

“We don’t have it in my mother tongue”: A newly arrived student’s stance towards using his first language in the transition from introduction class to technical VET

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This study explores the experiences and evolving stance of a newly arrived adolescent student, Hamid, regarding the use of his first language as a tool for learning in the transition from introduction classes to vocational education and training (VET). The article is based on fieldnotes and interviews from a larger linguistic ethnographic fieldwork and draws on a critical sociolinguistic framework. It reveals that while Hamid initially intended to distance himself from his first language upon transitioning to the mainstream school system, it ultimately emerges as an indispensable linguistic capital for navigating the language and literacy practices of VET. Such a finding challenges prevailing educational policy and practice in Norway, which prioritizes linguistic scaffolding based on students’ first language(s) only at the outset of their educational trajectories and assumes its diminishing relevance over time spent in the country. In the analysis, Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of capital is employed as a conceptual lens to interpret Hamid’s experiences and reflections. Furthermore, the study considers how scaffolding (Bruner, 1966) and disciplinary literacy interact and influence Hamid’s stance.

Keywords: Newly arrived adolescent students, vocational education and training, first language use, second language learning, metasociolinguistic stance

1 Introduction

I don’t understand anything. What is the name of the machine we are using? It - screws, they have different, and have many tools, and have very different tools, but I know nothing about what it is in my language. And we, I think, don’t have it in my mother tongue.

The above excerpt is taken from an interview with Hamid, a newly arrived immigrant youth in Norway, who had just transitioned from introduction

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classes¹ to vocational education and training (VET) in a technical field. The excerpt reflects his confusion and concern as he is confronted with technical vocabulary that he is unfamiliar with in both Norwegian and his first language². This study explores Hamid's experiences with, and stance towards, using his first language as a tool for learning in school. Stance is understood here as his "displays of attitudes or positions with respect to language hierarchies and ideologies" (Jaffe, 2009, p. 17), as deliberately carried out and explicitly expressed during interviews – referred to by Jaffe as metasociolinguistic stance.

Drawing on interviews and fieldnotes from a larger linguistic ethnographic project on language and literacy in the transition from introduction classes to VET, this sub-study aims to further our understanding of newly arrived students' experiences with using their first language(s) during this transition. The purpose of exploring Hamid's case is not "to universalize but to particularize and then yield insights of potentially wider relevance" (Duff, 2012, p. 96). Consequently, the study is guided by the following research questions: (a) How does Hamid's stance towards the value of his first language as a tool for learning evolve as he transitions to VET, and what factors influence this evolution? (b) How can lessons drawn from Hamid's stancetaking inform educational policy and practice? In the analysis, I employ Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *capital* as a conceptual lens to interpret Hamid's experiences and reflections. Furthermore, I consider how *scaffolding* (Bruner, 1966) and *disciplinary literacy* interact and influence his stance.

The proportion of immigrants in Norwegian upper secondary schools has increased by approximately 50% over the past decade (Statistics Norway, 2023). In 2013, they constituted around 10% of the student body, a figure that has now risen to roughly 15 % (Statistics Norway, 2023), making them one of the fastest growing segments of students in the Norwegian educational landscape (Kjelaas, 2023, p. 2). For most of these immigrants, the Norwegian language is unfamiliar upon arrival, and they are expected to put great effort into adapting linguistically and socially in their new country of residence. This has proven particularly challenging for those who arrive during adolescence and who may have limited prior schooling. Being a late-arriving immigrant youth with little school experience is a condition strongly related to school failure (e.g., Eurydice, 2014, p. 38; Wollscheid, 2010, p. 23), to the point where this failure has been termed a late arrival penalty (Valenzuela, 1999). Statistics show that in Norway today, only half of all immigrant students in upper secondary school graduate (Directorate of Integration and Diversity, 2021), and it is believed that completion rates for newly arrived students with limited schooling (henceforth NALS, Brännström, 2021) are considerably lower (e.g., Bjørkeng & Dzamarija, 2011, p. 36; Jeon, 2019, p. 103). Students who drop out of vocational programs tend to do so in the first year of study, in contrast to general studies, where dropouts are more prevalent in the final year of study (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022), making the transition to, and the initial year of VET, a particularly interesting context for research.

The majority of NALS, in Norway as well as in many other European countries, choose the vocational path in upper secondary school (e.g., Carlana et al., 2022, p. 2). It is often assumed that VET is a more practical education than others and, as such, demands lower literacy skills (Herrera et al., 2022, p. 23; Loeb et al., 2016), making it an appropriate choice for NALS who might struggle with literacy and second language learning (Bell et al., 2022, p. 63; Salerno &

Kibler, 2015). However, this assumption fails to consider that VET draws on a range of specialized literacy skills connected to professional fields, including advanced specialized vocabularies. Disciplinary literacy - defined as “the ability to appropriately participate in the communicative practices of a discipline” (Airey, 2011, p. 3) - thus constitutes a considerable linguistic gatekeeper to success in VET, especially for NALS who must acquire such disciplinary literacy skills by means of a second language.

