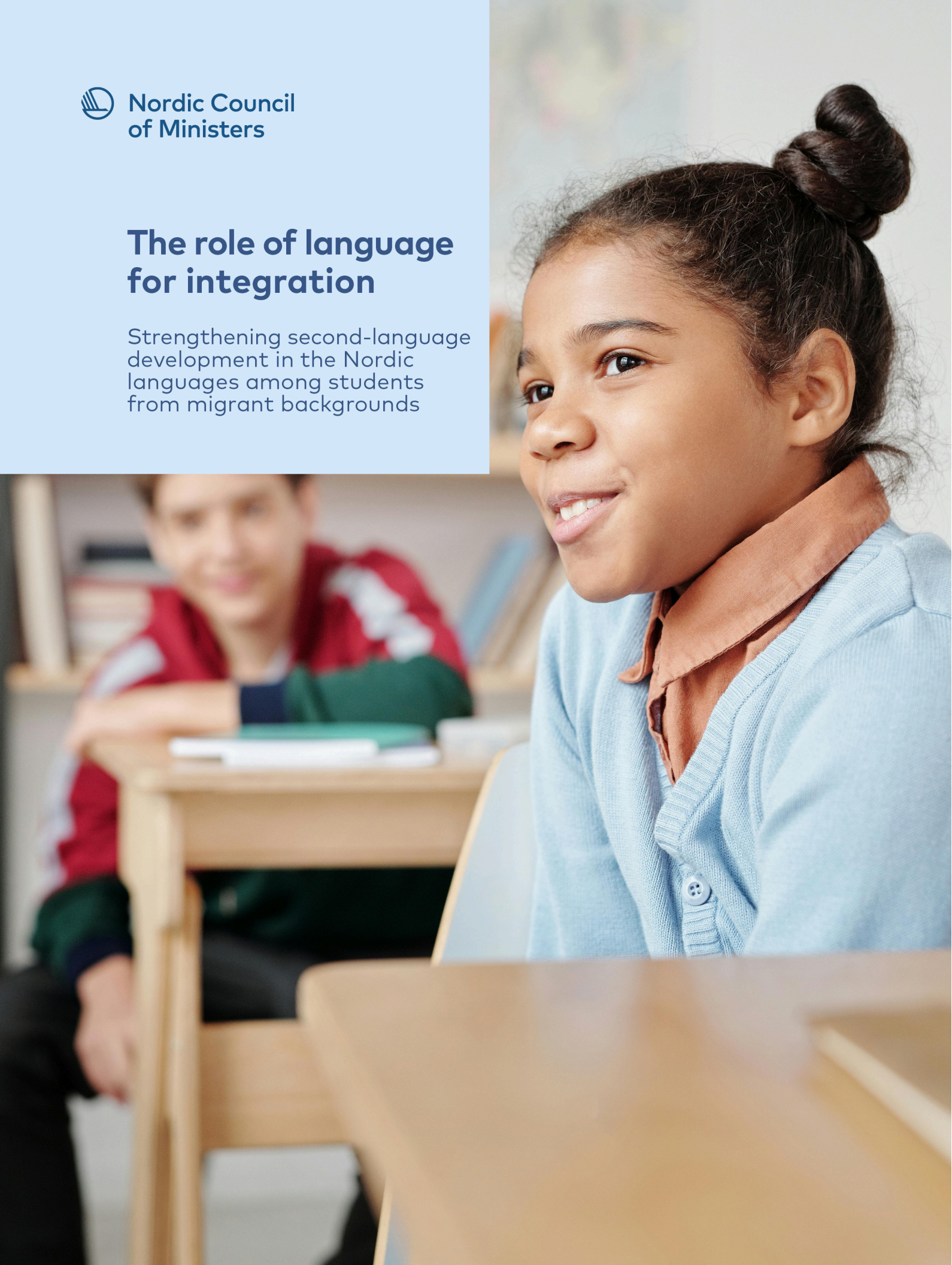




Nordic Council
of Ministers

The role of language for integration

Strengthening second-language
development in the Nordic
languages among students
from migrant backgrounds



Contents

Foreword	3
Contributors	5
Executive summary	6
Resumé (dansk)	8
1. Introduction and key concepts	10
2. Sabine Wollscheid: Programmes and policies facilitating second-language acquisition in the Nordic countries	13
3. Nihad Bunar: Language development and participation	23
4. Maria Ahlholm: Multilingual classrooms	28
5. Renata Emilsson Pesková: Family, school, and educational policies for plurilingual students in Iceland	33
6. Reflections on enhancing education and second-language learning in the Nordics	38
Appendix 1. Summary of study findings	46
Appendix 2. Methods: Systematic review	58
Appendix 3. Additional knowledge resources	63
About this publication	64

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Foreword

As the Nordic region grows increasingly diverse, the countries share a common challenge: how to support strong second-language development among children and young people from migrant backgrounds. Language is more than just a technical skill; it is a key driver of belonging, participation, well-being, and democracy.

This report explores how the educational systems in the Nordic countries support second-language learning and discusses how existing measures can be improved to better promote inclusion and integration. It brings together key insights from a Nordic research review and from leading scholars who participated in the Nordic webinar *The role of language for inclusion* in October 2025.

This report shows that while the countries' education policies share a common emphasis on multilingualism and inclusion, the practical implementation differs significantly across countries and regions. Although these differences make generalised conclusions difficult on what works best, they also create fertile ground for exchanging experiences and developing new solutions together. The scholars at the webinar emphasise that effective language learning depends not only on motivation and effort, but also on the opportunities and strategies provided by the education system.

A central feature of this report is the concluding chapter developed by the **Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students**. Representing ministries and national authorities across the region, the Network provides recommendations for improving language support, particularly enhancing holistic, language-aware school cultures, pedagogical leadership, and continued competence development for teachers. The network clearly demonstrates the unique value of Nordic collaboration in an area where shared challenges call for shared solutions. We would like to express our deep appreciation to its members, whose expertise and support have been essential to the development of this report.

We warmly thank research professor Sabine Wollscheid at the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education in Norway (NIFU) for the valuable and hard work on the Nordic research review. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the three scholars sharing their expertise and important insights: professor Nihad Bunar at Stockholm University, associate professor Maria Ahlholm at the University of Helsinki, and associate professor Renata Emilsson Pesková at the University of Iceland.

Improving language learning for students with migrant backgrounds is a vital step toward achieving a socially sustainable and cohesive Nordic region where everyone has the opportunity to participate fully and contribute to our shared future.

For more information about Nordic co-operation on integration and inclusion, please visit www.integrationnorden.org.

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Author: Freelance journalist **Sebastian Dahlström**, drawing from presentations at the webinar The role of language for inclusion – How can we strengthen language development in the Nordic languages among students from migrant backgrounds?. The webinar was arranged on 29 October 2025 by the Nordic Welfare Centre in collaboration with the Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students.

