

Swedish L2 teacher cognitions of the initial assessment of students' L1 literacy resources

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In this paper, we explore second language (L2) teachers' cognitions regarding the initial assessment¹ of adult learner literacy in their strongest language.² Instruction can thus be adapted according to what is stipulated in the curriculum and syllabus. The literacy assessment is conducted in the student's strongest language with assistance from an interpreter, translated decoding and reading comprehension tasks and concerns assessment of learners with little or no prior education. Questionnaires and interviews with L2 teachers reveal great variation based on four categories of teacher knowledge, namely, Subject matter knowledge, Knowledge of students, Pedagogical knowledge, and Knowledge of educational contexts. These four categories were partly intertwined with each other and both a resource and a deficit perspective emerged. The teachers' cognitions regarding the concept of literacy, the value of initial L1 literacy assessment and students' prior literacy and multilingual resources, as well as its potential for instruction planning were diverse. This may have significant implications for what emerges in initial assessments of a student's L1 literacy. In turn, this affects the validity of the assessment and, ultimately, the quality of education.

Keywords: Swedish for Immigrants, adult education, second language learning, L1 literacy assessment, newly arrived students, teacher cognitions

1 Introduction

Sweden has a long tradition of receiving immigrants and refugees. Recent decades have seen an increasing number of immigrants arriving from outside Europe (for example Africa and the Middle East). In addition, Sweden has a high level of work-related immigration. This calls for flexible and adapted education in the Swedish language to facilitate integration into society and worklife (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2021; Hyltenstam & Milani, 2012). According to Colliander et al. (2018), migration from parts of the world with less access to basic education has increased the number of adults without print literacy

1. In the current paper we use the term *assessment* as a *mapping* or a *screening* of a learner's literacy resources and skills.
2. In the current paper we use the term *first language (L1)* to denote the language the students have stated as their strongest, which often corresponds to the language with which they identify themselves and/or the language they use most frequently or master to a higher level (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981).

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in Sweden. Newly arrived adults are provided elementary education in the Swedish language through the language programme Swedish for Immigrants (SFI). The student base is heterogeneous in terms of educational, cultural, and linguistic background as well as pedagogical needs. However, there has long been a strong demand for SFI to become more adapted to the learners (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2018, 2023). A thorough assessment of the student's previous literacy experience in their strongest language is therefore crucial for the planning of L2 instruction. Furthermore, in adult education in general it is important to validate the students' previous knowledge and experiences in order to adapt the instruction (Fejes, 2015). This is essential in particular regarding a group of students with little or no prior schooling who need more time to complete this basic language education. Passing the SFI exam is in many cases a requirement for both a job and further studies (Wedin & Norlund Shaswar, 2019). However, assessing the prior literacy experiences of this group can be challenging, as literacy outside the educational domain is often undervalued by societal institutions such as schools (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2015; Ivanič et al., 2009). It is therefore important to pay attention to what the teachers' perceptions are about the initial literacy assessment and how this knowledge can be used in the instruction.

The aim of this paper is to explore and analyse *teachers' cognitions* (i.e. knowledge, beliefs and thoughts) (Borg 2003) regarding the initial literacy assessment of adult learners with little or no prior education in their strongest language. The teachers in this study used an L1 literacy assessment material for newly arrived adult learners of Swedish.³ This study addresses the following questions:

- 1) What is the knowledge and which beliefs are held by teachers regarding the assessment of prior literacy resources of students with little or no education in their strongest language?
- 2) What are the didactic implications of teachers' cognitions regarding the assessment of students' prior literacy resources?

1.1 Background

SFI has a very heterogeneous student group and is therefore organised into three study paths (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). The study paths are mainly based on the students' previous schooling, where study path 1 is aimed at students with little or no formal education, who are in focus in this study. According to curriculum and syllabus, instruction needs to be adapted to the student's needs, pre-conditions and goals (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). However, many teachers lack knowledge of their students' prior experiences with different literacy practices and therefore fail to adapt their instruction accordingly (Wedin & Norlund Shaswar, 2019). This is also highlighted in two recent surveys of SFI classes conducted by the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, indicating that the instruction is not adapted to the students and therefore does not seem relevant to them (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2018, 2023).

Research has shown that even those students who may not consider themselves literate, usually have experience of writing in different contexts, which can be an important starting point in teaching. Scribner and Cole (1981) and Heath (1983), found that people who had no formal schooling at all used written language for everyday purposes in ways that were culturally shaped and culturally specific. Research on print awareness and emergent literacy shows that people who lack basic reading and writing skills can possess a high degree of written linguistic awareness, as well as experience of interacting with others in various written activities (Kurvers et al., 2009; Säljö, 2005). However, in the Swedish context, research about how SFI teachers use the writing practices

3. The literacy assessment material was commissioned by the *Department of Education* for newly arrived adult learners of Swedish and published by the *Swedish National Agency for Education* in 2019.

of their students demonstrated that teachers limited the students' opportunities to link their everyday writing to the course (Norlund Shaswar, 2014). In a study on teaching practice of initial literacy and L2, Colliander et al. (2018), found that the actions of the teachers were intertwined with those of the learners, as well as with the teachers' conceptions of the learners which underscores the importance of teachers' understanding of their students' prior experiences.

Initial assessment is a form of formative assessment that is generally thought to improve student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Taras, 2005). While the international research regarding initial assessment is extensive (Gravells, 2016), there is a strong need for more knowledge about initial literacy assessment for adults (Fogg et al., 2019; Looney, 2007) and particularly L1 literacy as it is a relatively new practice. In the Swedish context, studies of initial L1 literacy assessment for adults have not been conducted previously, but similar assessments for newly arrived children or young adults have been investigated from other perspectives by Wadensjö and Chrystal (2019) and Wedin (2023). In addition, research on adult education is generally scarce (Fejes & Nylander, 2019), and teacher students are not sufficiently prepared for this very complex and challenging instruction (Fejes, 2019), especially regarding L2 acquisition. Meanwhile, SFI has been repeatedly subject to criticism for its outdated pedagogy and inefficiency (Hyltenstam & Milani, 2012; Lindberg & Sandwall, 2007, 2012; Rosén, 2013).