To date, few studies have investigated newly arrived students’ transition from introduction classes into the mainstream school system (Jama, 2018, p. 18; Loeb et al., 2016; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Paul, 2023). The few existing studies are mainly concerned with students’ psycho-social experiences, such as social inclusion/exclusion in school and other emotional aspects before and after the transition (e.g., Chinga-Ramirez, 2015; Mathisen, 2020; Nilsson Folke, 2017), and to a lesser degree their experiences with language and literacy development (e.g., Bjuhr, 2019; Daugaard et al., 2020). To the best of my knowledge, no study has yet examined the role of newly arrived students’ first languages as tools for learning in VET. Thus, this study responds to a critical need to learn more about NALS’ experiences with literacy, language learning, and the transition to VET, and more specifically – the role of their first languages.

2 Study context: Newly arrived adolescent students in the Norwegian school system

In Norway, newly arrived youths between 16 and 24 years of age who lack sufficient school experience will in most cases be advised to enroll in so-called introduction classes, in order to learn the Norwegian language and/or obtain a primary school diploma. The ways such classes are organized may vary greatly in and between municipalities and counties. Usually, the subjects mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, English and Norwegian (and sometimes physical education) are taught in introduction classes, with a specific focus on learning the Norwegian language (Rambøll, 2018, p. 73). Though there might not be a designated subject for second language learning, teachers are expected to integrate language learning opportunities across all subjects to facilitate content and language integrated learning (CLIL; Coyle et al., 2010). Introduction classes for this age group are typically held at an upper secondary school but often operate as socially segregated units within the broader school environment, with the student body consisting exclusively of newly arrived migrant students (Kjelaas, 2023, p. 2). The duration of enrollment in these classes, which can extend up to four years, depends on factors such as students’ prior school experience, Norwegian proficiency, literacy competence, and progression.

VET, the primary pathway for most NALS after completing introduction classes, is organized according to a 2+2 model in Norway. Students spend the initial two years in school, which includes some vocational placements, followed by two years as apprentices in a business before their planned graduation (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). During the initial two-year school period, students whose first language is not Norwegian or Sámi³ are entitled to, and often receive, adapted instruction in the Norwegian language until they are deemed sufficiently proficient in Norwegian to follow the school’s normal teaching (Education Act, 1998). However, the Education Act

states that, if necessary, students are also entitled to mother tongue instruction, bilingual subject teaching, or both. And while such provisions are offered to some extent in primary and lower secondary schools (often within a limited time frame), mother tongue instruction and bilingual subject teaching are almost non-existent in upper secondary schools (Rambøll, 2016).

3 Previous research on newly arrived adolescent students transitioning to upper secondary school

Segregated introduction classes as a means of preparing for the mainstream school system have become a conventional way of organizing education for newly arrived migrant students in the Scandinavian countries (NAFO, n.d.; Pérez & Kristjánsdóttir, 2016; Skolverket, 2023) as well as in many other Western countries (e.g., Baker, 2011, p. 217; l'ONICEP, 2023; Spanner & Maué, 2022). This educational model can be both linguistically and pedagogically motivated (Kjelaas, 2023, p. 3), as introduction classes are intended to linguistically and academically prepare students for further education in the regular school system (Hilt, 2016). However, the transition to the mainstream school system has proved challenging for NALS for a number of reasons, as evidenced by several studies where students describe a massive gap between the two educational contexts (Berggren et al., 2021, p. 349; Jama, 2018; Nilsson Folke, 2017, p. 96). They feel that introduction classes do not prepare them well enough for the demands of upper secondary school, neither pedagogically (Bjuhr, 2019; Jama, 2018) nor socially (e.g., Nilsson Folke, 2017; Thorshaug & Svendsen, 2014, p. 98).

A common finding is the sense of social inclusion experienced by students during their time in introduction classes. This feeling is attributed to shared circumstances among classmates (e.g. Chinga-Ramirez, 2015, p. 285; Mathisen, 2020, p. 112; Skowronski, 2013, p. 275) as well as to teachers' pedagogical provision (e.g., Daugaard et al., 2020, p. 19). However, several students point out the negative ramifications of being segregated from the mainstream educational system, particularly the limited opportunities of interacting with speakers of the majority language (e.g., Lynnebakke et al., 2019, p. 60). Thus, many students are eager to transition to upper secondary school, as they feel introduction classes delay their language learning and integration into the host society (Kjelaas, 2023, p. 1), causing an experience of temporal desynchrony (M. Thomas & Bailey, 2009) in relation to both students who speak the majority language and peers in their country of origin, as well as what they had envisioned for their own lives (e.g., Kjelaas, 2023, p. 11; Nilsson Folke, 2018).

For students in introduction classes, upper secondary school thus represents normality and opportunities to socialize with classmates who speak the majority language. However, once the transition is made, stories of both social and pedagogical exclusion are common. Social exclusion manifests not only in formal institutional exclusion, but also in subjective embodied experiences of being out of line with the students who speak the majority language in the mainstream system, or feeling ashamed of not understanding communicative conventions (e.g., Busch, 2017; Folke, 2016, p. 824). Pedagogical exclusion is described as the students having to grapple with language and literacy practices on their own, without adequate support from teachers (e.g., Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013, p. 147). Studies that examine students' experiences with language learning

and literacy unanimously depict introduction class as spaces with low challenges and high support (see Mariani, 1997), while the opposite is true of upper secondary school (e.g., Bjuhr, 2019, p. 148; Daugaard et al., 2020, p. 19; Lynnebakke et al., 2019, p. 57).