Chapter two also builds on a research review manuscript by research professor **Sabine Wollscheid** at the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), Norway. The research review was commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The afterword is written by the **Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students** and edited by Sebastian Dahlström.

Editors of the final report: Kaisa Kepsu, Trine Skriver Høholt Andersen and Mikaela Sonck at the Nordic Welfare Centre.

[Watch the webinar video here.](#)

The Integration Norden programme generates and disseminates research-based knowledge and collects examples of promising integration practices from the Nordic countries. The purpose is to contribute to improved integration policies and initiatives and to strengthen the opportunities for refugees and immigrants to become active members of society. Visit the knowledge bank at www.integrationnorden.org for more information.

Executive summary

The Nordic countries aim to ensure that all children and young people receive a high-quality education. As the number of students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds has grown significantly in recent decades, the region faces both an opportunity and a challenge. Despite considerable variation within the group, students with migrant-language backgrounds – especially refugee children – continue to achieve lower educational outcomes than their native-born peers. Proficiency in the local Nordic languages remains essential for participation, learning, and inclusion.

This report draws on a rapid systematic Nordic research review and expert presentations from the webinar *The role of language for inclusion – How can we strengthen language development in the Nordic languages among students from migrant backgrounds?* The webinar was organised in October 2025 by the Nordic Welfare Centre in collaboration with the Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students.

The research review found substantial heterogeneity across both interventions and student groups, making uniform recommendations difficult. A consistent finding was the strong influence of the age of acquisition on second-language proficiency, underscoring the need to support older learners. Research professor Sabine Wollscheid emphasised the need for better data and more experimental studies to enable evidence-based language policies in the Nordic region.

Professor Nihad Bunar highlighted language as a key driver of inclusion. While shared physical space is important, it is insufficient on its own; barriers to both physical and social inclusion must be addressed. Bunar identified four elements necessary for second-language acquisition: hard work, motivation, opportunity, and strategy. The first two are individual assets, while the latter two depend on the education system. When opportunity and strategy fail, learning challenges arise. Bunar therefore urged attention to segregation, school placement, and the need for teachers to build on students' existing abilities rather than treating them as blank slates. Individualised plans are essential.

Adjunct Professor Maria Ahlholm similarly stressed that no single model fits all learners. Both student heterogeneity and classroom composition must guide pedagogical choices. She underscored the importance of highly skilled teachers who can adapt instruction to diverse learners.

Associate Professor Renata Emilsson Pesková encouraged schools to maintain open dialogue between teachers and parents to support children's language and literacy development. Plurilingualism should be recognised as an asset, and strategies must balance the child's right to maintain their mother tongue with their

right to learn and participate in society, in line with the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

All four researchers discussed whether separate or joint classrooms best support second-language learning. They agreed that both models are valid, depending on the student's age, sense of inclusion, and available resources.

The Nordic Network for Education of Newly Arrived Students – comprising representatives from Nordic ministries and directorates – provided recommendations for improving education quality for second-language learners.

- Better examination of language policies and programmes
- Advantages in applying a holistic approach, also referred to as a 'whole-school' approach
- Pedagogical leadership: Municipalities and leaders must actively participate and support change.
- A systematic approach to developing vocabulary and concepts for the individual student
- Increased focus on reading
- Language-aware school culture: Acknowledging multilingualism and making an aware pedagogical strategy
- Increasing teacher competencies for teaching heterogeneous language students.

A coherent strategy for newly arrived students' second-language learning is still needed across the Nordic countries. More research and improved statistics are required to equip teachers and policymakers to make informed decisions. Given the heterogeneity of the student group, individualised plans and tailored strategies are essential to support second-language development and foster inclusion in Nordic schools.

Resumé (dansk)

De nordiske lande har en fælles ambition om, at alle børn og unge skal have adgang til en god uddannelse. Antallet af elever med forskellige sproglige og kulturelle baggrunde er steget markant i de seneste årtier, hvilket både rummer et stort potentiale og en betydelig udfordring. På trods af stor variation inden for gruppen opnår elever med anden sprogbaggrund - særligt flygtningebørn - generelt lavere uddannelsesresultater end deres indfødte jævnaldrende. Beherskelse af de lokale nordiske sprog er afgørende for deltagelse, læring og inklusion.

Rapporten bygger på et hurtigt systematisk nordisk forskningsreview samt oplæg fra forskere og eksperter ved webinaret *The role of language for inclusion – How can we strengthen language development in the Nordic languages among students from migrant backgrounds?* afholdt af Nordens Velfærdscenter i samarbejde med det Nordiske Netværk for Uddannelse af Nyankomne Elever i oktober 2025.

Forskningsreviewet viste stor heterogenitet både i indsatser og elevgrupper, hvilket gør generelle anbefalinger vanskelige. Et gennemgående fund var, at alder ved sprogindlæring har stor betydning for færdigheder i andetsproget, hvilket understreger behovet for at støtte ældre sprogindlærere. Forskningsprofessor Sabine Wollscheid fremhævede behovet for bedre data og flere eksperimentelle studier for at kunne udvikle vidensbaseret sprogpolitik i Norden.

Professor Nihad Bunar understregede sprogets rolle for inklusion. Fysisk samvær er vigtigt, men ikke tilstrækkeligt; barrierer for både fysisk og social inklusion skal fjernes. Bunar pegede på fire nødvendige elementer for andetsprogstilegnelse: hårdt arbejde, motivation, mulighed og strategi. De to første er individuelle ressourcer, mens mulighed og strategi afhænger af systemet. Når disse svigter, opstår læringsudfordringer. Han advarede mod segregering og placering af nyankomne elever på ressourcetsvage skoler og opfordrede lærere til at bygge videre på elevernes eksisterende kompetencer frem for at betragte dem som blanke tavler. Individuelle planer er nødvendige.

Adjunct Professor Maria Ahlholm fremhævede ligeledes, at ingen model passer til alle elever. Både elevgruppens og klassens sammensætning bør styre valg af pædagogiske strategier. Hun understregede betydningen af højt kvalificerede lærere, der kan tilpasse undervisningen til forskellige læringsbehov.

Professor Renata Emilsson Peskova opfordrede til en åben dialog mellem lærere og forældre om børns sprog- og literacyudvikling. Plurilingualisme bør ses som en ressource, og strategier skal balancere barnets ret til at bevare sit modersmål med retten til at lære og deltage i samfundet, i tråd med Den Universelle Erklæring om Sproglige Rettigheder og Børnekonventionen.

Alle fire forskere diskuterede, om separate modtager- eller almen klasser bedst understøtter andetsproglæring. De var enige om, at begge modeller kan være relevante - afhængigt af elevens alder, oplevelse af inklusion og de tilgængelige ressourcer.