In summary, there is a strong need for more research regarding adult education, particularly with regard to SFI in order to address the issues outlined above. Teacher training needs to better prepare teachers by providing a knowledge base in terms of initial L1 literacy assessment and multilingualism as a resource, giving teachers the possibility of adapting their instruction to the students' prerequisites and needs by drawing on their literacy resources.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The present study, as well as the assessment material used by the teachers in the study, has a sociocultural approach to literacy and is based on the idea that students' multilingualism is an asset for their L2 literacy development. Furthermore, the study draws on theories of teacher cognition. Together, these theoretical assumptions comprise the framework of this study and are presented in more detail below.

Literacy is seen as social practices (Barton, 2007; Gee, 2015; Street, 1984, 2017, p. 4) and involves reading and writing in a broader sense, including all activities linked to written text. Text also includes other graphic elements that in combination with written text, create a multimodal message (Ivanič, 2009). Street (1984) distinguishes between an *autonomous* and an *ideological model of literacy*. The *autonomous* view perceives literacy as a range of technical, universal and decontextualised individual skills, which do not change significantly from one context to another, while the *ideological* view assumes literacy as a set of concrete social practices embedded in and given meaning through different ideologies, power structures and cultures that vary between different contexts (Street, 1984, 2017, p. xiii). These *literacy practices* do not imply that the person who encounters written text necessarily needs to be able to decode or produce written text themselves. Thus, the students who are the subjects of the L1 literacy assessments conducted by the teachers in the present study and who have indicated that they themselves cannot read and write, may nevertheless possess experiences of literacy practices. As this group of students often lacks or has a limited formal education, their experiences mainly encompass literacies from their everyday lives – what is known as *vernacular literacies* (Barton, 2007). These practices, which are used outside domains of power and influence, are often less valued than so called *dominant literacies* which correspond to more standardised practices, often defined by formal purposes of institutions such as schools (Barton, 2007; Ivanič et al., 2009). Uncovering the creativity in students' daily

literacy practices has the potential to enhance their learning in more formal contexts (Ivanič et al., 2009), which underscores the importance of assessing literacy practices beyond school-based contexts.

Sweden has a long tradition as a multilingual society, resulting in multilingual perspectives being present in legislation as well as in curricula and syllabi. For instance, the *Swedish Language Act* (SFS 2009:600) highlights the individual's right to language, both regarding the development of Swedish and the preservation and development of one's L1. The discourses in these types of documents could be characterised as *normative discourses* (Juvonen, 2015), in this case reflecting a view of multilingualism as a resource that points to a translanguaging pedagogy, which is a theoretical and instructional approach allowing learners to use their whole linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning (García & Li Wei, 2014). This represents a dynamic view of bilingualism "not as two monolithic systems made up of discreet sets of features, but as a series of social linguistic practices" (García et al., 2012, p. 50). This theoretical and pedagogical development is sometimes referred to as the *Multilingual turn* (Conteh & Meier 2014; May, 2013). However, a monolingual norm often continues to dominate educational policies and practices. While research on teachers' perceptions and practices concerning multilingualism has demonstrated predominantly positive views, these beliefs are not, for various reasons, necessarily translated into instructional approaches that reflect them (Alisaari et al., 2019; De Angelis, 2011; Haukås, 2016; Juvonen, 2015; Lundberg, 2019).

The social linguistic practices referred to above (García et al., 2012), include literacy practices, which means that literacy is not seen as a set of skills connected to a specific language but rather to different activities. According to Gee (2015), literacy practices constitute different *discourses*, which refer to how text is used, valued and discussed. Participation in different domains such as everyday and worklife, educational settings and society requires the acquisition of the discourses used in those domains (Gee, 2015). Newly arrived adult students can have divergent experiences of various literacy practices that involve writing, different approaches to writing and different ideas about what it means to read and write in different domains. An already acquired discourse that resembles a new one facilitates the acquisition of the new discourse, a process that resembles L2 acquisition (Gee, 2015). This view on literacy, as well as the multilingual view mentioned above, corroborates Cummins' well-known *interdependence hypothesis* (1979, 2000) which is an earlier theory of L2 acquisition where literacy experience in any prior languages promotes literacy development of L2 as there is an assumption of transferal during the process. All of these theoretical assumptions constitute a *resource perspective* on the student's prior experiences to build upon in L2 literacy instruction and motivate an initial L1 literacy assessment. Thus, the focus in this type of assessment is to establish what students already know in contrast to focusing on what is yet to be acquired (referred to as a *deficit perspective*), in relation to school-based contexts (Franker, 2013).

For a multilingual migrant, it is not always obvious which language should be considered L1 due to migration "and/or" different language use in different domains. We therefore use L1, both within the article and in reference to the assessments, in the sense of it being the 'strongest language'. However, it may not be the language first acquired, but rather the language in which the students have most of their literacy experiences. Furthermore, literacy experiences do not have to be linked to a single language and/or writing system, nor to a specific geographical area (Martin-Jones & Jones, 2001). Many students master multiple languages in speech and/or in writing. Globalisation, migration and technological developments in areas such as mobile telephony and the internet also influence how teachers need to relate to literacy and to student resources and assess these from a broad perspective, in order to incorporate not only context, time, and place but also languages, writing systems, medium and modality (Holm & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2012, p. 5).

The present study is also based on theories of *teacher cognition*, i.e. teachers' knowledge, beliefs and thoughts, and how these interact with classroom practices (Borg, 2003, 2015). These are influenced by the teacher's own experiences from school, teacher education and their experience as teachers. Teacher cognition is thus shaped by the social contexts in which the teachers are included, while the teachers simultaneously influence the practices of the contexts in which they work, such as their L1 literacy assessment practices. An area within teacher cognition, has specifically focused on teachers' subject-matter knowledge and how it transforms into practical knowledge, subsequently communicated to and understood by students (Borg 2003). This research has resulted in various classifications of teachers' knowledge (Shulman, 1987), some of which form the basis for the analysis in the present study and are further elaborated in the methodology section. Prior research on teacher cognition in educational settings has indicated that teachers' beliefs are typically resistant to change (Borg, 2015). It is therefore important to explore teachers' understanding of the concept of literacy as outlined above and their perceptions regarding the assessment of L1 literacy and students' multilingualism as a resource for learning, as well as the implication for instruction as these cognitions are likely to affect both assessment practices and future instruction. It is also of interest to investigate whether these knowledges, beliefs, and attitudes evolves over time.