In introduction class, many students have classmates with whom they share their first language. This allows them to use their first language to some extent in both second language and content learning, as well as in social interaction. However, after the transition, students rarely have the opportunity to employ their first language as a resource (Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013, p. 149; Pérez & Kristjánsdóttir, 2016, p. 55). This contrasts with recommendations from research on second language learning, such as for instance the pioneering work of Thomas and Collier (1997). They concluded that for minority students, the most prominent predictor of long-term success in school is the long-term opportunity to use and develop their first language in and alongside second language and content learning. Additionally, it has been claimed this not only strengthens their cultural and ethnic identity, which is seen as important for their experience of being valued in school (e.g., Cummins, 2000, p. 34; Dewilde, 2019; Kjelaas & Fagerheim, 2021, p. 34), but also leads to more effective second language learning (e.g., Bakken, 2007, p. 17; Cook, 2001; Cummins, 2007; Norton, 1998) and is associated with positive linguistic, cognitive and academic growth (e.g., Garcia & Wei, 2013; Lewis et al., 2012; Macaro, 2005; Peal & Lambert, 1962; Turnbull & Dailey-O’Cain, 2009; Vygotsky, 2012; Walter, 2008).

Despite a growing scholarly interest in the education of NALS (Kjelaas, 2023, p. 4), it remains an undertheorized area of research (Brännström, 2021, p. 14; Paul, 2023, p. 158) that has been limited in its empirical investigations, especially when it comes to studies that depart from students’ own experiences and perceptions (Jaffe-Walter & Miranda, 2020; Nilsson Folke, 2017). Though we know that students’ use and development of their first languages is, among other things, an important instrument for second language and subject content learning, research literature addressing first language use in the specific context of VET is almost non-existent. Against this backdrop, the current study contributes an important supplement to the existing body of research.

4 Sociocultural perspectives on language and learning

Sociocultural theory offers a suitable framework for exploring how language, learning and sociocultural contexts interact to shape educational practices, and thus aptly captures Hamid’s evolving stance towards the value of his first language as a tool in his educational trajectory. Within this paradigm, language and literacy are seen not merely as individual cognitive abilities, but as socially situated practices embedded in specific sociocultural contexts (Gee, 2015). Accordingly, Hamid’s stancetaking reflects his response to experiences with sociocultural dimensions of language use and learning, encompassing dominant language ideologies, within the two educational contexts. Language ideologies are understood here as beliefs and attitudes that influence how speakers relate to their own and others’ languages (Gal, 2016, p. 116).

In the analysis, Hamid’s stancetaking is elucidated by Bourdieu’s concept of capital. Aligning with sociocultural perspectives, Bourdieu (1977, pp. 645–646) saw language and literacy as instruments of power, both in the educational

system and in the broader society. As such, he claimed that a specific linguistic competence in a given social space was symbolic capital and inseparable from an individual's position in the social structure. *Symbolic capital*, to Bourdieu, is what gives an individual legitimacy, and accordingly, what makes an individual a *legitimate speaker* (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 650). *Linguistic capital*, which refers to individuals' command of language, including fluency, proficiency, and mastery of particular linguistic codes, serves as a key component of symbolic capital (Walther, 2014, p. 10). By increasing their linguistic capital, individuals can enhance their symbolic power, gain recognition, and attain social advantages within linguistic communities, educational institutions, and professional spheres. Thus, linguistic capital functions as a currency in a given market/social space (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 651), facilitating individuals' social positioning and mobility within broader social structures. A relevant concept is that of *symbolic violence*, which describes a non-physical violence exerted by a dominant class or group to maintain and legitimize the existing social order. This is achieved through the distribution of value, for instance, to different languages, by reinforcing prevailing ideologies (Schubert, 2012) and sustaining the linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1977).

In the realm of vocational education, *disciplinary literacy* constitutes a pivotal form of linguistic capital. Given that literacy is inherently contextual and socially embedded, literacy within a specific vocation differs from that of others. For instance, and of particular interest for this study, language and literacy practices in a technical VET-program can be distinguished from that of for example a VET-program specialized in health care. According to Gee (2015, p. 49), such differences are not constrained to only reading and writing, but also entails ways of speaking, thinking, interacting, valuing, feeling, and believing. A discipline's distinct literacy will thus both "draw from and reproduce the epistemic understandings and routine practices of a discipline" (Moje, 2015, p. 257) and as such, is ideally learned in the context of disciplinary content learning (Coyle et al., 2010). To Bourdieu, literacy meant possessing sufficient and appropriate linguistic capital to occupy a desirable position in a given social space (Grenfell, 2012, p. 68). For second language learners in VET, this means not only mastering the second language, but also the relevant disciplinary literacy.

To acquire such relevant literacy competencies, students need to be scaffolded, linguistically and pedagogically, by a more knowledgeable other, such as a teacher or a classmate (Bruner, 1966; Gibbons, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Following Mariani (1997), the ideal learning environment is characterized by a high degree of challenges and a high degree of support, a claim that has been widely validated by a substantial body of researchers (see Gibbons, 2015, p. 18). Hence, to accommodate the need of L2 learners, challenges should not be reduced, but rather accompanied by a high degree of teacher scaffolding (Gibbons, 2015, p. 18), eventually leading students to greater autonomy (Mariani, 1997, p. 1). Gibbons (2015, p. 18) cautions against simplifying tasks for second language learners, emphasizing the importance of providing cognitively demanding learning tasks to avoid a reductionist curriculum and keep students motivated to reach their learning potential. She urges teachers to reflect on the nature of the scaffolding they provide, asserting that the difference between first and second language users in school should not lie in the learning outcomes but

rather in the nature and amount of scaffolding provided to achieve the same outcomes.