Det Nordiske Netværk for Uddannelse af Nyankomne Elever - bestående af repræsentanter fra ministerier og direktorater i de nordiske lande - fremlagde anbefalinger til at styrke kvaliteten af undervisningen generelt og for andetsprogs elever. Anbefalingerne omfattede:

- Bedre undersøgelse af sprogpolitikker og -programmer
- En holistisk "whole school"-tilgang
- Stærk pædagogisk ledelse på kommunalt og lokalt niveau
- Systematisk udvikling af ordforråd og begreber for den enkelte elev
- Øget fokus på læsning
- En sprogbevidst skolekultur, der anerkender flersprogethed
- Styrkede lærerkompetencer til undervisning af heterogene elevgrupper

Der er fortsat behov for en tydelig strategi for nyankomne elevers andetsprogsudvikling i de nordiske lande. Mere forskning og bedre statistik er nødvendigt for at ruste lærere og beslutningstagere til at træffe kvalificerede valg. Elevgruppen er meget heterogen, og individuelle planer og målrettede strategier er afgørende for at understøtte sprogudvikling og inklusion i skolen.



1. Introduction and key concepts

In an increasingly diverse Nordic region, the capacity to promote strong language development among children and young people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds is emerging as a crucial factor for inclusion and integration. How do schools across the Nordic countries support second language learning of the local Nordic languages? What measures are currently in place? How can these systems be further developed to better promote inclusion and integration?

This report seeks to give some answers and Nordic perspectives to these questions from recent academic and policy-oriented studies. The report draws on a Nordic study as well as presentations given by key researchers and experts at the webinar in October 2025 'The role of language for inclusion: How can we strengthen language development in the Nordic languages among students from migrant backgrounds?'. The webinar was organised by the Nordic Welfare Centre in collaboration with the Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students. The report also includes a unique concluding chapter from a network of civil servants from different Nordic countries.

The report focuses on educational systems and policy measures to support second language development of children and young people in primary and lower secondary school. Students from migrant backgrounds possess multilingual skills, which benefit both individuals and societies. However, the students often have limited skills in the local Nordic languages. Weak proficiency in the local language can hinder access to society by restricting participation, learning, and social integration. There is a need for effective measures to facilitate second-language learning in this group. The Nordic countries have similar educational systems, but they still differ in how they approach their students – both monolingual and multilingual. This makes the exchange of knowledge and results from different models and policies especially valuable.

The ambition of the Nordic countries is that all children and youth have the opportunity to receive a good education. The number of children with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds has increased significantly in all the Nordic

countries in the last few decades. Yet, even despite great heterogeneity among them, students with foreign-language backgrounds – and refugee children in particular – achieve lower educational outcomes compared to native-born children. Learning the local Nordic languages is fundamental for thriving and actively participating in new societies.

Chapter two in this report summarises the results from a research review on the policies and programmes that the Nordic countries use to support the learning of local Nordic languages. The following three chapters builds on insights presented at the webinar by leading Nordic researchers in the field: Professor Nihad Bunar, Sweden, Senior University Lecturer Maria Ahlholm, Finland, and Associate Professor Renata Emilsson Pesková, Iceland. In the last chapter, the Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students highlights key learnings to enhance the quality of education in the Nordics, specifically second-language learning.

A useful cross-Nordic overview of the policies was compiled in 2025 by the research network Nordic Languages as Second Languages. The overview highlights significant features of the educational policy in each Nordic country, and also in Scotland. The overview is available at the [website of the National Centre of Multicultural Education \(NAFO\) at OsloMet University](#).

The table below outlines some key concepts used in the report.

Table 1. Key terminology as used in the report

<i>Effect</i> of a programme on second language learning	<i>Effect</i> is used in a broader sense as <i>consequences</i> for second-language learning as a result of a programme or measure. Not only in relation to causal studies.
First Language (L1)	Refers to the child's mother tongue or first learned language.
First-language instruction (L1)	Describes teaching and instruction carried out in the child's first language. First-language instruction and mother-tongue instruction are interchangeable terms.
Heritage language	Heritage language speakers are individuals raised in homes where a non-societal language is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in that language and the dominant language (Valdés 2001).

Second language (L2)	Pupils' second language is the native Nordic language in the area they live – Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, or Swedish.
Immigrant population	The population living in the Nordic countries born outside of the Nordic countries.
Students with foreign language background	Students who have another language than the native country language as their first language.
Students with migrant background	This term is used to describe students who are born outside of the Nordic country of residency.
Language acquisition	Refers here primarily to the acquisition of pupils' second language.
Newly arrived students	Students with a foreign language background and a short residence in the country of arrival
Policy, second-language policy	Refers here to statements and declarations on, for example, Nordic national laws and policy documents on second-language learning and students with foreign-language background (see, e.g., Shohamy, 2006).
Programme, second-language programme	Here understood as a concrete plan to achieve educational goals.
Effect studies	Effect studies are here defined as studies with experimental design and quasi-experimental design, i.e., studies with a type of control group. Examples of methods used in these studies are randomised controlled trials and studies with difference-in-difference design.
Translanguaging/ multilingualism	Translanguaging is the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages (Baker, 2011, p. 288). The students can use their full linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning.

The table is compiled by Sabine Wollscheid, NIFU, and The Nordic Welfare Centre.



2. Sabine Wollscheid: Programmes and policies facilitating second-language acquisition in the Nordic countries

Results from a Nordic research review

This chapter summarises insights from the webinar presentation and an unpublished research review by PhD Sabine Wollscheid, Research Professor at Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), Norway.

A good education, including (second) language learning, is regarded as an essential resource for the future for all children, and has shown to contribute to reducing social inequalities (Dollmann, 2016). Language learning is crucial for all types of learning. A joint Nordic language policy highlights that mastering the country's national language is necessary for migrants and for all second-language learners to participate in all domains of society, such as education. Deficient second-language skills may have significant consequences for students in education and in working life later, increasing the risk of exclusion.

Across the Nordic countries, there are many different programmes, policies, and support systems for the acquisition of a second language, with different aims and outcomes. What does research say about which programmes work?

To find some answers to such complex questions, the Oslo-based Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) was commissioned by the Nordic Welfare Centre to conduct a research review on the possible effects of policies and programmes used in the Nordic countries to support newly arrived students' second-language learning. The students' second language refers here to one of the Nordic local languages, Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, or Swedish. The main author of the study was research professor Sabine Wollscheid,

and the project was carried out between August 2024 to June 2025. Wollscheid presented the study at the webinar in October 2025.

This chapter summarises the key elements and results from the research review. A short summary of each of the selected studies included in the review can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

The study aimed to address the following main questions:

- What programmes are used in the Nordic countries to facilitate and support second-language acquisition in compulsory and upper secondary education and how do they work?
- Do these programmes also have secondary effects, such as social and other educational outcomes?
- What is the role of the first language (mother tongue) for second-language learning?

Method: A rapid systematic review of existing research

The study used a rapid systematic literature review to find relevant, already published research articles that investigate the effects of the different programmes for students from migrant backgrounds. A systematic review is a form of secondary research that applies scientific methods and includes existing studies as data material.