A final theoretical perspective relevant to this study is language assessment. Many factors may affect the quality of an assessment, such as *validity* and *reliability*. Validity concerns whether the assessment measures what it is intended to measure (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), while reliability means that the outcome will be similar if the assessment is repeated (ibid; Chapelle, 2013). Both validity and reliability are in turn affected by the materials, the assessor, and the interlocutor (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown, 2004; McNamara, 1996), in this case, the same person. Although the L1 literacy assessment materials clearly state that it is not a language test, the teachers and the students may perceive it as such. It could even be considered *high-stakes*, since the outcome may affect the students' study path placement and the instruction they will receive (cf. Pearson, 2023). In addition, even if the assessors are aware of the theoretical assumptions underlying the assessment, they may still pay more attention to other factors than the ones stipulated in the instructions (cf. McNamara 1990, p. 64). In this type of initial literacy assessment, teachers may, for instance, prioritise dominant literacy practices related to formal education, potentially overlooking questions or follow-up questions concerning everyday (*vernacular*) literacies (see Appendix C). This could lead to the exclusion of important literacy experiences from the assessment. Consequently, this omission may affect the validity, quality, and usefulness of the results, since important information about the students' literacy experiences remains unknown (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Also related to the assessor/teacher is the fact that the meaning-making in the conversation is co-constructed and the outcome is therefore a mutual responsibility (Brown, 2004). A further complication in the present study is that a translator is involved, which means that important information may be lost in translation (Wadensjö & Chrystal, 2019). All the factors described above indicate that the usefulness of any assessment's outcome is highly dependent on the users' knowledge and perceptions of the underlying theoretical assumptions, in this case, a sociocultural view of literacy and multilingualism as a resource. It is therefore relevant to explore how the assessing teachers perceive these.

1.3 Literacy assessment material

The L1 literacy assessment material used by teachers in the present study is designed to explore what kind of literacy practices the student has experienced in different domains in that student's strongest language(s), i.e., the language(s) with which the student has had the most written exposure to before their arrival in Sweden. According to the instructions, the assessment should be conducted in a language that the student is very

competent in and in which they can describe and reflect on their literacy experience with the teacher and an interpreter. The assessment conversation takes the form of an individual exploratory conversation, which makes it possible to adapt the content based on the individual student's terms.

The main part of the material consists of a conversation guide that provides a structure for the conversation based on different domains such as everyday and worklife, educational settings and society, and with suggestions for questions and examples that can be used by the assessing teacher (Appendix C). The material also consists of guidelines for teachers on how the assessment should be conducted, and for students on the purpose of the assessment as well as a standardised assessment summary (Appendix D). There are two entry points to the assessment material and the choice of entry point is based on information from the students about their prior reading and writing experiences. The first entry point, used by teachers in the current study, is intended to assess the literacy experience of students who have indicated that they cannot read or write or have very little experience in these areas. Conversely, the second entry point is purposed for all other students. The literacy assessment focuses not only on contexts in which reading and writing usually play a substantial role (e.g. in educational contexts) but also in situations in work,⁴ social and everyday life (i.e. situations with less visible use of writing, see Appendix C). The students who are assessed using the first entry point start by completing a set of decoding and basic reading comprehension tasks to assess their recognition, phonological, and orthographic awareness in the presence of a language support staff or interpreter as well as the assessing teacher. The brief texts include, for instance a bus timetable, a text-message, and a work schedule. During the subsequent conversation, the assessing teacher is supposed to discuss with the student about the purpose and content of the texts.

2 Methodology

This study takes a qualitative and inductive approach and is based on teachers' cognitions regarding their assessment of students' L1 literacy resources. The authors participated in the development of the assessment material. This means that we developed and tried out different versions of the materials in collaboration with other researchers as well as with a reference group consisting of teachers from different parts of Sweden, who also participated in the study. During this process, data was collected from questionnaires, with a focus on open-ended questions (see Appendix A), and from 10 audio-recorded interviews conducted with 22 teachers (see Table 1). The questionnaires were answered by 6 anonymous teachers, who had participated in the development of the material. Despite the limited number, the responses provided valuable information about teachers' cognitions as some of them were quite elaborate. The teachers who completed the questionnaires also participated in semi-structured interviews, along with other teachers who had also used the assessment material. All interviewees used the same guide (see Appendix B) with open-ended questions but it was also possible for the participants to raise other themes (Rose et al., 2020, pp. 115–117).

While the questionnaires provided rather limited data, the interviews were extensive (approximately 1 hour each, see Table 1) and allowed participants to elaborate on the different themes. Interviews were conducted by the authors and other researchers involved in the development of the assessment material. The authors conducted two and three interviews respectively and there were two teachers present at each interview, with the exception of interview 10 (see Table 1). In all interview studies, there is always a risk that the interviewees may adapt their responses based on what they believe the interviewer expects. In this case, however, the collaborative work of teachers and researchers in developing the materials enables a discussion from a shared collegial per-

4. This domain includes all kinds of daily occupation the student engaged in before their arrival in Sweden, such as such as farming, childcare, and household chores et cetera.

spective, with no reason to believe that the teachers did not express their genuine views. The teachers were selected from different locations throughout Sweden, ranging from small towns to bigger cities with great variation in terms of the size of the schools and the student groups. The intention was to capture how the assessment material was used and perceived in different educational settings. Hence the interviews were also undertaken in different settings. Some of the teachers had more experience in the assessment than others, which may be a weakness of the study. However, this will also be the case in real-life use, which contributes to representative data. The ethical guidelines provided by the Swedish Research Council (2011) were used, i.e. all participants were informed about the research project, how the data would be used, and that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn whenever they chose. A written consent for participation was filled out and all personal data was anonymised.

