holds a minority status in Finland (Official Statistics of Finland, 2024). The Finnish national core curriculum for early childhood education and care (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2022) obligates municipalities to provide ECEC in the child's mother tongue if it is Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi. Linguistic skills, multilingualism, and language diversity are concepts that the national core curriculum emphasizes. For example, it states that the task of ECEC is to strengthen the development of children's linguistic skills and capacity as well as their linguistic identities (EDUFI, 2022, p. 40). To achieve this, ECEC teachers need a clear understanding of what it means to be a linguistic role model and must possess knowledge of language teaching strategies.

The linguistic role model is central to our study and is emphasized in the core curriculum. According to the core curriculum (EDUFI, 2022, p. 34), ECEC staff should recognize that they are linguistic role models, which enhances children's language understanding (p. 45). The curriculum's view of language and its expectations provide a foundation for being a role model. It states that language in ECEC should be descriptive and precise; children should be encouraged to interact with adults and peers in various contexts, and they should practice storytelling, explaining, and discussing. Using language dynamically in

this way is key, henceforth referred to as languaging (Åkerblom, 2017). When we refer to teachers as linguistic role models, we mean they should purposefully use rich, nuanced language and foster languaging in diverse situations. While teachers are linguistic role models in the language of instruction for all children, this study focuses on teaching language to multilingual children. Language skills are essential and highly valued, because they are crucial for learning, enabling the expression of ideas and sharing an understanding of the subject at hand (Conner et al., 2014), making it crucial for teachers to be mindful of their language and strategize how languaging will be integrated into ECEC's daily life.

To capture all aspects of language, multiple theories are typically required to understand what language is and how language teaching is best structured (Aronsson, 2022). A distinction can be made between everyday language and academic language, and it is becoming increasingly common within early ECEC. Although everyday and academic language can overlap, acknowledging the distinction helps to understand which language skills are promoted in various situations. Everyday language refers to contextualized language that includes a large proportion of high-frequency words, such as those commonly used during mealtimes. Academic language refers to decontextualized language that includes many low-frequency words, such as those found during book reading (Cummins, 1979; 1981). In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, language teaching is often integrated into meaningful activities, such as circle time or mealtimes. This aligns with the holistic approach to learning that dominates in Nordic countries (Alstad & Sopanen, 2020; Brodin & Renblad, 2020; Nordberg, 2019; Sheridan & Gjems, 2017). A consequence of this holistic approach to learning is that implicit language teaching strategies are predominant, while explicit language teaching receives less attention. Language is primarily viewed as a means for learning rather than as a means for teaching content in its own right (Alstad & Sopanen, 2020). However, language development strategies have become an established research field in Nordic ECEC (Mård-Miettinen et al., 2018; Norling, 2020). Teachers generally demonstrate good skills in developing children's everyday language abilities, but more knowledge is needed to foster children's academic language skills (Sandell Ring, 2021). Teachers need language teaching strategies to help children acquire academic language skills in everyday ECEC environments, such as planning book reading and understanding decontextualized language (Björk-Willén, 2022).

Multilingualism and language diversity are often regarded as assets (Baker & Wright, 2017). However, they also pose challenges for teachers. Children have varying needs in terms of language support and exhibit different levels of linguistic proficiency. With societal changes, teachers' expectations have increased significantly (Harju-Luukkainen

& Kangas, 2021). Teachers not only require a general understanding of early language development but also need specific insights into multilingual language development, the impact of languages on children's identity formation, and strategies for creating multilingual learning opportunities for all children (Bergroth et al., 2021; Meier, 2018; Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017). Nevertheless, there is limited research on pedagogical staff working with multilingual children in mainstream ECEC in Finland (Bergroth et al., 2024). For instance, Finland's language diversity and the number of multilingual children are continually increasing, yet there is a tendency among Finnish teachers to restrict multilingualism to just Finnish and Swedish (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). Specifically, for teachers within the Swedish-medium ECEC, some believe it is essential to preserve Swedish, as it is a minority language. Therefore, there is a need for further examination of teachers' beliefs regarding their roles as linguistic role models and their approaches to teaching languages to multilingual children. The article uses multilingualism and bilingualism interchangeably, depending on the cited research.

Our study draws on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to understand learning (Vygotsky, 1978), Klafki's Didaktik analysis to comprehend teaching (Klafki, 2006), and a theorization of the concept of language awareness to grasp the complexity of language Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). Combining ideas from Vygotsky and Klafki provides a holistic understanding of language teaching and learning, allowing us to view language teaching as both implicit and explicit. Vygotsky's theory helps us comprehend social dynamics, whereas Klafki's analysis focuses on the content and methods of teaching. Therefore, language is placed in the foreground, making it the content, while language awareness ensures that language and multilingualism are integrated into a broader understanding. These theories were explicitly used in constructing the survey; see questions in the method section and attachment. This study aims to examine teachers' beliefs about their role as linguistic role models and how these beliefs relate to explicit and implicit language teaching practices. The main research question to be answered is:

How do teachers' beliefs about being linguistic role models relate to their language teaching practices, such as planned book reading, play, interaction, and daily conversations?