The sociocultural perspectives on language and learning outlined above provide a fitting theoretical framework for analyzing Hamid's evolving stance towards the value of his first language as a tool: The concept of capital elucidates and traces Hamid's evolving perception of his first language as either low or high in value, and his alignment or disalignment with dominant language ideologies. Concurrently, scaffolding and disciplinary literacy help to account for some of the experiences underpinning these alignments/disalignments.

5 Methodology

The linguistic ethnographic approach (henceforth *LE*) in this project is well-suited to combining interests in linguistics with a broader sociocultural perspective (Snell et al., 2015, p. 7). It is an interpretive approach that privileges the emic, participant perspective, aligning closely with this article's goal (Heller, 2008, p. 250). Wanting to investigate NALS' transition from introduction classes to VET, I conducted my fieldwork on both sides of this transition. I began during the spring of 2021 in an introduction class comprising 18 newly arrived students between the ages of 16 and 23, situated at a large upper secondary school in Norway. In the fall of 2021, I followed two of the students (among them, the focal participant in this article, Hamid) as they embarked on their vocational education in two different schools. The students I chose to follow to VET, were both eager to let me observe their transition, and were chosen because they liked sharing their reflections during interviews and in more informal field talks. Both semesters, I spent two to three days a week for 10 weeks as a participant observer. Furthermore, I did follow-up interviews one year after the initial fieldwork ended. Hamid and I continued communicating about his school situation through text messages and phone calls until he finished his 2nd year of VET. It is thus a diachronic study, as it describes and analyzes chronological changes in Hamid's reflections as he advances along his educational trajectory (G. Thomas, 2011, p. 149). In the analysis, I narrate and analyze Hamid's story drawing upon fieldnotes, notes from field talks, phone calls and text messages with him as well as quotes from transcripts of interviews. The excerpts included in this article have been translated from Norwegian to English by me, and mirrors Hamid's proficiency in Norwegian.

The interviews were semi-structured: led by an interview-guide with key questions and topics I wished to address, but also open to Hamid's elaborations and side-tracks, in line with the open, flexible, and inductive nature of *LE*. In the initial interview, my objective was to deepen my understanding of Hamid's school background and linguistic repertoire, as well as his perspectives on literacy and language learning. Three subsequent interviews in VET were guided by observations and topics he had previously brought up. The final interview, conducted during Hamid's second year in VET, focused on the development of topics he had talked about in previous interviews, such as linguistic scaffolding in school, his plans for the future, academic progression and the focus of this article - his stance towards using his first language.

Following the data collection period, interview transcripts, fieldnotes and other data material (photographs, interviews with various students, teachers, and other educational personnel, written student work, and audio recordings of student group work) was subject to a close reading followed by a systematic coding process. Coding was done by means of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo⁴ in order to identify themes and patterns in accordance with principles from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). One of the most salient themes that emerged was how the students related to using their first languages at school. This became the starting point for a more focused analysis of this theme, uncovering Hamid's story as a telling case (Mitchell, 1984, p. 239), providing especially unique insights. As such, the theme was generated inductively, but further analysis happened in dialogue with theory, making it an abductive process based on both empirical data and theory (Tjora, 2018).

The social constructionist nature of ethnography makes ethical considerations especially important. Researchers have the power to tell the participants' stories and the final say in how they are represented (Madison, 2019, p. 46) - such awareness is particularly important in research that makes one or a few participants the fulcrum of the analysis, as in the case of Hamid. I have therefore paid particular attention to how Hamid and his reflections are presented. Despite a power differential between me as a researcher and Hamid as a research participant is inevitable, I have strived - to the best of my ability - to give him his rightful expert role in my communication with him, as well as in this article.

Newly arrived adolescents are often portrayed as a vulnerable group, but they are also "competent actors capable of sharing valuable knowledge about their own experiences" (Mathisen, 2020, p. 76), a sentiment echoed by Hamid himself, who expressed a genuine desire to contribute to this research project.

6 Analysis

6.1. *"We feel like we are going to be part of society now" – Anticipating the transition to the mainstream school system*

Hamid came to Norway as an unaccompanied minor from a Middle Eastern country when he was 15 years old. Having grown up in a transit country where he did not have the right to attend school, he spent his childhood working in a textile factory and had no previous school experience on arrival in Norway. However, during lunch breaks in the factory he had learned to read and write, as well as some English and mathematics, from a benevolent colleague with a university degree. I first met Hamid during my fieldwork in the introduction class. At the time, he was 21 years old, in his 4th year of introduction classes, and about to graduate with a primary school diploma. The following year, he attended VET in a technical field. After 2 years in VET, Hamid is currently hoping to obtain an apprenticeship at a factory not far from where he lives.

While Hamid was a student in introduction class, he was looking forward to starting upper secondary school. It meant becoming part of the mainstream school system and represented a transition that would make him, in his words, "like them," that is, a regular participant/citizen of society:

It's exciting and it's something new. Because finally we are done with, ehm, all the time seeing each other. Foreigners seeing foreigners. Finally, we are done, we are going, we feel like we are going to be part of society now. We are like, yes, like them. Yes, that's the way it is. And other things? Yes, of course, we don't hear, uhm, so many mother tongues anymore. We hear Norwegian a lot. And we learn a lot of Norwegian. When you hear, you learn.