Analysis of the responses in the questionnaires and interviews focused on teachers' cognitions (Borg, 2003, 2015) regarding the concept of literacy, assessment of L1 literacy and its implication for instruction, all of which are related to our research questions. A thorough review of all responses ultimately resulted in the identification of central and recurring themes. These were subsequently consolidated into four categories that were inspired by Shulman's (1987) as well as Meijer et al.'s (2001) categorisations of teachers' knowledge.⁵ The first analytical category was *Subject matter knowledge*, which in this case corresponds to knowledge about the conception of literacy from either an ideological or an autonomous perspective but also knowledge of literacy in different domains as well as various types of literacies such as vernacular literacies. The second category was *Knowledge of students*, i.e. perceptions about students' learning and comprehension which in this case is based on their view of the students' multilingualism either as a resource or as a deficit as well as valuing their experiences of literacy outside school or formal contexts. The third category was *Pedagogical knowledge* which in the current study relates to instruction for L2 literacy development and teachers' perceptions about what kind of information that can be useful for their teaching practice. The fourth category, *Knowledge of educational contexts*, collects teachers' perceptions of organisational constraints stemming from factors such as time constraints, school policies, curriculums (Borg, 2015) or access to interpreters or language support staff. A qualitative, iterative analysis was used whereby recurring cognitions expressed by the teachers were identified and categorised as described above (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). Our procedure was to search through the material several times to identify all sequences in which themes related to our research questions were raised. These were then broadly transcribed, categorised, and analysed.

Table 1. Teacher interviews

Interview	Interviewer	Number of teachers	Length (minutes)
1	Int1	2	108
2	Int2	2	51
3	Int3	2	69
4	Int3	2	55
5	Int1	2	70
6	Int1	2	72
7	Int1 + Int4	2	56
8	Int4	2	46
9	Int5 + Int2	2	40
10	Int5 + Int2	4	69

5. The term *knowledge* is in this context used as a comprehensive concept encompassing the teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs.

3 Results

This section presents the results of the analyses of the questionnaires (referred to as “Q”) and interviews (referred to as “I”), from the four categories: *Subject matter knowledge*, *Knowledge of students*, *Pedagogical knowledge*, and *Knowledge of educational contexts*, that are used in order to structure the results. Teacher cognitions in each category are illustrated with representative examples translated from Swedish. However, some statements simultaneously express multiple views and can therefore be categorised in multiple possible categories.

3.1 Subject matter knowledge

A recurring theme is the teachers’ perceptions of the concept of literacy, which relates to *Subject matter knowledge* and is illustrated in various ways in the following three examples:

- (1) My general understanding of the concept has deepened, particularly regarding students at early literacy levels. (Q)
- (2) Yes, it has deepened. Partly by doing assessments myself, and partly through the interesting discussions that we have had in the group, where we have been able to share each other’s experiences. (Q)
- (3) I feel that I have a better understanding of the effect of the first language literacy on language development and how I can strengthen some parts of my instruction. (Q)

Examples (1) - (3) express a deepened understanding of literacy and its’ significance of language development (3), which equally indicates an understanding of the interdependence hypothesis (Cummins 1979, 2000). As in Example (2), many teachers claimed that participating in the discussions in the reference group, as well as a sustained practice of assessment over an extended period of time, have evolved their perception of the concept of literacy and its significance for students’ learning.

Many teachers appreciated that the assessment was structured around different domains:

- (4) The domains offered the possibility of illustrating [students’] literacy from different parts of life. (I)

In Example (4), the teacher expresses an insight that a broader knowledge of students’ literacy could be obtained by exploring domains other than school-based contexts (Gee, 2015; Ivanič et al., 2009). Other interviews affirmed this broader perspective on literacy and that exploration in different domains such as students’ worklife was important even if school-based literacy (i.e. dominant literacy) was regarded as the most valued experience. One teacher emphasised that a widened understanding of the concept of “worklife” is important as many occupations other than wage labour include different types of literacy practices, such as a farmer or housewife. This indicates an awareness that a student may possess experiences with literacy practices from their occupations to draw on even if they are unable to read and write in a traditional manner. In turn, this suggests recognition of the importance of paying attention to vernacular literacies (Barton, 2007) and less visible literacy practices (Ivanič et al., 2009). However, some teachers thought the exploration in different domains was redundant and made them repeat the same kind of question.

In the data, contrasting cognitions regarding literacy were expressed, as illustrated by Examples (5) and (6):

- (5) I don’t think I could use this information. I don’t know what to do with it as I don’t need it. I already know how many years they have attended school and if they can read and write. (I)

(6) Reading and writing are key to moving forward in one's studies and we need to know where we can start. Two students may claim that they read and write in their first language but what do they mean? One of them may struggle through a text in their first language and may have mostly copied other texts, while another uses reading and writing as the main tools for receiving and processing information and new knowledge. (Q)

Several teachers more explicitly problematised the concept of literacy and what "knowing how to read and write" actually means, as in Example (6). This suggests an ideological view and a different appreciation for previous literacy experience than Example (5) above where: "if they can read and write", reflects a rather narrow, autonomous and instrumental conception of literacy (Street, 1984). Furthermore, the same teacher expressed that they did not find it valuable to explore *how* the students use their mobile phones:

(7) Well, she uses the mobile phone, that's it. (I)

The view expressed in Example (7) is also in direct contrast to that of many other teachers who found knowledge about how students' use of digital tools particularly valuable as this is required in an increasing number of contexts in contemporary societies worldwide:

(8) Digital competence - good to know how they can use the mobile phone. (I)

The teacher in Examples (5) and (7) also seemed very focused on the student groups that they was currently teaching and how they valued the students' prior experience of literacy. The teacher did not consider asking their students questions aimed at exploring their experience of various literacy practices in different domains and particularly beyond school-based contexts:

(9) I gave them this material and I'm their teacher, so why would they contest it? (I)

The knowledge and beliefs expressed by the teachers in Examples (5) - (9) above illustrate two distinct perspectives on the concept of literacy (Subject matter knowledge) that were represented among many of the assessing teachers. These examples also reveal the teachers' likely conceptions of L2 literacy instruction as well as their perceptions about these students' learning which also Example (3) above does. Therefore, these examples can also be categorised as both Pedagogical Knowledge and Knowledge of Students.