Selected for the study were empirical studies investigating effects of national programs to support second-language acquisition among students with foreign-language background, either at compulsory level or upper secondary school level. Studies of programmes that aimed at first-language learning or individual pedagogics only were not eligible. Publications were retrieved from both international databases, such as Web of Sciences (WoS) and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and from national databases. The review was conducted between September 2024 and January 2025.

The methodology is more thoroughly explained in [Appendix 2](#).

Selected relevant studies

The research review selected 16 studies published between 2014 and 2024 for the analysis. Five studies applied experimental or quasi-experimental design as the most appropriate designs to measure causal effects. These studies were prioritised in the findings and discussion.

Table 2 gives an overview of the key characteristics of the included studies: the programmes studied, the target group of students, the skills where outcomes were observed, and the study design. Each study and their results are described in more detail in [Appendix 1](#).

Table 2. Articles addressing second-language learning included in the research review. [Appendix 1](#) summarises the findings from each study.

Reference, Country	Programme/Exposure	Population	Main outcome	Secondary outcomes	Study design
Experimental and quasi-experimental design					
Andersen et al., 2017, Denmark	First-language instruction	Grade 1 students	Second-language skills (Danish)	First-language skills, School outcomes Social outcomes Parental engagement	Cluster randomised controlled trial
Andersen et al., 2022, Denmark	Asset-based approach to minority-language instruction	Students with foreign-language background	Second-language skills (Danish)	School outcomes, first-language skills, differences between bilinguals and non-bilinguals	Randomised Controlled Trial (N=230) taking an asset-based approach to first-language instruction in collaboration with the Ministry of Education in Denmark.
Bylund et al., 2020, Sweden	Bilingualism	Students with foreign-language backgrounds (different groups)	Second-language learning (Swedish)		Experimental 2*2 factorial design, which includes 4 groups.
Tegunimataka, 2021, Denmark	Removing first-language training	Students with foreign-language background, first- and second-generation immigrants (outside the EU and EES)	Second-language skills (Danish)	Educational outcomes	Difference-in-differences (DID) method
Thordardottir, 2017, Iceland	Icelandic as a second-language (L2) programme; allocation criteria	Students with a foreign-language background	Second-language learning (Icelandic)	First-language learning	Quantitative: Longitudinal; One-Way ANOVA (L2 vs L1)

Other study designs

Dávila & Bunar, 2020, Sweden	Multilingual classrooms (MLC)	Newly arrived immigrants and refugee students		Inclusion of newly arrived students	Qualitative design
Ingves, 2024, Sweden	Language Introduction Programme (LIP)	Newly arrived students	Second-language learning		Quantitative: cross-sectional
Karlsson et al., 2022, Sweden	Translanguaging science classroom	Multilingual students	Translanguaging: Science learning		Qualitative/ longitudinal
Laimi et al./FINEEC, 2024, Finland	Evaluation of arrangement of teaching of late arrivals	Newly arrived students in grades 7–9	Basic skills	Education paths of late arrivals	Evaluation: quantitative and qualitative
Lødding et al., 2024, 2022, Norway	Educational Programme for newly arrived students	Newly arrived students	Second-language learning	Educational outcomes: inclusive education	Teacher survey and case study
Rambøll Management, 2016a, Norway	Special language programmes (introduction programme)	Newly arrived students	Second-language learning (Norwegian)		Evaluation drawing on 4 surveys of a sample of school owners, school leaders, teachers, and students
Rambøll Management, 2016b; Norway	Introductory offer	Newly arrived students	Second-language learning (Norwegian)		Qualitative: case study
Repo, 2023, Finland	Perspectives of how to increase linguistic diversity/ reformed language policies	Different student groups	Second-language learning	Language learning, linguistic diversity	Multi-methods combining qualitative and quantitative data
Venäläinen et al., 2023, Finland	National instruction programme to prepare for basic education	Multilingual students		Second-language learning (Finnish)	Quantitative evaluation
Warren, 2016, Swedish	Multilingual study guidance (MSG)	Newly arrived students	Second-language learning (Swedish)		Qualitative: Ethnographic field work
Aarsæther, 2021, Norway	Separate programs for newcomers/ introduction offer	Newcomers in Norwegian elementary schools	Second language learning (Norwegian)		Qualitative data from separate programs for newcomers; data collected at three schools for two months in 2017

Source: Unpublished systematic review by Sabine Wollscheid, 2025.

Main result: difficult to draw conclusions on what works

The selected studies describe a variety of programmes to facilitate second-language instruction for different groups of students with foreign-language backgrounds, directly and indirectly. The programmes comprise introductory offers, language introductory offers, separate classes for newly arrived students, translanguaging/multilingual programmes, and first-language support. Each of the selected articles introduced interesting and relevant results on second-language learning.

However, as the studies and the educational systems in the Nordic countries are so diverse, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions from the material. The target student groups were very heterogeneous, consisting of students from different linguistic backgrounds and with various lengths of stay in the country. The aim and size of the different policies were equally different across the studies. Therefore, it is almost impossible to synthesise findings across individual studies conducted in different contexts.

Effects are particularly difficult to capture. The research review found only five rigorous studies that investigated the **effect** of educational measures on second-language learning in the Nordic countries. This means it is not possible to draw any generalising conclusions on the effect of specific programmes.

The studies do, however, give some indication of factors facilitating second-language learning among students with a foreign-language background. Wollscheid highlights a few results.

Determinants of second-language acquisition

A Swedish study by Bylund et al. (2021) found that the age of acquisition, not the child's additional language skills, is the primary determinant of ultimate second-language attainment. Regardless of whether the child acquired two languages simultaneously, first learned one language and later another without maintaining the first, or was introduced to a new language only after establishing a mother tongue, the age at which the additional language was learned emerged as the strongest predictor of linguistic outcomes rather than the specific language constellation. Bilingualism may have a certain effect on some linguistic domains, such as lexis, while age of acquisition has more consistent effects over several domains. Bylund et al. (2021) stress the importance of considering heterogeneity among students with foreign-language background, i.e., different groups of second-language learners, when measuring effects of bilingualism.

Thordardottir (2020) further examined whether background variables could predict the need for L2 support in school. She found that learners of Icelandic as a second language were, as a group, performing significantly and visibly below native

Icelandic-speaking peers. No consistent pattern in background characteristics emerged that could reliably be used to identify pupils in need of additional L2 instruction. The study did, however, indicate that progress in Icelandic tended to slow down with increased time spent learning the language, and that the age at acquisition also appeared to play a role. Overall, Thordardottir concluded that acquiring Icelandic as a second language in a school context is a time-consuming process and not automatically successful. Based on these findings, the Reykjavík school board revised its allocation criteria, which now include individual assessments of Icelandic proficiency.