Previous research

Book reading as a language teaching strategy

Book reading is prevalent in ECEC due to established research. Studies conclude it is essential for oral language development (Hindman & Wasik, 2012; Swanson et al., 2011; Weadman et al., 2022), enhancing children's vocabulary, phonological awareness, and comprehension of the world (Boyd, 2013; Noble et al., 2019). However, research indicates it is often utilized for other purposes. Damber (2015) found that reading sessions are sometimes employed to calm children or transition between activities, often without a specific focus on language development. Effective reading necessitates planning, clear objectives, and intentional strategies. Scaffolding and questions about specific words and content improve children's language skills (Blewitt et al., 2009; Walsh & Hodge, 2018). Such strategies target academic language development, which is crucial in multilingual classrooms, ensuring quality and frequency in reading. Teachers establish optimal conditions for language development during book reading. Grøver et al. (2020) note that dialogic and shared reading especially benefit second-language learners. Instead of passive listening, dialogic reading encourages a mutual dialogue between teachers and children, connecting their experiences with the story. High-quality interactions involve asking questions, using synonyms, providing explanations, and linking reading content to other knowledge areas while mastering complex syntax (Santoro et al., 2008; Wasik & Hindman, 2014). Tjäru and Heikkilä (2023) found that Finnish teachers prioritize planning and preparation, considering children's needs and interests. Despite this, unprepared reading remains a common occurrence. Alatalo and colleagues (2024) report that while teachers regularly engage in book reading, these sessions are rarely planned. The authors identify three motives for book reading in ECEC as reported by teachers: language and knowledge development, fostering security and promoting calmness. They conclude that Finnish, Swedish, and Norwegian teachers utilize planned and systematic book reading to a limited extent.

Interaction and daily conversations as a language teaching strategy

The importance of children's language development in communication during routine situations and interactions between peers and teachers has been a focus among researchers (Aukrust, 2002; Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2006; Ødegaard, 2006; 2007). ECEC situations can promote language development if teachers effectively capture children's utterances. Teachers emphasize interaction and daily conversations as fundamental for language growth (Gjems, 2012; Sheridan & Gjems, 2017). Engaging in meaningful activities supports language development (Marulis & Neuman, 2010), while

teachers' communication patterns play a vital role in stimulating conversations (Nordberg, 2019; Henry & Pianta, 2011). Although teachers respond well to children's utterances, they should ask more open-ended questions and encourage storytelling (Henry & Pianta, 2011). High-quality interactions in ECEC promote language and literacy development, laying a foundation for later learning (Fast, 2008; Norling, 2015). Nordic ECEC pedagogy integrates language teaching into daily activities such as mealtimes and transitions (Brodin & Renblad, 2020; Kultti, 2013). This holistic approach challenges the provision of high-quality interactions for all children. Such interactions are essential for the development of multilingual children and for creating a language-rich environment (Hoff & Naigles, 2002; Weizman & Snow, 2001). Studies show concerns about differences in teacher interactions with monolingual versus multilingual children (Lara-Alecio et al., 2009; Ping, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2015). Multilingual children often interact less with teachers, who may use simplified language with them. Moreover, the quality of interactions varies across ECEC settings (Nordberg & Jacobsson, 2019). For conversations to foster language development, teachers must reflect on their interactions and learn effective communication patterns (Nordberg, 2019). High-quality interactions are defined by teachers' use of open-ended questions and facilitation of dialogue.

Play as a language teaching strategy

In Finland, as in other Nordic countries, play is given a unique position and is viewed as an essential learning space (Gjems, 2012). A particular research focus has been placed on teachers' understanding of play and how they use it to support children's language development (Conner et al., 2014; Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2002; 2003). Teachers believe play impacts children's language learning (Gjems, 2012). The most critical aspect of play is that it allows children to interact and use language in various ways. Play must fulfill many functions, such as language development, turn-taking, and emotional development (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993). Due to its multifaceted nature, play is considered a valuable strategy for teachers to implement in their language development work. Norling and Lillvist (2016) showed that play can be utilized to develop an understanding of various concepts, with both adult-led and spontaneous play being necessary. Guided play, which lies between adult-led and spontaneous play, enables children to become engaged and active partners in the learning process while also allowing teachers to provide the necessary linguistic guidance and support (Weisberg et al., 2013). Studies focusing on multilingual children emphasize the importance of adult-led play in stimulating and supporting language instruction. Dominguez and Trawick-Smith (2018) recorded dual language learners during free play and compared their interactions with those of their monolingual peers. The children learning the language of instruction as a second language played and conversed with their peers less frequently and relied more on teacher support.