Even if the majority of the teachers found the L1 assessment valuable, some teachers did not see the point in conducting the assessment in the student's L1 or in focusing on L1 literacy as they repeatedly mentioned students' levels of L2 Swedish and L2 literacy skills as the most important issue. This may imply that they did not fully understand the purpose of the L1 assessment, which suggests a lack of knowledge or belief in multilingualism as a resource (Cummins, 1979, 2000; García & Li Wei, 2014). One of the teachers even conducted the assessment in Swedish, although the instructions clearly stated that the assessment was to be performed in each student's L1. A few teachers also indicated that some students with limited literacy experience had seemed tired towards the end as there were "so many questions to answer", which implies a misunderstanding regarding how the assessment should be conducted according to the guidelines. This, in turn, could possibly be explained by a narrower and more autonomous view of literacy and suggests a need for training in how to conduct the assessment and also in its theoretical starting points. On the other hand, the analyses also revealed that the teachers became more aware of the significance of L1 literacy resources in L2 development due to the assessments being conducted in each student's L1 which indicates that a theoretical progress occurred during teachers' assessment practice.

3.2 Knowledge of students

Within this category, statements are gathered that indirectly or directly bear witness to either a deficit or a resource perspective on the students, their learning or their multilingualism. The teacher in Example (5) above expressed that they saw no use for the information that emerged during the literacy assessment because they already knew how many years the students had attended school and whether they could read or write, although the teacher initially said that they thought that L1 assessment was a good idea. That statement (Example (5) above) also reflects the teacher's *Knowledge of the students* and conveys a deficit view. The teacher did not seem to appreciate that literacy resources may be acquired beyond school-based context or that school literacy can vary between contexts. This may indicate a need for professional development. It also contrasts sharply with a recurring theme expressed by other teachers that also became obvious in the assessment material try-out: that there is no clear correlation between the number of years a student has attended school and their literacy experiences.

Although the resource perspective was broadly valued, several teachers found it rather challenging to apply, which is illustrated in the following examples:

- (10) The questions about reading often get the answer "no". (Q)
- (11) It was difficult to adapt the questions when the students completely lacked knowledge of reading and writing. (Q)
- (12) It was easier with a student who had more experience in reading and writing and more difficult with a student who didn't have that, since I couldn't ask too many questions. (Q)

Examples (10) - (12) suggest that the resource perspective was particularly difficult to apply when it comes to students with limited educational background and literacy experience. The assessment tended to focus on what the students *cannot* do, as the response to many of the posed questions often was negative. Some teachers suggested solutions to this problem, such as adapting or rephrasing the questions or simply not asking all the questions (which actually was the intention). This suggests that even though the teachers aimed for a resource perspective, it was still easy to focus on students' deficiencies. Examples (11) and (12) above also indicate a more autonomous perspective on literacy and a lack of understanding regarding the significance of vernacular literacy and its use in L2 literacy instruction and therefore also express teachers' *Subject matter knowledge*.

Many teachers attested that the students also appeared to be more comfortable using their L1 to talk about their literacy experiences and empowered by the opportunity to show their strengths and what they could do, rather than focus on what they had not yet acquired:

- (13) Now I have an impression of a person with a lot of abilities, not just difficulties in the meeting with the new language. (Q)
- (14) Provides very valuable information. I get a completely different picture of the student I am about to teach than from other types of assessment - much more useful! (I)

Most teachers appreciated gaining knowledge about the students' resources that gave them a more complete picture of the students' resources, as expressed in Examples (13) and (14). Example (14) also indicates how the assessments can move teachers beyond deficit thinking towards a resource perspective. The teachers perceived this viewpoint as valued by the students but also as a valuable tool for teaching planning. Thus, Example (14) also express teachers' *Pedagogical knowledge*.

Other examples of teachers' *Knowledge of the students* were found in their answers to the questionnaires, where teachers expressed appreciation for assessing students' prior

literacy from a resource perspective and thus being able to build upon their new knowledge of the students' strengths in their future instruction:

(15) When you know what the students can do, you can use it in your instruction, and this empowers the students and strengthens their confidence. You can build on what they are good at in the instruction. (Q)

This statement can thus also be categorised as *Pedagogical knowledge*. Another teacher expressed surprise at the fact that the assessment revealed that some students were genuinely able to solve certain reading or decoding tasks:

(16) I was surprised, pleasantly surprised. (I)

Example (16) implies a preconceived negative expectation of the students and a prejudice about their prior literacy experiences. At the same time, the statement also demonstrates a readiness on the part of the teacher to change their perception of the student's resources.

3.3 Pedagogical knowledge

Cognitions categorised as *Pedagogical knowledge* encompasses both teachers that did not find the L1 literacy assessment useful and did not know how to use the obtained information in their instruction, and those who found the information very useful and claimed that the assessment had an impact on their own teaching practices in general. Examples (14) and (15) above illustrated that teachers found the information that emerged during the assessment as valuable and saw great potential for adapting the instruction accordingly. There were also indications of increased awareness of students' literacy experiences in general:

(17) Certain things are brought up in the assessment, for instance, digital competence, which has made me also think about this when it comes to other students. Some of them may not have what we take for granted. Then we can pick it up and provide better support. (I)

(18) You take a lot for granted about the students and the assessment gives information, not only about one student but also ideas for the whole group. (I)

Examples (17) and (18) both express an awareness of literacy that has the potential to be beneficial for the whole student group. Other instances of the impact of the assessment on teaching practices given by the teachers encompass their choices of material that could be based on student experience and interests, which was seen as a good starting point. In addition, knowing the kind of support that the student needed for self-study and understanding which strategies the student used when reading texts, facilitated discussions about how these could be transferred to Swedish:

(19) If I know what the students think are the best ways for them to learn, I can use that in the instruction. (I)

In the instruction, the teacher could remind students about the assessment interview and what they have stated regarding their reading strategies and so forth. However, the teachers sometimes expressed different opinions regarding what kind of information they required and the level of detail at which this information should be given. This concern seemed to be connected to teachers' time constraints when summarising and drawing conclusions from the assessment interviews. In addition, several teachers expressed that they were not at all used to getting this kind of information about their students, which may explain their reluctance to perceive its usefulness for their instruction. This indicates that assessment practice also started a learning process for the teachers.

