

Research in the News

Offering research education for in-service language teachers

Since 2008, the Swedish government has launched occasional offers of funding for graduate schools aimed at practising teachers. The fundamental purpose of this initiative is to enhance quality in the Swedish school system by implementing what is stated in the Education Act, namely that education at all levels should be based upon scientific knowledge and evidence-based experience.

The Swedish Research Council has been given the task to allocate funding to universities interested in implementing the reform by offering graduate schools within different academic domains. Strict selection has been applied when evaluating the proposals submitted.

In June 2011 the graduate school FRAM (Swedish acronym referring to Foreign language education [De främmande språkens didaktik]) was granted funding for 2012–2014. While Swedish as a first language (L1) and second language (L2) had been targeted in previous rounds, FRAM was the first national graduate school focusing on foreign languages. In contrast to English, the conditions for the second foreign languages offered in lower and upper secondary school (mainly French, German and Spanish) are problematic regarding status, motivation and attained levels of proficiency (Hyltenstam & Österberg 2010). This situation was taken into account in the design of the research school.

FRAM – a national graduate school for language teachers

The response to the announcement of FRAM was very positive, with more than 50 applications submitted. Following a step-wise selection process, including analyses of previous academic work and letters of intent as well as interviews, a group of ten language teachers were given the opportunity to study at Ph.D. level – up to a so-called licentiate degree – while keeping their salary for the duration of their studies (two and a half years). During the five semesters in FRAM, the candidates continued to teach the equivalent of one day a week in their regular schools. Three of them taught at lower secondary level (age groups 12–16) and seven in upper secondary school, with students between 16 and 19.

The students were required to make two choices, one with regard to target language – English, French, German, Italian, or Spanish – and one concerning content domain, namely *Aspects of language learning from an individual perspective*, *ICT in learning and teaching of languages*, or *Forms of assessment in language studies*. Based on these choices, each student was admitted to one of the four different universities involved. As for target languages, five students chose English, two Spanish, and the remaining three French, German and Italian, respectively. Three decided to focus on language learning, two on aspects of information and communications technology (ICT) in language education, and five on forms of educational assessment.

FRAM was organized jointly by four Swedish universities, in Gothenburg, Lund, Växjö, and Stockholm (the host university). A steering committee, set up by the authors of the current report, was responsible for the planning and implementation of all activities. Furthermore, each student was assigned two supervisors from a pool of professors of languages and/or language education.

The graduate programme comprised three joint courses that focused on the content domains mentioned above and a number of university specific courses within the linguistic or the educational field. In addition, a thesis on a topic within the chosen content domain was written – in most cases in the target language. Once each semester, the students presented their work in progress during a joint seminar at one of the universities and received feedback both from the FRAM tutors and from their peers. During the fourth semester, the FRAM group attended an international conference for graduate students, thereby providing further feedback from a wider circle of tutors and peers.

Outcomes

The different studies conducted within FRAM are of immediate relevance and importance for teacher pre-service and in-service education, the topics of the theses being chosen by teachers, who were given the opportunity to identify areas of particular interest in their own practice and to deepen their knowledge within this field.

The research studies conducted on *Aspects of language learning from an individual perspective* have several implications of relevance for practising teachers in general but particularly in a situation when a rapidly growing number of students know and use several languages. Smidfeldt's (2015) investigation of cross-linguistic influence in Italian as a third language (L3), indicates that teaching may benefit from considering pupils' multilingual repertoires and by pointing out similarities and differences between languages, or encouraging pupils to do so themselves. The study by Gunnarsson (2015) on bilingual pupils learning English as an L3, more precisely on processes underlying their writing in English, points in the same direction, showing that learners' L1 is mainly employed as a language of thought for context specific ideas. Referring to the correlation between learners' images of themselves as future users of French and their intended effort to continue with French, Rocher-Hahlin (2014) argues for the importance of including learning activities that enhance pupils' *Ideal L3 Self* as early as possible in the curriculum to increase motivation.