Peer interaction can stimulate and support language development, enhancing interaction skills (Cekaite et al., 2014; Evaldsson & Sahlström, 2014). Results from a case study showed that interactions with monolingual peers contributed to vocabulary learning and enriched the expressive word repertoire of a 4-year-old emergent bilingual child (Erdemir & Brutt-Griffler, 2022). These findings align with other studies with a similar research focus (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2004; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). However, Erdemir and Brutt-Griffler (2022) highlight that the language support provided by peers is often unintentional and inconsistent for natural reasons. The vocabulary learned through peer interactions tends to relate to themes and situations that affect children's everyday lives in ECEC. Thus, the language support that children can offer one another is context-bound. To summarize previous research, book reading, daily conversations, and play provide teachers with opportunities to use rich and nuanced language tailored to each situation. These strategies offer avenues for teachers to enhance everyday and academic language development in planned and spontaneous contexts, which is ideal for becoming linguistic role models. With our questionnaire, we investigate whether teachers in multilingual Swedish-medium ECEC in Finland perceive themselves as linguistic role models and whether their views on book reading, daily conversations, and play relate to their perceptions of being linguistic role models.

Hypothesis

In the current study, we used an online questionnaire to examine Finnish ECEC teachers' beliefs about being linguistic role models and how these beliefs relate to various aspects of language teaching and language development work for multilingual children in Swedish-medium ECEC. Six hypotheses were formulated based on the previously stated research to examine the possible relationships between beliefs about teachers as linguistic role models and various aspects of language teaching for multilingual children.

Our first two hypotheses concern reading as a language-teaching activity. Following Blewitt et al. (2009) and Walsh et al. (2018), we hypothesize that teachers who consider themselves linguistic role models also prepare for the reading-aloud situation by choosing words and expressions they believe must be explained in advance. Previous results highlight the teacher's central role in planning and scaffolding. In addition, previous studies show that dialogic reading is an incredibly beneficial reading strategy (Tjäru & Heikkilä, 2023; Dowdall et al., 2020; Wasik, 2010). Therefore, our second hypothesis is that teachers who consider themselves linguistic role models also use dialogic reading strategies.

Hypotheses three and four concern the quality of daily conversations and interactions. Previous studies, forming the basis for these hypotheses, state that interaction in everyday activities and daily conversations is fundamental for the language development of multilingual children. However, teachers' interactions with multilingual children differ from their monolingual peers (Gjems, 2012; Sheridan & Gjems, 2017; Sullivan et al., 2015). Therefore, our third hypothesis states that teachers who consider themselves linguistic role models also use simplified language in interactions with multilingual children, with the idea that this facilitates the understanding of multilingual children. Our fourth hypothesis states that teachers who consider themselves linguistic role models also believe that daily conversations contribute to increased vocabulary and language comprehension for multilingual children in the language of instruction.

Previous studies have shown a positive connection between play and language development (Conner et al., 2014; Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2002; 2003). Our fifth and sixth hypotheses concern teachers as linguistic role models and their beliefs about play as a language teaching strategy. Hypothesis five is that teachers believe play is vital in children's language development, such as learning new words and expressions while interacting with peers, regardless of how teachers view their role. The sixth and final hypothesis is twofold. Hypothesis 6a states that although teachers feel they are linguistic role models, they value adult-led play less than children's free play, which would follow the play tradition in Nordic ECEC. Hypothesis 6b states that teachers who perceive themselves as linguistic role models and possess knowledge of previous research on play and language development tend to value adult-led play highly.

Methods

Material

The questions included in the online questionnaire are based on theories regarding children's learning (Vygotsky, 1978), teaching in a German Nordic Didaktik tradition (Klafki, 2006), and the theoretical concept of language awareness (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). This way, we captured all the essential elements necessary for language teaching for young, multilingual children. For instance, Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction and play in children's learning. The questionnaire reflected this by asking teachers to take a stand on the statement, 'During free play, children learn new words and expressions when interacting with peers.' The German Nordic Didaktik tradition stresses instructional preparation as a fundamental aspect of teaching (Klafki, 2006). The questionnaire captured this in the following

statement: "*I prepare the read-aloud situation by choosing words and expressions beforehand that I think might need to be explained to the children*." Language awareness was utilized as an umbrella term to encompass the complexity of language diversity and multilingualism in language teaching (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). For example, the questionnaire reflected this by asking teachers to take a stand on the statement, "*As an ECEC teacher, I function as the primary linguistic role model in the language of instruction*." Before data collection, the questionnaire was piloted, and minor alterations were made to some questions based on participant feedback (N = 6).

The questionnaire consisted of 70 items within 23 sections (see Koskinen, in preparation). The questionnaire was developed for a more extensive study on language teaching for multilingual children; further information about the questionnaire can be found in Koskinen (in preparation). All questions were designed for teachers to take a stand on various statements concerning language teaching by rating their alignment with each statement on a five-point Likert scale.

Data collection and participants

Data was collected in the fall of 2021 using an online questionnaire. The online questionnaire was sent to Swedish-medium ECEC settings in seven municipalities in Finland. The municipalities were selected based on statistics from the Association of Finnish Municipalities (2021), which reports the number of officially bilingual municipalities. This selection comprises municipalities where the Swedish-speaking inhabitants are in the minority, ranging from 2% to 29% of the total number of inhabitants. Only municipal ECEC settings were included.