As mentioned above, using the students' L1 also provided teachers with a valuable knowledge base upon which to build:

(20) This is a way to find the best point of departure for your teaching when you know what the students are bringing and what they need from me as a teacher. (Q)

(21) For the student I often perceive that it confirms that we, in Swedish schools, see that the student has previous knowledge and that we value this. For the teacher, it is clearly valuable to assess the students' [literacy] experiences. The deep digging often allows new insights that enable us to help the student to move forward. (Q)

Examples (20) and (21) show a readiness to use the information from the assessment in order to plan and adapt their instruction to student needs, prerequisites and goals. Another teacher found that the reading tasks provided a solid starting point to explore the student's prior experiences and understanding of similar texts' content and purpose:

(22) I found the information that emerged from the assessments to be relevant. The student was able to read letters and some short words. I displayed a text message , and the student recognised the text type (a message) but did not understand the content. This provides me with a clear understanding of the student's abilities and where we should begin. (I)

The same teacher reports that when they asked a student about her previous life experiences, they gained a clear understanding of how the student had managed to be independent when moving to another country, being forced to learn a new language:

(23) The student initially couldn't speak Arabic when she arrived there, but when she went shopping, she would just walk around the store, pick up what she needed, recognise the packaging, and through this process, she began to understand and learn words, such as "salt". (I)

As the Examples (22) and (23) indicate, the assessment interview revealed literacy resources of the student in the form of strategies for adapting to the new textual environment.

3.4 Knowledge of educational contexts

Educational contexts may affect the teachers' assessment practices, and statements expressing constraints in this regard have been gathered in this category, named *Knowledge of educational contexts*. Some teachers expressed reservations regarding the usage of the literacy assessment, citing institutional constraints as a basis for their scepticism:

(24) We cannot use all this information, this is not what our reality looks like. I feel as though I am fooling the students. (I)

The teacher in Example (24) said that they had no idea of how to use all the obtained information and that they felt that they was giving the students false expectations as the teacher would not be able to adapt their teaching according to students' experiences anyway because of the contextual reality. In addition to practical constraints, regarding the effects that insufficient resources have in terms of implementing the goals of the syllabus, this statement may suggest an autonomous view of literacy (Street, 1984) and a lack of ability to use students' multilingual resources and adapt the teaching accordingly (Cummins, 1979, 2000; García & Li Wei, 2014). The knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of this teacher could, therefore, potentially be indicative of all three of the other categories, namely Subject matter knowledge, Knowledge of students, and Pedagogical knowledge.

Many teachers report that the assessment of literacy among students with a limited or no educational background is particularly time-consuming:

(25) I spent one and a half hours on my first assessment interview, and the time wasn't sufficient. I would have liked to continue for another half hour. I didn't feel that we were finished. I wanted to give her more time to contemplate the reading and letter-related tasks. It also took some time to get the conversation going. (I)

The request for more time expressed in Example (25) is, in part, due to the extensive time required to establish an understanding of the purpose of the assessment, as well as the fact that students possess a multitude of diverse experiences that necessitate an exploration to capture their literacy background. The extended duration for this category of students is also due to the presence of the interpreter or language support staff during the execution of the reading and letter-related tasks. In addition to the time constraints, which inherently pose practical limitations for conducting the assessment, it can also be challenging to secure an interpreter or language support staff:

(26) *No, we do not have that [representation of language support staff for all languages], and that's what becomes practically challenging, especially when you are supposed to conduct [the assessment] during the introductory course. (I)*

Example (26) illustrates that the interpretation may be difficult to arrange, since the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the students are rarely all represented in schools. A related complication raised by several teachers was the difficulty of knowing in advance which language to use in the assessment as many students with multilingual backgrounds have used several languages but for different purposes in different domains. Sometimes it became clear during assessment interviews that the information about the student's L1 was not the language in which the student had gained most of their literacy experiences.

In summary, the results show a great variation in teachers' cognitions of literacy, which includes both an autonomous and an ideological literacy view. Those conceptions seem to correlate with their appreciation for assessing the students' prior literacy experiences. Teachers who expressed a wider understanding of literacy in different domains also seemed to find the information obtained from the assessments more valuable. Many teachers valued students' multilingualism as a resource but simultaneously found this perspective rather difficult to apply which confirms previous studies (Alisaari et al., 2019; De Angelis, 2011; Haukås, 2016; Juvonen, 2015; Lundberg, 2019). The teachers who expressed a wider understanding of literacy also found the information more useful for instruction planning. These correlations may possibly explain the fact that the categorisation of teachers' perceptions partially overlapped, in a way that at least three of the four categories, i.e. *Subject matter knowledge*, *Knowledge of students* and *Pedagogical knowledge*, seem to be intertwined.

4 Discussion

In this article, we have explored teachers' knowledge, beliefs and thoughts regarding literacy assessment among newly arrived adults, with a specific focus on students who lack or have limited prior educational backgrounds, as well as the didactic implications of these cognitions.

Regarding the first research question, the results indicate a great variation among teachers' cognitions of literacy which seems to correlate with how they perceived the L1 literacy assessment. The teachers who expressed a deeper understanding of the concept (Subject matter knowledge) also found the information obtained in the assessment more valuable and useful for planning their instruction (Pedagogical knowledge). Most teachers expressed that their understanding of literacy was broadened by assessing the students' L1 literacy which is suggestive of a progress of their knowledge, beliefs and thoughts and a movement towards an ideologic literacy view. However, some teachers seemed to maintain a narrower, more autonomous literacy view limited to school-based literacy (Street, 1984) and did not value the information regarding the students' L1 litera-

cy experiences beyond that. This might be indicative of a resistance to the normative discourse on multilingualism (Juvonen, 2015) and that these teachers' beliefs are typically resistant to change (Borg, 2015). Some teachers stated that they did not know how to use the information collected in the assessment for teaching, which implies that they were not prepared to adapt their teaching to their students' needs (Pedagogical knowledge). This suggests a deficit view of their students that could be linked to an autonomous view of literacy with focus on school-based contexts, that also has been identified in previous research on Swedish adult education (Sandberg et al., 2016).