Two studies with emphasis on *ICT in learning and teaching of languages* point to the role of the teacher in the digital school environment and emphasize pupils' need for guidance when using the computer as a learning tool. Both studies concerned Spanish as the target language. Generally, young people are skilled in managing computers, but when the computer is used in foreign language education they need supervision: searching for relevant information is a demanding task, especially in a language where proficiency is relatively low (Fredholm 2015). Furthermore, pupils do not always use computers in ways that teachers expect. The study by Källermärk-Haya (2015) shows that the learners used the computer more for producing than for consuming (i.e. reception). Moreover, assumptions about what motivates pupils are not always correct. Thus, the two studies on ICT indicate that it is essential to moderate the discussion about the role of the computer in language learning. Different tools need to be evaluated so that they can be used in efficient ways for different aims.

The studies conducted on *Forms of assessment in language studies* focus on areas that have been given increasing attention during the last few decades, some of them being also closely related to the content domain of language learning. The topics range from feedback and formative uses of assessment, aimed to clarify learning goals and to enhance learning by raising students' awareness, to large-scale summative perspectives related to issues of fairness and equity, of special relevance in Sweden, where teachers' grades are used to a very large extent for admission to higher education. Pålsson Gröndahl's (2015) results from a study of teachers' written comments on writing indicate that pupils understand many of the issues addressed by their teachers, but they need clear feedback, time to process feedback, and subsequent teaching that is closely related to the feedback given. Håkansson Ramberg's (2016) study on the relation between teachers' holistic assessment of writing in German and linguistic features of grammar and vocabulary provides insights into the rating processes behind the assessment of written language proficiency.

Assessment practices in Content and Language Integrated Learning, CLIL, with regard to a possible relationship with the language of instruction, was investigated by Reierstam (2015), whose results indicate that CLIL does not have an effect on teachers' assessment practices. Finally, two of the five FRAM research studies within the assessment area deal with aspects of large-scale, national assessment, hence the summative function, both studies focusing on oral language proficiency. Borger (2014) used a mixed-method approach to investigate rater behaviour and orientations across two groups of raters evaluating oral proficiency in a paired speaking test, finding reasonable agreement between raters' marks and a wide array of features taken into account to form holistic rating decisions. The study reported by Frisch (2015) deals with teachers' varying perceptions of oral language proficiency, as expressed in semi-structured interviews and group discussions, and their assessment of this in a mandatory national test for lower secondary school.

Five of the ten teachers in FRAM have continued their Ph.D. studies, and two of them have been hired at the National Agency for Education. This development is of course highly rewarding for the graduate school, though it may be seen as only indirectly corresponding to the goals set by the government, namely to increase quality in schools in a more immediate and direct sense. However, this also has to do with the ways the students from research schools have been received back at their schools, where a certain lack of career opportunities has been noted (Högskoleverket 2012).

Evaluation and future prospects

FRAM has brought about a number of activities, important at individual as well as public levels www.isd.su.se/english/fram. The students have taken part in national conferences and webinars, and many of them have presented papers at international conferences. A book comprising articles based on the different theses is underway, as is an application for funding from the Swedish Institute for Educational Research. The focus of the envisaged project aims at further developing the three themes of the research school, with some of the FRAM students acting as project leaders at their respective schools, and three FRAM supervisors as senior mentors.

The FRAM graduate school was the first of its kind in Sweden and evaluations have been very positive from the students themselves, the supervisors, the participating universities, and, importantly, also from the schools involved, the latter often articulated in informal ways. FRAM has undoubtedly increased, and will continue to increase, teachers' theoretical knowledge of language learning, teaching and assessment, and will form a basis for continued educational research, with the former students as multipliers. Moreover, it will facilitate a productive encounter between researchers and experienced teachers, which implies a broader and yet more precise discipline of language education.

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