The online questionnaire was sent to all municipal Swedish-medium ECEC settings in the included municipalities, totaling 106 ECEC settings. It was distributed by emailing the principal of each ECEC setting. The email contained a link to the questionnaire, written information about the study, and protocols for handling personal information and data management. Principals were requested to forward the email to all personnel working as ECEC teachers. Contact information for the principals was obtained from the municipalities' online pages. Due to the distribution method of the online questionnaire, there is no data available on the number of ECEC teachers who received it. Consequently, it is also impossible to report the response frequency in relation to the potential number of responses. All respondents were asked to give informed consent before entering the online questionnaire. Participation in the study was voluntary. A research permit was required from the municipality to complete data collection. An approved research permit was obtained from all the included municipalities. The response time for the

questionnaire was approximately three weeks, with two reminders sent during this period. The questionnaire was completed by 42 ECEC teachers in Finland.

Most of the settings to which the questionnaire was sent have Swedish as the official language of instruction. However, five teachers reported that Swedish and Finnish are the official languages of the setting. Teachers reported that children speak Swedish, Finnish, English, Arabic, Norwegian, Russian, Spanish, Farsi, Somali, German, Italian, Kurdish, Estonian, French, Chinese, and Vietnamese. The languages that the teachers themselves reported using in teaching were Swedish, Finnish, English, and French. Teachers were also asked to report the number of children who speak more than one language at home:six teachers reported having 1–5 children, 16 teachers reported having 6–10 children, 15 teachers reported having 11–15 children, and six teachers reported having 16–20 children in their group that speak more than one language at home (respondents could choose multiple options and one respondent ticked two alternatives). This illustrates that language diversity is partly expressed in the languages and number of languages the children speak and partly in the languages the teachers report using in their teaching.

Data analysis

Data from the 42 teachers was analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests in the statistical package IBM SPSS 27.0. Analyses were performed at the item level. Apart from the question regarding ECEC teachers' belief in being a linguistic role model (item 1 in Table 1), six other items were selected guided by what has been considered important in the previous research. Teachers were asked to take a stand on various statements concerning language teaching for multilingual children by rating their alignment on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree). We analyzed the means and standard deviations for the descriptive statistics of the seven items included in the analysis (see Table 1). The chi-square tests aimed to examine ECEC teachers' beliefs about their role as linguistic role models and how these beliefs relate to their language teaching. Non-parametric techniques were chosen for analysis, as the data were measured on an ordinal scale, and the dataset was relatively small. A chi-square test for independence was chosen to examine relationships between variables. Gamma was used since it fits the chi-square testing of ordinal-by-ordinal variables, such as Likert scales. Gamma values are interpreted by Goodman and Kruskal's gamma statistics (1959): 0.00: no association; ±.01-.09: weak association; ±.10-.29: moderate association; ±.30-.99: strong association; ±1.00: perfect association. The results of the descriptive analysis of variables used for further analysis in this study are presented in Table 1.

Research ethics

This study followed sound research practices and upheld democratic values (Swedish Research Council, 2017). All participants received written information about the survey and how personal information would be handled. They were asked to provide informed consent by ticking a box to agree to proceed with the online questionnaire. No personal information, such as IP addresses, was collected, so respondents cannot be traced. Questions focused on teachers' professional views on language teaching, allowing respondents to answer in the context of their professional roles. No sensitive personal data was handled.

Results

Results from descriptive analyses

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of variables from the online questionnaire. Mean value and standard deviation were reported.

Variable	Mean	*SD*
As a teacher, I am the primary linguistic role model in the language of instruction.	1,76	*,726*
I prepare the read-aloud situation beforehand.	2,88	*1,194*
I use dialogic reading while reading aloud.	1,93	*,867*
I use simplified language when interacting with multilingual children.	2,45	*1,017*
Daily conversations contribute to increased vocabulary and language comprehension in the language of instruction for multilingual children.	1,07	*,261*
Children learn new words and expressions during free play when interacting with peers.	1,48	*,594*
Adult-led play contributes to the development of the language of instruction.	1,55	*,670*

Each question was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally agree) to 5 (totally disagree). A mean value close to 1 means a high agreement with the statement. A low or small standard deviation (SD) indicates data are clustered tightly around the mean, and a higher or larger standard deviation indicates data are more spread out. For example, the question "*Daily conversations contribute to increased vocabulary and language comprehension in the language of instruction for multilingual children*" has a mean value of 1,07 and an SD value of 0,261, meaning that almost all ECEC teachers agree strongly. For the question "*I prepare the read-aloud situation beforehand*," the mean value shows the lowest agreement of all the questions. However, the high SD also shows the largest variety in answers; the lowest unity in the ECEC teacher's answers is found here. For our main question, "*As a teacher, I am the primary linguistic role model in the language of instruction*," there is a fairly high agreement with the statement and a fairly high unity in answers.

Results from Chi-square analyses

These analyses examined ECEC teachers' beliefs about being linguistic role models and how these beliefs relate to the language teaching and language-developing work they conduct for multilingual children. To depict relationships between being a linguistic role model and language teaching, chi-square tests were used to examine associations between variables. Results are presented in the following as calculations of the chi-square tests and in cross tables.

Book reading as a language teaching strategy

TABLE 2 Statistics showing the relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' (vertical) and 'preparing the read-aloud situation' (horizontal). Both variables had answer categories from totally agree to totally disagree.