Teachers' cognitions of the limited utility of the L1 assessment may also be due to a more autonomous view of literacy and/or a perception of L2 literacy teaching (Pedagogical knowledge) as a sparse number of literacy practices and with focus on school-based contexts, denigrating vernacular literacy. The aim of the initial L1 literacy assessment is to allow the students to show their literacy resources, to prevent teaching (or organisation of teaching) entirely from assumptions based on a student's educational, cultural or regional background. However, the teachers who recognised the resource perspective found it difficult to apply in practice, particularly with students with little or no prior education (cf. Alisaari et al. 2019; De Angelis, 2011; Haukås, 2016; Juvonen, 2015; Lundberg, 2019). Time and a lack of access to language support staff or interpreters were cited as potential practical constraints in conducting the assessments and implementing this practice within the organisation (Knowledge of educational contexts).

The differences in teacher cognition described above could be partially explained by the fact that data was not primarily collected for research purposes but while developing the assessment material. This means that some of the teachers who participated in both the reference group and in the try-outs had more time to develop a broader understanding of literacy and of initial literacy assessment than others. However, the great variation in perceptions revealed in the data could not be explained entirely by this, as the more autonomous views were also expressed by teachers in the reference group. Instead, the data could reflect real-life situations in which L1 literacy assessment is conducted by very experienced and well-educated teachers, as well as by teachers with less experience or training.

Regarding the second research question, concerning the didactic implications of the teachers' cognitions of assessing the students' literacy resources, the findings suggest that the outcome of the L1 literacy assessment is highly dependent on the teachers' individual knowledge and beliefs regarding the conception of literacy. It appears that the sociocultural approach to literacy (Barton, 2007; Gee, 2015; Street, 1984) reflected in the SFI syllabus is either not known, or not shared by all teachers. Furthermore, some teachers did not seem to be aware of the significance of L1 literacy for L2 literacy development (Cummins, 1979, 2000; Gee, 2015), which in turn may affect the teachers' abilities to adapt the instruction to the needs, preconditions and goals of their students. This problem would ideally be addressed by training and professional development. Another explanation could be the different conditions for teachers created by time and resources regarding possibilities for implementing the goals of the syllabus (cf. Knowledge of educational contexts). Thus, a practical implication of this study is that an initial L1 assessment should be conducted by an experienced and educated teacher with special skills in assessment and with sufficient time and resources to use the outcome. We thus argue that all aspects of L1 literacy assessments, its utility and theoretical foundations, should be included in teacher training programs. This way, teachers will be better equipped to develop best practices and become specialists in this area. Regarding the varying cognitions of the teachers in this study, we claim that such assessment should be a standard part of student intake in SFI and will thus improve the possibilities for teachers to individualise their teaching to the student's needs and preconditions.

As previous language assessment research has shown, in terms of validity and reliability, the quality of any assessment depends not only on the assessment material but

is also highly dependent on the skills and knowledge of the assessor in how to use the material (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). This implies knowledge of the theoretical assumptions underlying the assessment material. However, there may be teachers who do not share these assumptions and whose beliefs are typically resistant to change (Borg, 2015), and thus will resist the normative discourses regarding a sociocultural view of literacy and a resource perspective on multilingualism reflected in the assessment materials (cf. Juvonen, 2015; McNamara, 1990). Implementation of the assessment is the starting point for a learning process among both teachers and students. A pedagogical implication is thus that implementation and training of teachers are crucial in initial L1 assessment, although it may not be sufficient as there still may be teachers who use the assessment according to their own views and beliefs, different from the normative discourses expressed in the syllabus. We therefore suggest, that the components within teacher education programmes aimed at adult instruction should be expanded and that the content related to literacy, multilingualism, as well as assessment and validity should be enhanced.

5 Future research

In this paper, we explored L2 teachers' cognitions regarding the assessment of adult learners' literacy in their strongest language. The purpose of the L1 literacy assessment is to accurately assess a student's literacy resources in order to adapt and improve the teaching of L2 Swedish. As this kind of scientifically-based assessment still is rare in practice and research on adult education is generally sparse, further research on L1 assessment in adult L2 education is needed. Firstly, the L1 literacy assessment practices during assessment interviews need investigation. How are they conducted? How is the assessment material perceived and used? By whom and what kind of information is obtained? How is this information used? How does interpretation work? In developing the assessment material, we perceived great variation in the skills of the interpreters and how they understood their role in the assessment interview. The vital role played by the interpreters is a potential weakness in L1 assessment that needs further investigation. Another issue is how the students themselves perceived the interviews. Teachers thought the students found it valuable to take part in the assessment, but is that true? The attitudes of the students need further investigation. We cannot rely solely on teachers' impressions, bearing in mind the asymmetric power relationship between teacher and student as students may perceive the situation as a test with a lot at stake and change their behaviour in a way that does not accurately reflect their literacy. It became clear that there was great variation among the teachers in their ability (or willingness) to use the information obtained in the assessments for their teaching practices. Hence, a final suggestion for future research is an investigation of the impact of assessments on teachers' classroom practice.

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Appendix A – questionnaires

The questionnaires contained multiple-choice questions, yes and no questions, and open-ended questions. Of particular interest for the research questions in the present study are the following questions regarding the teachers' perceptions of literacy, how useful the information obtained was, and how they perceived the L1 assessment:

Question 1: Literacy is a multifaceted concept. Which aspects of the concept are the most central to you?

Question 2: Has your participation in the reference group led to any changes in your perception of the concept of literacy?

Question 3: What is your perception of the relevance of assessing the student's literacy in his/her strongest language? (for the student? for teachers?)

Question 4: Has the type of information you have obtained through the assessment of literacy in the student's strongest language affected your teaching in any way? If so, how?

Question 5: Is there anything you would like to add about the assessment of literacy in the student's strongest language?