By describing the transition as a gateway to societal integration, Hamid implicitly defined introduction class as a space outside the societal fabric and thus himself as someone who was not yet part of Norwegian society. His distinction between the introduction class on the one hand and the mainstream school system/society on the other was closely related to language use – to him, introduction class was characterized by the widespread use of the students' different first languages, clearly deviating from the rest of society, where Norwegian was the dominant language. He thus saw linguistic capital as a marker of either belonging or societal exclusion (Bourdieu, 1991), displaying alignment with a monolingual ideology, where being a true member of society meant taking part in dominant language practices.

Hamid frequently voiced his dissatisfaction with what he conceived as an excessive use of different first languages in the introduction class. He perceived it as distracting noise that made it difficult to concentrate on the teacher's instructions and interfered with his opportunities to hear and learn Norwegian. He also considered it socially exclusionary behavior when students with a shared first language communicated in it, as others could neither understand, nor participate, in the conversation. At one point he even asked his teacher to tell the class not to use their first language in the classroom, indicating his alignment with a monolingual preference. He imagined, and wished, that teachers in VET would be stricter and allow only very limited use of languages other than Norwegian.

Hamid didn't have any "Norwegian"⁵ friends and was looking forward to being with "Norwegians" at the vocational school. He believed that this would significantly enhance the ease and effectiveness of language learning. To make sure he would practice his Norwegian as much as possible, he devised a plan to abstain from using his first language in VET. He explicitly made this clear to two friends who shared his first language and whom he knew might become his classmates in VET, as, to him, other languages represented barriers for learning Norwegian. This strategy may be construed as a form of capital investment, reflecting Bourdieu's perspective on strategic actions with anticipated returns (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 656) – by eliminating the use of his first language, he expected acquiring the second language more efficiently, which in turn would enhance his symbolic capital, contribute to mitigating his marginal position as a newly arrived student and pave the way for participation in the broader society.

Valuable insights into why Hamid was so eager to transition to VET, and why he planned on not using his first language, can also be gained by considering an experience he had with level placement tests and the consequences that followed: A few years earlier, before Hamid could enter introduction classes, he had to take level placement tests in various subjects, such as for example mathematics. This was done to determine how many years he would have to spend in such classes in order to obtain a primary school diploma. The tests were in Norwegian. During these tests, Hamid found that he wasn't able to communicate his subject knowledge because his level of Norwegian didn't allow

it. As a result, he had to take classes with subject content with which he, according to him, was already familiar. He frustratedly stated:

The system [in Norway] when you don't understand a language, you first have to understand the language, even if you understand [the subject content]. You learn Norwegian, you take Norwegian classes, you also have maybe math, you also have maybe English. But you start with math from the beginning, you start with English from the beginning. Even if you know a lot of English. You don't need to learn English anew. Then, in a way, you just have to sit there, because it's boring. When it's - that's all human beings, it's not just immigrants. This is true for everyone that knows about things. They don't need to spend time, their time, to learn things they already know. It's not exciting for anyone.

Hamid found the subject content presented in introduction classes to be minimally challenging, leading to a sense of boredom. The lack of appropriate challenges left Hamid with the impression that he was wasting his time, it didn't lead to valuable learning and greater autonomy (Mariani, 1997, p. 1), but rather added to an experience of temporal desynchrony (M. Thomas & Bailey, 2009) – he was well aware that Norwegians his age had already graduated from upper secondary school while he was “spending time, his time, learning things he already knew,” in his own words.

Observations in Hamid's introduction class unveiled extensive teacher scaffolding, such as providing sentence starters and writing frames for text composition, standardizing oral language for enhanced comprehensibility (Andreassen & Kjelaas, 2024), offering substantial support during individual tasks, and occasional access to bilingual teacher assistants. The abundance of scaffolding coupled with subject content that, from Hamid's perspective, was unchallenging, put him in what Gibbons (2015, p. 17) calls “the comfort zone”, instead of “the learning zone.” The latter being characterized by a high degree of challenges accompanied by a high degree of scaffolding.

Hamid's level of Norwegian competencies had placed him in a comfort zone with which he was not comfortable – his takeaway from the level placement tests was that being considered knowledgeable depended on mastering the majority language. Subjected to symbolic violence, Hamid experienced that his previous knowledge and competences were largely devalued due to his inability to articulate them in Norwegian, and that his first language was a worthless capital – it was not treated as a means of communication of knowledge or competence, but seemingly rather indexed the lack of such. Elaborating, he indignantly described that the lack of Norwegian skills positioned him as a child, without any knowledge:

I have learned about the subjects they work on [in introduction class] earlier. And I'm not a, a child, I grew up in a society. I know a lot of things.

Hamid's impatience to learn Norwegian and his plan to distance himself from his first language can be interpreted as resistance to being positioned as a child. His linguistic capital became a deficit rather than an asset, as well as a reason why his self-perception as someone who knows “a lot of things” was not congruent with the perception of others. This led him to align with the monolingual ideology he was subjected to, by planning not to use his first language in VET. Supporting a second language monolingual ideology is not unusual among members of minority groups (Cummins, 2000, p. 13), as

proficiency in the second language is often seen as an entry ticket into mainstream society, and to Hamid, an opportunity to project himself as someone competent, a legitimate speaker (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 650).