	Preparing the read-aloud situation					
Teachers as linguistic role models	Totally agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Totally disagree	Total
Totally agree	2 (4,8%)	5 (11,9%)	4 (9,5%)	2 (4,8%)	3 (7,1%)	16 (31,8%)
Agree	3 (7,1%)	5 (11,9%)	3 (7,1%)	10 (23,8%)		21 (50%)
Neither agree nor disagree.		4 (9,5%)				4 (9,5%)
Disagree				1 (2,4%)		1 (2,4%)
Totally disagree						
Total	5 (11,9%)	14 (33,3%)	7 (16,7%)	13 (31%)	3 (7,1%)	42 (100)

The relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' and 'preparing the read-aloud situation' was not significant; the negative Gamma value is weak and has no clear indication of a relationship between these variables, $\chi 2$ (12, N = 42) = 19,82, p =,070, Gamma = -,088. However, the p-value indicates a trend, which we will explore by interpreting the cross table. Most ECEC teachers either totally agree or agree that they are a linguistic role model (vertical side). In contrast, for the question of whether they plan reading situations, there is a more extensive variety in the answers (horizontal). For the three options Totally agree, Agree, and Neither agree nor disagree on preparing reading situations, there is a reasonably even number of ECEC teachers answering that they Totally agree, Agree, or Neither agree nor disagree on being a linguistic role model. So far, no relationship has been found between the variables. However, when looking at the option Disagree in relation to preparing reading situations, 23% have a lower agreement with being a role model, and one teacher even disagrees with being a linguistic role model. Exploring the cross table and considering the p-value as a trend, we can hypothesize that more data with a wider variety of answers will show that ECEC teachers who do not see themselves as linguistic role models also do not prepare for reading situations. However, clear conclusions cannot be drawn from these results alone.

TABLE 3 Statistics showing the relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' (vertical) and 'using dialogic reading' (horizontal). Both variables had answer categories from totally agree to totally disagree.

	Using dialogic reading					
Teachers as linguistic role models	Totally agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Totally disagree	Total
Totally agree	7 (16,7%)	8 (19,0%)	1 (2,4 %)			16 (38,1%)
Agree	6 (14,3%)	10 (23,8%)	3 (7,1%)	2 (4,8%)		21 (50%)
Neither agree nor disagree	1 (2,4%)	2 (4,8%)	1(2,4%)			4 (9,5%)
Disagree				1 (2,4%)		1 (2,4%)
Totally disagree						
Total	14 (33,3%)	20 (47,6%)	5 (11,9%)	3 (7,1%)	0 (0%)	42 (100%)

The relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' and 'using dialogic reading' was not significant, but the p-value indicated a strong trend, $\chi 2$ (9, N = 42) = 16,47, p =,058, Gamma =,409. The relatively high positive Gamma value indicates a strong relationship between the two variables; together with the strong trend, we must interpret the cross table. The cross table shows the extent to which teachers feel they are linguistic role models (vertical side) and the extent to which they state using dialogic reading while reading aloud (horizontal). A clear majority (73,8%) of the responses cluster towards Totally agree to and Agree to be both a linguistic role model and using dialogic reading as a language teaching method. Numbers quickly trail off in other answering alternatives, but where there is disagreement about using dialogic reading, there is also a lower agreement about being a linguistic role model. Based on the Chi-square test and what the cross table shows, a careful conclusion can be drawn that teachers who feel they are linguistic role models to a greater extent also use dialogic reading while reading aloud, which supports hypothesis two. In general, the fact that many ECEC teachers respond that they agree or highly agree with both questions indicates that being a linguistic role model and using dialogic reading is essential in language teaching for young children.

Interaction and daily conversations as a language teaching strategy

TABLE 4 Statistics showing the relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' (vertical) and 'I use simplified language in interactions with multilingual children' (horizontal). Both variables had answer categories from totally agree to totally disagree.

		I use simplified language in interactions with multilingual children				
Teachers as linguistic role models	Totally agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Totally disagree	Total
Totally agree	3 (7,1%)	8 (19%)	1 (2,4%)	3 (7,1%)	1 (2,4%)	16 (38,1%)
Agree	3 (7,1%)	11 (26,2%)	4 (9,5%)	3 (7,1%)		21 (50%)
Neither agree nor disagree.		1 (2,4%)	3 (7,1%)			4 (9,5%)
Disagree				1 (2,4%)		1 (2,4%)
Totally disagree						
Total	6 (14,3%)	20(47,6%)	8 (19%)	7 (16,7%)	1 (2,4%)	42 (100%)

The relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' and 'I use simplified language in interactions with multilingual children' was not significant, $\chi 2$ (12, N = 42) = 16,67, p =,162, Gamma =,216. The cross table shows the extent to which teachers feel they are linguistic role models (vertical side) and the extent to which they state using a simplified language in interactions with multilingual children (horizontal). Although the relationship is not significant, the positive Gamma value indicates a moderate association between these two variables. Most (62%) of the responses cluster towards Totally agree to and Agree to both being a linguistic role model and using simplified language with multilingual children. However, numbers for Neither agree nor disagree with using simplified language also see a drop in agreement for being a linguistic role model. The pattern that can be seen in the cross table illustrates that the more teachers feel they are linguistic role models, the more they agree that they use simplified language when interacting with multilingual children. However, the pattern is not significant, and we cannot fully support the hypothesis.