Appendix B – interview questions

The semi-structured interviews with the teachers were conducted with an interview guide, containing several different themes regarding the development of the assessment material. In the present study, the analysis focused on the themes relating to the research questions, namely the following questions:

Question 1: What do you think works well in the literacy assessment material, and what needs further development?

Question 2: During the assessment interview, did you find it possible to adapt the questions within the different domains in order to make them relevant for the students?

Question 3: Did you find any of the domains more difficult to explore than others?

Question 4: What did you find particularly challenging while using the assessment material?

Question 5: How did you perceive that the students experienced taking part in the assessment?

Question 6: Can you give some examples of the information about the students' literacy experiences obtained by the assessment and how it could be used?

Appendix C – Example of questions in assessment interview (from Conversation Guide)

Here are examples of questions posed by the assessor to the student during the assessment interview. The assessment interviews are structured according to domains related to occupation/employment, every day and societal life, as well as education. The questions regarding reading and writing should be tailored based on the respective domain. In the everyday domain, the assessor is to endeavor to capture an activity regularly engaged in by the student. Subsequent questions regarding literacy and experiences with text shall emanate from this activity (or interest) referred to as X below.

Every day and societal life in Sweden

- Can you describe a typical day for you here in Sweden?
- Do you own a mobile phone? If so, how do you use it? (e.g., answering calls, making calls, responding to text messages, sending text messages, booking/reserving, gathering information, watching, listening, using GPS, checking the time)

- Do you receive any mail? (e.g., letters, bills, advertisements, magazines) – How do you go about accessing the information and/or responding to letters?

Instruction to assessor: Customize the questions and examples below based on the activity/situation/interest you have chosen to explore (indicated by X in the questions below).

READ

- Do you usually see/recognize anything written in connection with X/when you X? (words, letters, numbers, symbols, images) – In what form/in what context? (e.g., notes, forms, lists, signs, letters, text messages, instructions, receipts, advertisements, labels, religious texts, maps) – In which language/languages? – How do you go about it? Do you read on your own, or does someone assist you? – How did you learn to do this?

LISTEN/SPEAK

- Do you usually listen when others read, tell stories, provide information, or give oral instructions in connection with X? (e.g., fiction, poems, songs, religious texts, news, information messages, instructions) – In which language/languages?
- Do you yourself tell stories, provide information, or give oral instructions in connection with X? (e.g., stories, poems, songs, religious texts, information messages, instructions) – In which language/languages?

WRITE

- Is there a need for you to write/fill in something in connection with X/when you X? – What/in what context? (e.g., notes, forms, lists, letters, notes, text messages) – In which language/languages? – How do you go about it? Do you write on your own, or does someone assist you? – Do you write by hand or using a mobile phone/other digital tool? – How did you learn to do this?

Every day and societal life in your home country

- What was it like where you grew up? (big city, small town, village, rural area)
- Was there a lot of written content there? (e.g., signs, advertisements, newspapers)
- Were there books/magazines at home? – In which language/languages?
- A typical day in your home country – what did you usually do (when you were not working/going to school)?
- Did you engage in X there as well?
- Did you usually receive any mail? (e.g., letters, bills, advertisements, newspapers) – How did you go about accessing the information and/or responding to letters?

READ

- Did you usually see/recognize anything written in connection with X? (words, letters, numbers, symbols, images) – In what form/in what context? (e.g., notes, forms, lists, signs, letters, text messages, instructions, receipts, advertisements, labels, religious texts, maps) – How did you go about it? – How did you learn to do this?

LISTEN/SPEAK

- Did you usually listen when others read, told stories, provided information, or gave oral instructions in connection with X? (e.g., fiction, poems, songs, religious texts, news, information messages, instructions)
- Did you yourself tell stories, provide information, or give oral instructions in connection with X? (e.g., stories, poems, songs, religious texts, information messages, instructions)

WRITE

- Did you need to write/fill in something in connection with X? – What/in what context? (e.g., forms, lists, notes, receipts, letters, notes, text messages) – How did you go about it? Did you write on your own, or did someone assist you? – How did you learn to do this?

Work/Occupation

Could you briefly elaborate on the tasks and responsibilities you typically undertook in your professional capacity or occupation?

Based on the information provided by the individual, select an activity or situation and explore potential literacy experiences.

READING

- Did you used to see/recognize anything written? – In what form/in what context? (e.g., signs, orders, lists, maps, images, drawings, labels, (price) tags, invoices, letters, instructions) – In which language/languages?
– How did you go about it? – How did you learn to do this?

WRITING

- Did you need to write/fill in something yourself?
– What/in what context? (e.g., signs, notes, lists, invoices, text messages, messages, forms)
– In which language/languages?
– How did you go about it?
– How did you learn to do this?

LISTENING/SPEAKING

- Did you used to listen when others read, told stories, provided information, or gave oral instructions? (e.g., instructions, readings, informational messages)
- Did you yourself used to tell stories, provide information, or give oral instructions? (e.g., instructions, readings, informational messages)
– In which language/languages?

Swedish National Agency for Education [Skolverket]. (2019)

Appendix D – L1 Literacy Assessment Summary Template

The summary consists of several different parts which are summarized under the headings below.

Background Information on the Student Prior to Assessment

- Student's name and age:
- Assessment language (the language in which the assessment is done):
- Year of arrival in Sweden:
- Strongest language according to the student:
- Other languages stated by the student (speaks/reads/writes):
- Education (and total number of years of education):
- Work/occupation/employment:

Basis for planning of instruction

- Concise comments on the student's strengths
- The student's goals, needs, and interests.
- Other relevant aspects for instruction

*Literacy experiences in the student's strongest language**Work/Occupation*

Engagement in written language (what, in which contexts, extent)

- Reading
- Writing

Every day and societal life

Interaction with written language (what, in which contexts, extent)

- Reading
- Writing

Education

Interaction with written language (what, in which contexts, extent, and how the student has engaged in [worked with] reading and writing)

- Reading
- Writing

Beyond the aforementioned areas that are being assessed, inquiries are also directed towards aspects of literacy, specifically: Formal Spoken Language/Different Types of Oral Presentations; Use of Digital Tools, Use of Other Languages besides the Strongest Language; Use of Conscious reading and learning strategies.

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