Hamid's stance on refraining from using his first language after transitioning to VET was shaped by several factors. Primarily, it entailed a pragmatic assessment of the Norwegian language as the only valuable linguistic capital within the Norwegian educational system and what appeared to him as a de facto entry requirement to the Norwegian society. Additionally, he experienced that his progression in learning the Norwegian language was delayed as a consequence of the extensive use of first languages in the introduction class. Moreover, his assessment was influenced by the experience of symbolic violence – his first language was devalued and as such, resulted in marginalization within the Norwegian educational system. Taken together, these experiences led him to perceive his first language as an impediment to further second language learning, which he perceived as crucial for social inclusion. Furthermore, this devaluation placed him in a school context where he felt cognitively unchallenged – the introduction class, from his perspective, was characterized by high support and low challenge, resulting in an experience of being evaluated and treated like a child.

6.2. Hamid's discovery in VET

Interestingly, after transitioning to VET, Hamid's stance towards the value of his first language shifted considerably. He still mentioned that he didn't enjoy hearing "lots of mother tongues" in the introduction class, but as it turned out – now experienced a growing need to use his own. After a few weeks in VET, Hamid began to miss having a classmate with whom he shared his first language and imagined that they could have used this common ground to support each other's learning, functioning as each other's language brokers. He contacted a school supervisor and asked to be allowed to switch classes so that he could be in the same class as his friend, Armin, who shared his first language, but his request was denied. When I reminded Hamid that in introduction class, he had wanted to avoid using his first language in school, and asked if he could explain this shift, he replied:

For example, me and Armin, or – yes, if we are together in a class, it's not – for me, I try to not speak a lot of mother tongue. You know, last year, there was in our class, but I try to not speak a lot of mother tongue, I don't like that. But when we started upper secondary school, it is better, maybe some words he understands and I don't understand, maybe there are words that I understand and he doesn't understand, maybe something on the computer I know how to do, or he is better than me.

In the above quote we witness Hamid's evolving stance following his transition to VET – confronted with both linguistic and digital challenges, he came to recognize the potential benefits of his first language for getting help, as well as for providing it. Formerly perceived as a barrier, it now emerged as a personally significant capital – a change reflecting a pragmatic adaptation in response to an altered educational context. The extensive teacher scaffolding that Hamid had gotten used to was discontinued after the transition. In marked contrast to introduction classes, he was not offered any linguistic scaffolding in VET, neither through adapted Norwegian teaching, nor through mother tongue

instruction or bilingual subject teaching. Additionally, teachers demonstrated little awareness of the linguistic challenges of students speaking minority languages – for instance, they used their respective regional dialects in teaching and in oral communication with Hamid, requiring him to develop receptive skills for a plethora of Norwegian dialects (Andreassen & Kjelaas, 2024). Furthermore, the transition to VET introduced a shift from predominantly paper-based learning materials to almost entirely digital formats, a change Hamid found unfamiliar and uncomfortable. This shift was accompanied by frequent codeswitching between Norwegian and English in relation to digital software programs and workshop machinery. Consequently, Hamid found himself in a high challenge/low support learning context, whereas introduction classes were characterized by the opposite (Mariani, 1997, p. 6).

When Hamid started his second year of VET, he changed schools, and his wish was fulfilled - a new classmate, Abbas, shared his first language. A few months into the school year, I asked if he and Abbas could sometimes help each other out if there was something that they didn't understand, like he had previously imagined. The answer was no, because very often, neither one of them understood - they struggled with the same problems. At this point, he identified a need for a bilingual teacher or assistant, and contrasted this with introduction class, where he didn't need the help of the bilingual assistant that was available to him:

Yes, the things that I got from the teacher [in introduction class], for example a theme and such. I, I, it wasn't difficult, I can work on it on my own. For example, if I don't understand a word, I can use Google Translate, I can google it and afterwards I understand it. It wasn't difficult for me. So, I didn't need her help [the bilingual assistant in introduction class]. Help from her. But here in Norwegian, in upper secondary school now, yes of course on tools, and some things, of course one needs a person who can talk our mother tongue and help us. Sometimes I don't really understand what the teacher talks about, hehe. Yes, I know nothing of what he talks about. I use Google Translate and translate, but there are things that I know nothing about even in my mother tongue. That's why it is difficult.

In introduction class, Hamid found little intellectual challenge, feeling already familiar with the themes and subjects they worked on. He therefore forwent the bilingual help he was offered, relying instead on translation software if there were words he did not understand. However, the linguistic resources and learning strategies Hamid had drawn on in introduction class could not hold the weight of VET's disciplinary literacy requirements. While in the introduction class, he could translate both linguistic competences and subject content from his first language to Norwegian. In VET – where he encountered an entirely new branch of expertise, a vocation with its own theoretical subjects and disciplinary literacy practices, including an advanced technical vocabulary, he lacked a reference point for translation, which made matters far more abstract. As he explained: “I use Google Translate and translate, but there are things that I know nothing about even in my mother tongue. That's why it is difficult.” In other words, in order to grasp the disciplinary literacy of VET, Hamid needed to develop the corresponding first language competences as a mediating tool, but this challenge was accompanied by a complete lack of linguistic scaffolding.

While Hamid had envisioned that a classmate with the same first language could remedy the linguistic challenges he experienced in VET, he now called for

a more knowledgeable other, specifically “a person who can talk our mother tongue and help us”. His challenge was situated at the intersection between language and subject learning (Coyle et al., 2010) and between his first and second language, a struggle he articulated in the opening quote of the article: “I don’t understand anything. What is the name of the machine we are using? [...] I know nothing about what it is in my language. And we, I think, don’t have it in my mother tongue.”