TABLE 5 Statistics showing the relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' (vertical) and 'daily conversations contribute to increased vocabulary and language comprehension in the language of instruction for multilingual children' (horizontal). Both variables had answer categories from totally agree to totally disagree.

Teachers as linguistic role models	Daily conversations contribute to increased vocabulary and language comprehension in the language of instruction for multilingual children					
	Totally agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Totally disagree	Total
Totally agree	15 (35,7%)	1 (2,4%)				16 (38,1%)
Agree	19 (45,2%)	2 (4,8%)				21 (50%)
Neither agree nor disagree.	4 (9,5%)					4 (9,5%)
Disagree	1 (2,4%)					1 (2,4%)
Totally disagree						
Total	39 (92,9%)	3 (7,1%)				42 (100%)

The relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' and 'daily conversations contribute to increased vocabulary and language comprehension in the language of instruction for multilingual children' was not significant, $\chi 2$ (3, N = 42) =,583, p =,900, Gamma = -,062. The cross table shows the extent to which teachers feel they are linguistic role models and that almost all ECEC teachers (92,9%) believe daily conversations contribute to increased vocabulary and language comprehension in the language of instruction for multilingual children, a so-called ceiling effect in the data. Indeed, the cross table shows a strong consensus among teachers regarding the importance of everyday conversations for multilingual children's development of the language of instruction regardless of whether they consider themselves linguistic role models.

Play as a language teaching strategy

TABLE 6 Statistics show the relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' (vertical) and 'during free play, children learn new words and expressions when interacting with peers' (horizontal). Both variables had answer categories from totally agree to totally disagree.

	During free play, children learn new words and expressions when intracting with peers					
Teachers as linguistic role models	Totally agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Totally disagree	Total
Totally agree	10 (23,8%)	6 (14,3%)				16 (38,1%)
Agree	11 (26,2%)	8 (19%)	2 (4,8%)			21 (50%)
Neither agree nor disagree.	3 (7,1%)	1 (2,4%)				4 (9,5%)
Disagree		1 (2,4%)				1 (2,4%)
Totally disagree						
Total	24 (57,1%)	16 (38,1%)	2 (2,8%)			42 (100%)

The relationship between variables 'teachers' as linguistic role models' and 'during free play children learn new words and expressions when interacting with peers' was not significant, $\chi 2$ (6, N = 42) = 4,146, p =,657, Gamma =,142. The cross-table shows the extent to which teachers feel they are linguistic role models (vertical side) and the extent to which they believe that children learn new words and expressions through interaction with other peers during free play (horizontal). A clear majority (83,4%) of the responses cluster towards Totally agree to and Agree to be a linguistic role model and that children learn new words and expressions in interaction with peers during free play. Five teachers do not clearly state that they see themselves as linguistic role models, but they still think that free play interaction benefits language development. Therefore, free play is essential regardless of how teachers view their role as linguistic role models. This is consistent with our hypothesis.

TABLE 7 Statistics show the relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role models' (vertical) and 'adult-led play contributes to multilingual children's development of the language of instruction' (horizontal). Both variables had answer categories from totally agree to totally disagree.

Teachers as linguistic role models	Adult-led play contributes to multilingual children's development of the language of instruction					
	Totally agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Totally disagree	Total
Totally agree	10 (23,8%)	4 (9,5%)	2 (4,8%)			16 (38,1%)
Agree	11 (26,2%)	10 (23,8%)				21 (50%)
Neither agree nor disagree.	2 (4,8%)	1 (2,4%)	1 (2,4%)			4 (9,5%)
Disagree			1 (2,4%)			1 (2,4%)
Totally disagree						
Total	23 (54,8%)	15 (37,5%)	4 (9,5%)			42 (100%)

The relationship between variables 'teachers as linguistic role modes' and 'adult-led play contributes to multilingual children's development of the language of instruction' was significant, $\chi 2$ (6, N = 42) = 14,34, p =,026, Gamma =,236. The cross table shows the extent to which teachers feel they are linguistic role models (vertical side) and the extent to which they believe that adult-led play contributes to multilingual children's development of the language of instruction (horizontal). The positive Gamma value illustrates a moderate association between variables. Again, a clear majority (83,4%) of the responses cluster towards Totally agree and Agree both that they see themselves a linguistic role model and that adult-led play contributes to multilingual children's development in the language of instruction. However, ECEC teachers who agree with the statement that adult-led play contributes to multilingual children's development in the language of instruction are not evenly spread among those who see themselves as linguistic role models. Instead, a majority agree rather than totally agree. The results of the Chi-square test and the cross table show that ECEC teachers who see themselves as linguistic role models believe to a more considerable extent that adult-led play contributes to multilingual children's development in the language of instruction, which means that hypothesis 6a is proven wrong. In contrast, hypothesis 6b is proven right.