Inconsistent evidence on the role of first-language skills for learning Danish as a second language

Three studies, all from Denmark, were identified with a rigorous study design measuring the effects of first-language (mother-tongue) learning, or removal of first-language learning, on learning a second language (Danish in this case) or other learning outcomes. The findings were mixed and inconsistent.

In a study from 2017, Andersen et al. found that first-language learning did not seem to have a visible effect on foreign-language students' linguistic abilities in Danish, their second language. At the same time, the study shows some positive effects for first-language instruction on students' motivation, well-being, and parental school engagement.

However, assessing the effects of an asset-based approach on language learning in first grade, Andersen et al. (2022) showed some positive effects for reading skills in Danish. One year after the intervention, reading skills in Danish seemed to be significantly improved. The findings support an asset-based approach, suggesting that first-language instruction facilitates students' engagement in school and their learning, also in their second language (Danish).

Finally, Tegunimataka (2021) showed that for male students the removal of first-language instruction had a negative effect on grades in Danish, but this did not apply for female students. Female students tend to have more training in their first language at home, and they score better in first and native language.

Findings from the remaining studies included in the review

The remaining eleven studies addressing second-language learning were not causal effect studies. They applied either a mixed method, a cross-sectional quantitative or a qualitative design. Most of the studies have a broader scope than second-language learning.

The studies addressed various research questions related to subgroups of students (such as age) and organisational aspects of second-language learning. The Finnish and Norwegian studies included were larger evaluations, whereas Swedish studies

were of a smaller scale. For Sweden, the topic of multilingualism and translanguaging was present in several studies.

The difficulty to generalise findings for the whole group of students with a foreign-language background was mentioned in numerous studies. As stated earlier, the target student population differs in the various studies when it comes to age, time of arrival, and background. In addition, there are different practices in different regions and areas. For instance, in Norway the implementation of introductory offers for newly arrived students at the municipal level has led to a high local variation in these offers (Lødding et al., 2024).

A description of each of the studies and their findings are available in Appendix 1, with links to the original publication, if applicable.

Recommendation: better data and more research

Given the heterogeneity in student groups, measures and differences in country contexts, the study implies that it is not possible to draw a clear conclusion on which programmes work for students with a foreign-language background. The recommendation is therefore to conduct more effect studies with an experimental or quasi-experimental design, addressing the second-language learning of specific groups. The researchers also recommend a longitudinal perspective and support studies in several Nordic countries to provide more knowledge.

'In particular, we need more studies with a causal design that can measure the effect of programmes on different student groups, if this is possible. To progress, stakeholders must collaborate to obtain better data on students' backgrounds and language proficiency, especially in the case of newly arrived students,' Sabine Wollscheid concluded.

Wollscheid also stresses that experimental studies may be hard to conduct in a Nordic setting. Lødding et al. (2020) has argued that the principle of equality, a fundamental value of the educational system in the Nordic countries, may conflict with the principle of a randomised controlled trial. If the intervention group gets an offer that the control group does not receive could mean an ethical clash. Further, it is challenging to randomise a minority group of students (for example, newly arrived students) into a control and intervention group, as the design requires a certain group size.

The weak data basis is another challenge for further research, in particular for the group of newly arrived students. For example, in Norway national databases do not register whether the student receives an introductory offer, or which type of offer the student gets. Datasets on language assessment tests or national tests are also lacking, as newly arrived students in Norway are exempt from participating in them and are assessed to a lesser degree.

Nevertheless, good timing opens possibilities for further studies. Newly introduced reforms provide an opportunity for studies comparing students before and after the implementation of a reform, as they have done in Denmark regarding the role of first-language instruction.

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3. Nihad Bunar: Language development and participation

Barriers and opportunities for newly arrived students in the Nordics

This chapter summarises insights from the webinar presentation by Professor Nihad Bunar, Department of Special Education, Stockholm University.

Professor Nihad Bunar from Stockholm University focuses on how migration and integration interact and influence one another. Bunar shares findings from his own and his colleagues' research on newly arrived students and their language acquisition.

Professor Bunar begins by giving an overview of the role of language in fostering inclusion. He notes that one of the best definitions of inclusion comes from the newly arrived students themselves: *to become just like anybody else*.

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When asked about their dreams, fears, and aspirations, they say: We just want to be like anybody else.

Nihad Bunar examines inclusion from five perspectives: policy discussions, physical spaces, individually tailored support, the removal of barriers within a broader school context, and subjective perceptions and individual practices.

Regarding policy discussions, Nihad Bunar states that, at least in Sweden, policymakers have adopted a more critical stance on inclusion in recent years. They argue that low academic achievement or behavioural issues are linked to inclusion, and the common question raised is whether inclusion has 'gone too far'. I challenge you all to think about this: Has inclusion truly gone too far, or have we ever genuinely attempted to establish a truly inclusive system?

Scientific literature on inclusion consistently emphasises the importance of shared physical spaces. Children need to come together to develop social relationships, shared norms, values, and a common language. Nihad Bunar adds that, while this is true, merely having a physical space is not sufficient for true inclusion to occur.

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We put all the kids in the same school, in the same classroom, and then we say we have achieved inclusion. But it's a sink-or-swim policy. Newly arrived children will sink without proper support.

Therefore, Nihad Bunar argues that we need to combine physical space with individually tailored support, recognising the needs of each individual child. The same applies to removing barriers within school cultures. There are informal barriers that hinder the genuine inclusion of these children, such as bullying, exclusion, discrimination, and racism. We need to remove these barriers.

Nihad Bunar also maintains that we have to engage directly with newly arrived children, asking whether they feel included. Personal feelings also impact the overall sense of becoming like everyone else.

Second-language acquisition: Not merely an individual endeavour

When learning a second language, newly arrived children face both obstacles and opportunities. Professor Nihad Bunar states that newly arrived children are generally motivated and ambitious to learn a second language. They realise that learning the language is important for helping their family and forming a new identity in the country they have moved to.

Bunar also argues that these children generally have the *ability* to learn a new language, regardless of social background, traumatic experiences, educational history, migration status, or cultural differences. What the newly arrived might lack is the *opportunity* to learn a second language, as well as adequate *support* for this.

In many cases, the schools provide both opportunity and support – but not always. The acquisition of a second language is not just an individual endeavour; it is also a pedagogical and social practice embedded in a broader school context.

Figure 1. What is needed for second-language learning according to Nihad Bunar.

Hard work	→	Yes, but is it enough?
Motivation	→	Meaning, Trusting your own abilities
Opportunity	→	Organized and informal learning: Practice, Repetition, Support, Encouragement
Strategy	→	Pedagogical (organized learning) and Individual (practices and choices)

Source: Based on Nihad Bunar's presentation at the webinar The role of language for inclusion – How can we strengthen language development in the Nordic languages among students from migrant backgrounds? on 29 October 2025.