Hamid’s discovery of his first language as a resource to second language and subject content learning was intimately linked to his transition between educational contexts. The lack of linguistic scaffolding following the transition, coupled with the altered literacy practices and specialized disciplinary vocabulary of VET seemed to outweigh the reasons why Hamid had distanced himself from his first language in the first place. His first language now emerged as a personally significant capital, despite lacking formal recognition as such. Notably, he discovered that in VET, this particular linguistic capital served as an important currency which would ultimately provide access to the more acknowledged form of linguistic capital, namely the Norwegian language, and more specifically, the Norwegian language of technical VET. As such, Hamid’s stance had now shifted and disaligned with an ideology where the dominant language was the sole valuable linguistic capital.

7 Discussion

As we have seen in the analysis, Hamid’s transition to VET brought about a shift in his stance toward the value of his first language as a tool for learning. In VET he expressed that “...of course one needs a person who can talk our mother tongue and help us,” while having foregone such assistance in the introduction class. Participants in Nilsson and Axelsson’s (2013, p. 149) study reported similar experiences after transitioning to the mainstream system, suggesting that the need for scaffolding through their first language(s) might indeed be greater after the transition.

As previously mentioned, mother tongue instruction and bilingual subject teaching are offered to some extent in Norwegian primary and lower secondary schools, including introduction classes, but are virtually non-existent in upper secondary schools (Rambøll, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the underlying premise of this linguistic support framework – an assumption that students’ proficiency in Norwegian will render their reliance on their first language(s) unnecessary after a few years in Norway, thereby justifying the withdrawal of linguistic scaffolding in upper secondary school.

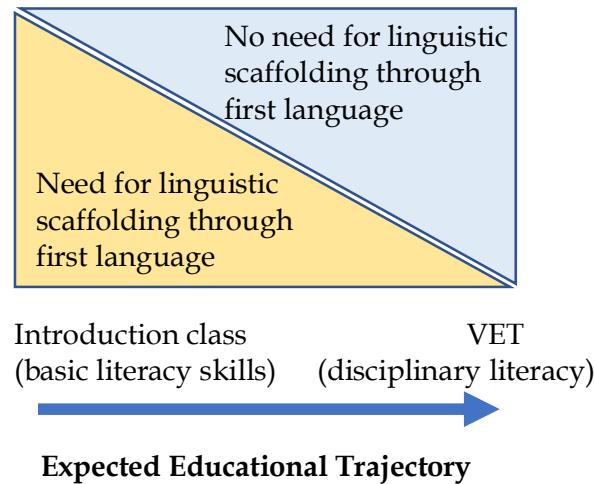


Figure 1. Expected educational trajectory.

Contrary to this expected decrease in the need to draw on one's first language in accordance with years spent in the country, Hamid experienced that it grew, as illustrated by Figure 2: His first language felt redundant at the beginning of his school trajectory but emerged as an indispensable capital for accessing the advanced disciplinary literacy of VET. Hamid's dependence on his first language transcended mere years spent in Norway; rather, it reflected the increased challenges posed by transitioning into a new educational domain, characterized by its distinct disciplinary literacy and the absence of adequate linguistic support (Gibbons, 2015; Mariani, 1997). In light of a sociocultural view on language and learning, where language is not considered an individual cognitive ability, but a situated practice (Gee, 2015), this should come as no surprise - he had made a transition from one domain to another, where both challenge and support was altered. While language learned in one educational context will certainly benefit the student in a new educational context, a new learning context also implies new language and literacy practices inherent to the specific domain in question (Gibbons, 2015, p. 8).

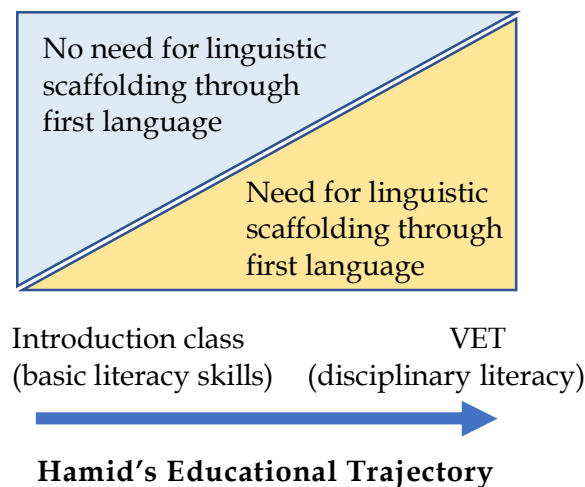


Figure 2. Hamid's educational trajectory.

Drawing on his own and others' research, Macaro (2005, p. 74) proposes that by using their first language(s), students reduce the cognitive load of tasks, and thereby facilitate cognitive processing – an aspect increasingly crucial as students advance in their educational trajectory and academic demands increase. Providing linguistic scaffolding based on student's first languages only in the beginning of their school trajectory, as is done in the Norwegian school system, acknowledges that first languages are enablers of second language learning, but draws a timeline of anticipated usefulness that diverges from current research (e.g., Cummins, 2000; Lewis et al., 2012; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013). Expecting newly arrived students to learn the second language and that followingly, their first language(s) becomes redundant as a tool for learning “once and for all”, reflects a reductionist view on language and learning which ignores the principle of building on learners' prior competences and knowledge (Gibbons, 2015). Moreover, it subscribes to a linear view of second language learning and does not align with sociocultural perspectives. It presumes that languages are static and decontextualized, and thus not sensitive to different environments. But as Norton (2013) points out: “Language learning is not an abstract skill that can be easily transferred from one context to another. It is a social practice” (p. 174). A practice far from linear, better described as a dynamic, multifaceted, and nonlinear process, calling for flexible approaches to linguistic scaffolding to answer to the diverse needs of newly arrived students in school.