Discussion

In this study, we examined ECEC teachers' beliefs about being linguistic role models and how these beliefs relate to their language teaching for multilingual children. Teachers serving as linguistic role models provided the starting point for our study, as emphasized in the national core curriculum. Teachers' views on book reading, daily conversations, and play were examined to see how they relate to their perspectives on being linguistic role models. The results show that, on a general level, teachers agree that they are the primary linguistic role models for the children, using the language of instruction. Teachers' consensus indicates that book reading, interaction, daily conversations, and play are essential for developing children's language skills. However, there are differences in how teachers' views of being a linguistic role model correspond to these specific teaching strategies. We will discuss these relationships in more depth below.

Book reading

Our results showed no clear relationship between seeing oneself as a linguistic role model and preparing for the read-aloud situation. Teachers largely agree that they are linguistic role models; however, this is not clearly linked to preparing for read-aloud situations. Considering the overall results regarding book reading, we hypothesized that teachers who do not believe they are linguistic role models would also be less likely to prepare for read-aloud situations. Regarding the use of dialogic reading during read-aloud, we found a strong relationship between understanding oneself as a linguistic role model and the use of dialogic reading. Our conclusion is, therefore, that teachers who believe they are linguistic role models also use dialogic reading during read-aloud to a greater extent.

The difference in how the view of being a linguistic role model relates to preparing for read-aloud and using dialogic reading is interesting. Dialogic reading is a beneficial reading strategy, particularly for second-language learners, as demonstrated by Grøver and colleagues (2020). However, as Santoro and colleagues (2008) and Wasik and Hindman (2014) highlight, high-quality interaction during book reading usually consists of mutual questions and comments, providing children with synonyms and explanations, and helping children associate the content of the reading with other areas of knowledge and conquer complex syntactic structures. It requires a lot from the teacher to offer children high-quality dialogic reading. The fact that teachers report using dialogic reading is positive, but a large percentage of teachers, 38.1%, report that they do not prepare for the reading situation, which raises some questions. Scaffolding and asking questions about specific words and the book's content are essential in developing the breadth and depth of children's language skills (Blewitt et al., 2009; Walsh & Hodge, 2018). Ensuring

that reading aloud is effective, language-developing, and supports children's academic language skills requires significant preparation on the part of the teacher. Being able to ask open-ended and interpretive questions, offer synonyms and explanations, connect the book's content to children's earlier experiences, and consider children's different language backgrounds require appropriate preparation. It is questionable whether it is feasible to do all this spontaneously in the moment.

The finding that teachers do not prepare for read-aloud situations is unsurprising. Instead, it resonates with recent studies by Tjäru and Heikkilä (2023) and Alatalo and colleagues (2024) that show that unprepared reading is common in Nordic ECEC. These tendencies were also found by Damber (2015), who discovered that the reading situation is often used for purposes other than language development. Teachers appear to recognize that book reading, particularly dialogic reading, is particularly beneficial for language development. However, teachers face challenges in understanding their role as linguistic role models and their impact on the quality of reading aloud. The lack of planning does not necessarily imply that teachers do not value prepared teaching. As Alatalo and colleagues (2024) highlight, it may reflect the informality of learning activities in Nordic ECEC. Reading aloud is a regular and common activity; however, teachers might consider it more of a learning activity in the everyday life of ECEC rather than an intentional language teaching activity that is specifically planned.

Interaction and daily conversations

Our results show a pattern indicating that the more teachers perceive themselves as linguistic role models, the more they agree to use simplified language when interacting with multilingual children. However, the pattern is not significant, so our hypothesis is not fully supported. This result is interesting because, as emphasized in the Finnish core curriculum (EDUFI, 2022), language use in ECEC should be descriptive and exact, and children should be encouraged to practice storytelling, explaining, and discussing. Our finding that 61.9% of teachers use simplified language suggests that teachers have a different understanding of what languaging entails compared to what is stated in the national core curriculum. Therefore, languaging for multilingual children in everyday interactions might be more simplified than outlined in the core curriculum. Teachers' use of simplified language and fewer interactions with multilingual children have also been observed and highlighted in previous studies (Sullivan et al., 2015; Lara-Alecio et al., 2009; Ping, 2014). Nordberg (2019) and Henry and Pianta (2011) emphasize the crucial aspect of teachers' communication patterns, which are vital in determining the level of challenge and stimulation in children's conversations and interactions. For that reason, teachers must be aware of their role as linguistic role models and how their professional

knowledge can impact the interactions multilingual children experience throughout their day in ECEC. While teachers should not always use simplified language, it is important to note that our study only demonstrates that teachers report using simplified language; we do not know the extent to which they do this or the reasons behind it. Based on previous research, it is essential to highlight that in interaction, not only the frequency but also the quality of interactions determines how language-developing the exchanges between a teacher and a child are.