Professor Nihad Bunar outlines a model of what is needed to learn a second language (Figure 1). He categorises the requirements into personal assets such as *hard work* and *motivation*, as well as support in the form of *opportunity* and *strategy*.

Hard work is necessary; each child bears their own responsibility and must dedicate considerable time to learning. Motivation, based on purpose, is also crucial; you need a reason to learn the language. Naturally, the newly arrived also need to trust their own abilities and not give up.

Besides these individual assets, the newly arrived children also need opportunities. Nihad Bunar identifies an opportunity in both formal and informal learning, where informal learning occurs with peers, and the importance of physical space becomes relevant.

Additionally, Bunar emphasises that children need a structured language-learning strategy, including skilled teachers who can provide appropriate challenges and support as needed.

Core challenges of second-language learning

Nihad Bunar identifies factors that hinder newly arrived children from learning a second language. These include segregation and enrolment in disadvantaged schools, the indiscriminate use of collective organisational and pedagogical models, a limited understanding of migrant children's needs and low expectations, poorly trained teachers, chaotic school organisation, a lack of clarity about the support

required, and stigmatisation of their first language. In disadvantaged schools, children face double barriers, as they must manage their own language learning while also dealing with the problems of the school as a whole.'

The question of whether to keep all newly arrived children in separate classes or to distribute them across regular classes has no universal answer, Bunar argues.

Separate education classes could be a barrier, as children need bridges to mainstream classes. This also happens if the school indiscriminately uses collective organisational and pedagogical models, such as treating all newly arrived students as a homogeneous group and assigning them to ordinary classes, when some of these children might need extra support.

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We cannot follow colour-blind pedagogy, thinking that everyone is the same and refusing to see differences in children. We must always recognise what the child needs – and develop strategies based on that.

'Treat their first language as an asset, not a liability'

Nihad Bunar emphasises that teachers should not view newly arrived children as a blank slate, but rather recognise their existing knowledge and the fact that they already speak one language in addition to the second they are trying to learn. Bunar contends that newly arrived children must be recognised as *learners*, not just as *language learners*.

We must harness the first language for the children's progress in school and at the same time work on the second language. We cannot only focus on the second language first, only to later return to progress in the school subjects. In that case, some children will never be able to return to normal education.

Among the factors that promote opportunities and strategies, Nihad Bunar returns to the concept of inclusion, *becoming just like anybody else*, utilising all its parts, from shared physical spaces to tailored individual support.

Teachers must also be well-educated and supported by their local administration. They need to rely on their students' willingness to learn. Additionally, Nihad Bunar states that the school should foster a positive outlook for the future.

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I am aware that these are not revolutionary suggestions, but ultimately, these are the basic requirements; nothing else functions without them.

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4. Maria Ahlholm: Multilingual classrooms

From policy to practice in Finland

This chapter summarises insights from the webinar presentation by Adjunct Professor Maria Ahlholm, Senior University Lecturer, University of Helsinki

Focusing on Finland, Senior University Lecturer Maria Ahlholm from the University of Helsinki shared examples of how policies are implemented in practice across the country when teaching Finnish as a second language.

Ahlholm started by giving a hypothetical example, highlighting how every classroom is unique.

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If a statistically average classroom existed, we would expect to find 16 Finnish speakers in a class of 20 students, one Swedish speaker, and three speakers of other languages: most probably one Russian speaker, one Arabic speaker, and one Ukrainian speaker. But in reality, urban classrooms often consist of 16 multilingual students, many of whom are bilingual with one Finnish-speaking parent. Then we also have inland classrooms that consist of 20 Finnish speakers, but even in these circumstances, during the school breaks, we would hear a lot of English.

The distribution of newly arrived students across schools in Finland is highly uneven. Given the complexity of school reality, Maria Ahlholm argues that models that rely solely on statistics might result in a one-size-fits-no-one approach that fails to address the needs of diverse classrooms.

Ahlholm argues that ongoing discussions with teachers in different contexts are necessary. A survey conducted by the University of Helsinki shows that teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism are more positive in schools and regions with higher migration rates than in those with fewer than 5% of students from migrant backgrounds (Suuriniemi et al., 2021).

The survey also found that teachers in Swedish-speaking schools in Finland hold a more permissive attitude towards multilingualism than their counterparts in language-majority schools, and they have considerably more experience of navigating multilingual environments daily.

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This indicates that teachers who have little experience with multilingualism recognise their lack of tools for effectively addressing this issue. Additionally, the survey also shows that working in a multilingual context enhances teachers' awareness and develops their pedagogical skills.

Thirdly, the survey found that lower secondary teachers are generally more reserved in their views on multilingualism compared to primary school teachers. I think this finding is a bit different, since it reveals that subject education teachers working with older students in grades 7 to 9 are concerned about their students' ability to progress after compulsory school. There is a pressing need for more subject-specific tools for language-aware pedagogy. This also includes supportive structures, such as language-specific tutoring and collaboration with resource teachers.

Inclusion does not depend on joint or separate classrooms

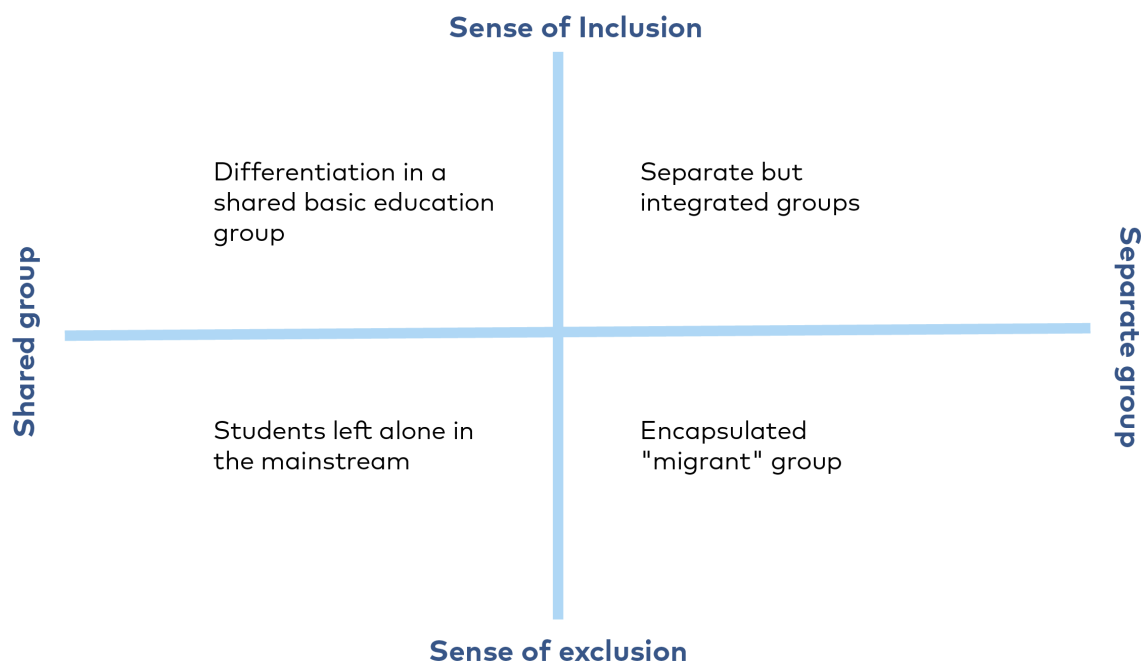
Maria Ahlholm notes that a common question is whether to have joint or separate classrooms for various learners. She explains that this dilemma has historically taken different forms, including divisions based on gender, religion, social class, or ability levels. And today we are encountering this issue as a language-based question: should the language of instruction be taught in integrated groups or separately?