The mismatch between Hamid's experience and the absence of mother tongue instruction and bilingual subject teaching in Norwegian upper secondary schools (figure 3) is thought-provoking, as it prompts a need to rethink the taken-for-granted assumptions behind chronologically withdrawing the offer of mother tongue instruction and bilingual subject teaching as students advance on the educational ladder. Several researchers have warned about the dangers of such withdrawal too early in the educational trajectory (e.g., Cummins, 2000; Macaro, 2005; W. P. Thomas & Collier, 1997), and Hamid is a telling case.

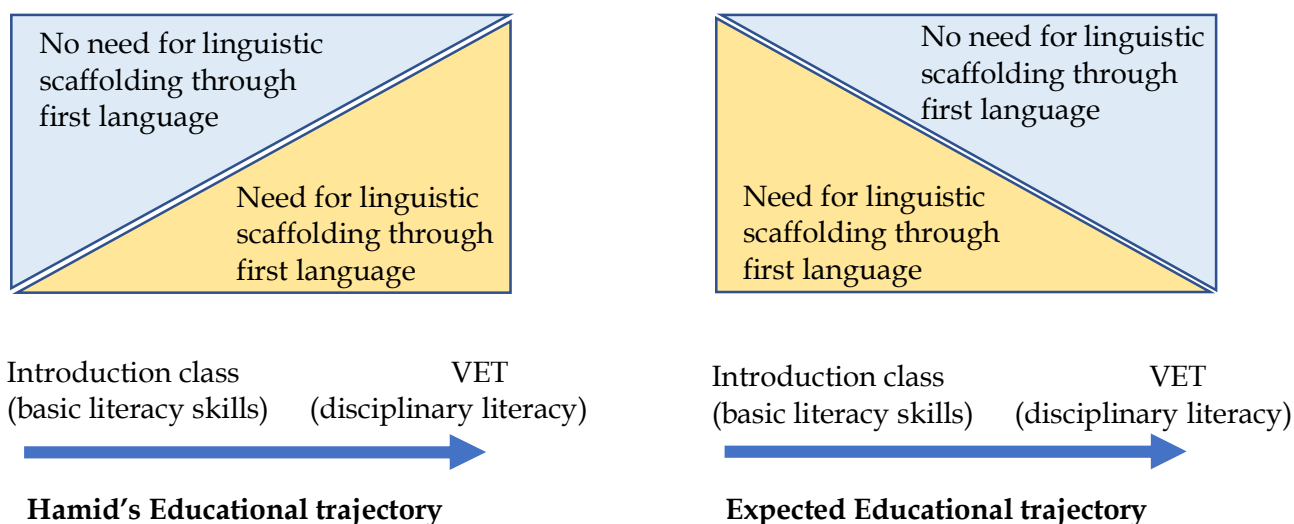


Figure 3. Comparison of Hamid's educational trajectory and expected educational trajectory.

Garcia & Wei (2013,) assert that leveraging students' entire linguistic semiotic repertoire in meaning-making "...is important for all bilingual students, whether they're situated in the beginning points of the bilingual continuum or whether they're further along the continuum" (p. 69). They contend that such leveraging not only allows students to develop corresponding linguistic competences in their first and second language(s), but also promotes the transgression and destabilization of language hierarchies, such as the one Hamid was subjected to. Drawing on this study as well as other researchers' contributions (e.g., Lewis et al., 2012; Macaro, 2005; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013), it may well be high time to start questioning policy and practice regarding scaffolding through students' first languages. The findings in the present study illuminate the dynamic, complex and nonlinear nature of language learning, which is always related to specific contexts in which certain linguistic practices count as more valuable capital than others. It encourages a recognition of students' first languages as enduring enabling tools for learning and as a personally significant capital as they navigate new educational domains. Based on this study as well as insights from other researchers (e.g., Lewis et al., 2012; Macaro, 2005; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013), it can be argued that scaffolding through students' first languages, long term - whether in VET or in other educational settings, will significantly enhance their chance to achieve their educational goals and could furthermore foster a more equitable educational system.

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Endnotes

¹ I use the term introduction class, but such classes may also be called introductory class, combination class, welcome class, and other terms. For more information about introduction classes, see section 2.

² I use the term *first language(s)* instead of *mother tongue*, except in excerpts from interviews where Hamid himself uses mother tongue and when referring to *mother tongue instruction*. This is because the term mother tongue is a problematic term in several ways - for instance it refers to a traditional family structure that does not apply to everyone.

³ Alongside Norwegian, Sámi is an official language in Norway. It is spoken in Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia. It consists of several Sámi languages spoken by the indigenous Sámi people.

⁴ NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software which helps organize and analyze data material.

⁵ I put «Norwegian» in quotation marks to signal that it is a problematic term. What makes someone Norwegian?

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