Further, our results also show that regardless of whether teachers consider themselves linguistic role models, they strongly agree that interaction and daily conversations are fundamental. They believe that interaction and daily conversations contribute to increased vocabulary and language comprehension in the instructional language for multilingual children. In relation to book reading, we observe a difference in how the view of being a linguistic role model relates to two interactional activities. Again, even if teachers generally see themselves as linguistic role models, this perspective only applies to specific situations involving teacher-child interaction. Previous studies by Sheridan and Gjems (2017) and Gjems (2012) have concluded that teachers highlight interaction and daily conversations as foundational for children's language development. Our results confirm this idea, but we also find that this view of interaction and daily conversations is not linked to teachers' perceptions of being linguistic role models. This finding can also be understood in light of previous studies by Brodin and Renblad (2020) and Sopanen and Tomter Alstad (2021), who discuss the uniqueness of Nordic ECEC, where all aspects of the day are seen as essential opportunities for language learning. However, a challenge arises in that these highly valued interactions and daily conversations may not necessarily promote language development for all children. Interaction and daily conversations may also serve as opportunities for language learning rather than intentional language teaching strategies.

Using simplified language and engaging in interaction and daily conversations appear to be at odds, which, similar to book reading, suggests that teachers need to better understand their role as linguistic role models and how it impacts the languaging opportunities available for multilingual children. On the one hand, teachers assert that daily conversations and interactions are crucial for the language development of multilingual children. On the other hand, they indicate using simplified language when interacting with these children. This raises questions about the conditions provided for multilingual children to practice storytelling, describing, and languaging, and to what extent their language development is challenged in these everyday situations by facilitating the opportunity to develop academic language skills.

Play

Our results indicate that regardless of how teachers perceive their role as linguistic role models, they believe that play is essential for children's language development and for learning new words and expressions while interacting with peers. Teachers who do not explicitly state that they see themselves as linguistic role models still acknowledge that play benefits children's language development. This perspective aligns closely with the holistic view of learning prevalent in Nordic countries, where children's free play is highly valued (Sheridan & Gjems, 2017; Brodin & Renblad, 2020; Alstad & Sopanen, 2020; Nordberg, 2019). Play may serve as an implicit language teaching strategy, where language functions as a means of learning. This helps explain the strong consensus among the teachers in our study regarding the central role of play in language development. Previous research has demonstrated that peer interaction can stimulate and support language development as well as enhance interaction skills (Evaldsson & Sahlström, 2014; Cekaite et al., 2014). However, Erdemir and Brutt-Griffler (2022) emphasize that the language support provided by peers is often unintentional and inconsistent. While peers can offer each other linguistic support, this is typically limited, as children generally do not have a language-developing purpose in their interactions during play. Consequently, it is impossible to predict the type of language development support that may arise from peer interactions. Another crucial point raised by Erdemir and Brutt-Griffler (2022) is that the language children use in their interactions – and that emerging multilingual children learn – is often context-bound. This implies that the vocabulary developed with peers functions well in everyday situations in ECEC, but academic language, with its specialized vocabulary, does not always receive the same level of support.

Furthermore, our results indicate that teachers who see themselves as linguistic role models are more likely to believe that adult-led play contributes to multilingual children's development in the language of instruction. This relationship was significant. Lillvist and Norling (2016) and Weisberg et al. (2013) demonstrated that adult-led play can facilitate understanding various concepts, underscoring its importance in helping multilingual children develop academic language skills. Dominguez and Trawick-Smith (2018) also found that multilingual children rely on teacher support. Thus, our results indicate that despite the emphasis on free play and its high valuation, ECEC teachers regard adult-led play as crucial for multilingual children. The teacher assumes a central role, which may be attributed to their ability to offer more advanced language support than peers of the same age.

Conclusions and further research

In general, it can be concluded that ECEC teachers agree on their roles as linguistic role models and that book reading, adult-led play, and daily conversations are important for the language development of multilingual children. Additionally, our study suggests an inconsistency between teachers' recognition of their roles as linguistic role models and the implementation of strategies that effectively promote language development for multilingual children. In interactions, teachers appear to be aware of their significance as linguistic role models, as evidenced by their relationships with adult-led play. However, when planning their teaching, such as preparing for book reading, they do not appear as conscious of the importance of being a linguistic role model, which raises concerns about the quality and effectiveness of book reading as a language teaching strategy. The findings align with previous research, indicating the need for further professional development for teachers regarding planned, intentional language teaching. There appears to be a universal consensus that interactions and daily conversations are essential for language development. Simultaneously, 61.9% of the teachers report using simplified language in their interactions with multilingual children, suggesting a divergence from the Finnish curriculum guidelines.

This study uses quantitative analysis to explore ECEC teachers' perspectives on language teaching and their roles as linguistic role models. However, the online questionnaire limits the ability to clarify emerging questions during data collection. A potential way to gain broader insights could have been to ask teachers to reflect on what it means to be a linguistic role model. Our findings indicate that teachers tend to simplify language when interacting with multilingual children; however, the questionnaire does not provide insight into the frequency of this practice or the specific reasons behind it. Additionally, 38.1% of teachers report not planning read-aloud sessions, but the reasons remain unclear. Is this due to organizational factors, such as job descriptions or their knowledge regarding planning book reading? In-depth interviews or follow-up questionnaires could clarify these motivations, providing a more complete view of language teaching practices and guidance on the need for professional development at the organizational, individual, or both levels.

Acknowledgments

We want to express our gratitude to all the ECEC teachers who took the time to complete the survey.

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