Maria Ahlholm argues that there is no simple answer to this question, as both models can be effective depending on the context and the individual groups. The important thing is to work towards inclusion, regardless of which model the school chooses.

Separate groups for newly arrived students and others learning a second language can be advantageous, but they must be integrated effectively. Shared groups can also be beneficial, under certain conditions, as long as the differentiation is well managed. (See Ahlholm et al., 2023)

As both models can be beneficial, they can also have negative effects on inclusion if not managed properly, Ahlholm argues.

Figure 2. Matrix of inclusion and groups



Source: Maria Ahlholm's presentation at the webinar The role of language for inclusion – How can we strengthen language development in the Nordic languages among students from migrant backgrounds? on 29 October 2025.

A separate group can become an encapsulated "migrant" group, which may heighten feelings of exclusion. The same could also occur in shared groups if students learning a second language are left unsupported in the mainstream class.

Following this, Maria Ahlholm presented more detailed research results on how separate versus shared groups can work well (see Ahlholm & Latomaa, 2023; Ahlholm et al., 2023; Shestunova, 2022; Venäläinen et al., 2022).

A separate group can promote inclusion if it works with basic education and customises lessons for each member. The group should be a safe space for practising speaking, and the teacher must be specialised in early-stage language learning. Additionally, support in the students' native language must be accessible. Here, the integration process occurs *as a group*.

A shared group, Maria Ahlholm argues, works best for the youngest learners. It is also crucial that teachers, resource teachers, and the teaching assistant form a team, with pre-planned support for second-language learners. Peer communication must be encouraged daily; teachers should use language-aware working methods, and support must be accessible in students' native languages. In this scenario, the integration process is more focused on the *individual level*.

Balance and skilled teachers are key

Our research, along with that of many of our colleagues, indicates that second-language learners benefit from a balanced combination of togetherness and differentiation.

Maria Ahlholm believes that togetherness is nurtured through shared group activities. However, having separate time with other language learners also offers advantages: it creates a safe space for practice, promotes initiative, and unlocks students' potential.

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In conclusion, the dilemma of togetherness versus separation must be continually addressed in each context. It is an enduring and complex challenge in education, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. These approaches must be tailored to individual contexts.

Maria Ahlholm states that this optimal outcome can only be achieved by highly skilled teachers who adapt their teaching to different learners (see Shestunova, 2022). She mentions that sometimes the newly arrived are not assigned to the most well-educated teachers, which can pose a problem.

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I think my key message to policymakers is that we really need to maintain a high standard of teachers. At least in Finland, many young people are still eager to become teachers, and we must recognise how valuable this resource is.

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5. Renata Emilsson Pesková: Family, school, and educational policies for plurilingual students in Iceland

This chapter summarises insights from the webinar presentation by PhD and Associate Professor Renata Emilsson Pesková, University of Iceland

Contemporary language-education policy of the Council of Europe places growing emphasis on learners' linguistic rights and on frameworks that value all languages equally. Central to this policy direction is the call for learning environments that recognise linguistic diversity as an educational asset and ensure that children are supported both in acquiring the language of schooling and maintaining their mother tongue(s).

Within this context, Associate Professor Renata Emilsson Pesková from the University of Iceland references the Motivation Manifesto for the European Day of Languages. In keeping with this European endeavour, she advocates for a motivational ecology that emphasises the equal value of all languages and recognises the importance and advantages of linguistic and cultural diversity.

According to the manifesto, learners are empowered in their language learning when they belong to a welcoming and supportive learning community, are encouraged to share control of the learning process, and are simultaneously users and learners of the target language.

Emilsson Pesková highlights children's linguistic human rights, which are closely connected to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: language is a fundamental part of children's holistic development. The concept also implies that children's rights can be violated and calls for an explicit human rights focus in teacher's education and for state funding to support and monitor the protection of children's linguistic human rights.

Figure 3. Children's linguistic rights according to UNESCO and UN

The Universal Declaration of linguistic Rights (UNESCO, 1996)

- The point of departure the principle that linguistic rights are individual and collective at one and the same time
- The principle that the rights of all language communities are equal and independent of the legal or political status of their languages as official, regional or minority languages.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989)

- Protect the child from any form of discrimination
- The right to education
- The right to learn the language of society
- The right to maintain and use the mother tongue
- Freedom from losing the mother tongue

Source: Renata Emilsson Pesková's presentation at the webinar The role of language for inclusion – How can we strengthen language development in the Nordic languages among students from migrant backgrounds? on 29 October 2025.

Renata Emilsson Pesková reminds us that linguistic human rights are inalienable from other rights, such as the right to education, and that they are all in place simultaneously, at all times.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that we must protect the child from any form of discrimination, uphold the right to education, the right to learn the language of the society, the right to maintain and use the mother tongue, and uphold the right to freedom from losing the mother tongue.

Renata Emilsson Pesková argues that inclusive education aims to reduce inequality, strengthen pupils' sense of belonging, and ensure that all students can succeed.

The Nordics aim right but need to do more

A 2023 study by Renata Emilsson Pesková, with Maria Alholm as one of the authors, examined how all the Nordic countries provide for second-language learning, mother-tongue education, and the provisions offered to newly arrived students. These approaches were viewed through a social justice lens, emphasising that all students should have equitable access to education.

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The Nordic countries show an ambition to provide second-language and mother-tongue instruction to newly arrived students, but the provisions for first and second languages differ. We concluded that the more the Nordic countries do for second-language instruction, first-language instruction, and for newly arrived students, the closer they get to the ideal state of social justice.

Focusing on the current situation in Iceland, Renata Emilsson Pesková finds that while the Icelandic education policy is based on inclusive principles and aims to offer equal opportunities for every student, some schools struggle to meet the language and educational requirements of students learning Icelandic as a second language. The compulsory school act in Iceland stipulates that instruction in Icelandic schools must be conducted in Icelandic.

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School responses to language diversity can lead to discriminatory practices that violate students' human rights. Therefore, a gap exists between policies and practice.

Renata Emilsson Pesková states that Iceland generally has many effective policies and initiatives supporting newly arrived people, with a focus on their linguistic learning and rights. However, she also highlights a paradox in the education system, two paradigms pulling in different directions. One emphasises a democratic and inclusive education with joint classes, while the other is driven by competition, as schools aim to be internationally competitive and prioritise individual skills.

Plurilingualism is an educational asset – not an obstacle to success

A study by Renata Emilsson Pesková on the school experience of plurilingual students in Iceland highlighted the valuable roles of heritage-language schools and robust family language policies in balancing the monolingual focus of compulsory schools.

Emilsson Pesková recommends that schools should value their students' languages and plurilingual identities. She notes that plurilingualism is an educational value, not a burden or barrier to success, nor a threat or political divide.

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Strong family-language policies and heritage-language schools counterbalance the monolingual focus, and allow the students to develop all their languages in safe spaces.

Effective communication between teachers and parents is also emphasised, as it positively influences students' learning. The study also suggests that schools and teachers systematically adapt their practices to respect their students' plurilingual identities and needs.

Emilsson Pesková also recommends that schools adopt a systematic whole-school approach when aligning language policies with inclusive educational practices. Key steps include comprehensive teacher training and professional development, adapting curricula and materials, and securing institutional support from schools, local authorities, and the government.

In conclusion, Renata Emilsson Pesková encourages the schools to foster and maintain an open dialogue between parents and teachers regarding children's language and literacy development. Preschools and schools should implement language-friendly policies that align with educational laws and rights, and that include the perspectives of staff, parents, and children. All languages should be equally valued, supporting children's plurilingual identities and leveraging their linguistic and cultural resources.

Furthermore, schools should provide sustained language support, foster a communicative culture that promotes social inclusion, and assess children's progress formatively and individually, rather than against monolingual norms. Ultimately, schools should become socially just, inclusive spaces where children feel supported to communicate, connect, and form relationships across languages and cultures.

As the number of immigrants in Iceland has risen sharply in the last few years, schools have been quick to respond.

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The policies have been quickly adjusted, and it is an ongoing process. Also, society shares these social values. There is a lot of flexibility among teachers and schools to approach students on an individual basis and find local solutions to local challenges. Schools also have a culture of collaboration. I admire the teachers' willingness to continue their own education in these matters.

Key sources and recommended reading

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Emilsson Peskova, R., Lindholm, A., Ahlholm, M., Vold, E. T., Gunnþórsdóttir, H., Slotte, A., & Busch, S. E. (2023). Second language and mother tongue education for immigrant children in Nordic educational policies: Search for a common Nordic dimension. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 43(2), 128–144.

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Gollifer, S., Gunnþórsdóttir, H., & Emilsson Pesková, R. (2024). 'We can do much more and better': Understanding gatekeepers' perspectives on students' linguistic human rights. *Human Rights Education Review*, 7(1), 26–48.

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Jónsdóttir, F. B. (2023). *Giving wings to voices: Preschool as an inclusive learning space for communication and understanding* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Iceland]. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11815/4460>

Ragnarsdóttir, H., Benediktsson, A. I., & Emilsson Peskova, R. (2023). Language policies and multilingual practices in Icelandic preschools. *Multicultural Education Review*, 15(2), 81–98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2023.2250711>

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6. Reflections on enhancing education and second-language learning in the Nordics

Afterword by the Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students

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The seminar was organised in close collaboration with the Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students, a network of country representatives from the Nordic directorates and ministries. The network was established in 2017 as a response to an increasing number of refugees in the Nordic countries. Over the years, the network has shared policies and practices regarding the inclusion and education of newly arrived students and students with immigrant backgrounds.

In connection with the webinar, the network members met in Stockholm to discuss the findings with the researchers. In this afterword, the network shares its reflections on how the quality of education in general and second-language learning, more specifically, could be enhanced in the Nordics.

The challenge of examining language policies and programmes

First and foremost, the network would like to thank the Nordic Welfare Centre for hosting the event and the researchers for sharing their work on this highly relevant topic. High-quality research is vital for developing educational programmes that address the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. The educational systems in the Nordic countries share both similarities and differences. Sharing current research and insights across the Nordic countries helps realise the aim of enhancing our educational systems for the benefit of all children and students.

In recent years, the arrival of refugees from Ukraine has renewed and strengthened the interest in and the urgency of the topic. In addition to this, all Nordic countries have students with an immigrant background who need support in their second-language development, learning, and social participation, even if they are not newly arrived. In 2023, when the Nordic ministers of education met in Reykjavík, they concluded that '[w]e must invest more in language teaching for children with a different linguistic and cultural background in the Nordic countries'^[1] and discussed different measures and suggestions for collaboration across the Nordics. One of these is enhancing the knowledge base on successful programmes for second-language acquisition and education for students with immigrant backgrounds.

On behalf of the Nordic Welfare Centre, researcher Sabine Wollscheid carried out a research review of studies examining programmes designed to facilitate second-language acquisition in schools for students with immigrant background. The overview included studies following experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies. However, such studies are rare within a Nordic context. Given the heterogeneous student group, it is difficult to randomise a minority group of students into control and intervention groups, as this design also requires a certain group size (see Wollscheid in chapter 2). A lack of data on newly arrived students is also making it challenging to enhance the quality of this kind of research. Further, Wollscheid refers to Lødding et al. (2020), noting that RCTs (randomised controlled trials) challenge the principle of equality, a core value of the educational system in Nordic countries, because the intervention group is offered a programme that the control group might not receive or no longer receives. This adds an ethical problem into the mix.

It is obvious that we need transdisciplinary and diverse types of studies using different methodological approaches to gain insights into promising practices. Thus, the webinar was a way to bring together researchers in this field to share a range of studies using different methodologies and theoretical focus.

1. [Language is the key to society, and society is the key to language!](#)

Approaches for enhancing the quality of education for newly arrived students

Newly arrived students and students with an immigrant background form a heterogeneous group in every aspect, regarding their linguistic and academic backgrounds, immigration histories, time in the new country, social and economic background, and more. In the Nordic countries, the local contexts also vary. For example, cities and rural areas may have different populations, resources, and access to key personnel and experts. Municipalities also have a lot of independence to make their own decisions.

Educational programmes cannot easily be transferred from one local context to another. Such programmes do not seem to be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution for these issues, as Nihad Bunar points out, and not a clear 'model' to adopt. However, there appear to be some principles regarding organisation and pedagogical practices that show promise. Leaning on the presentations given at the webinar and based on their own knowledge in this field, the network would like to highlight some of these practices and their thoughts on some of the key areas to focus on going forward.

Holistic approaches

A holistic approach, also referred to as a 'whole-school' approach, appears to be beneficial. Within such an approach, the entire school takes responsibility for the inclusion of migrant students. A recent study in Norway by the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) concludes: 'A well-considered, thoroughly justified, and firmly anchored plan for the school, supported by the school owner, to which all staff are committed, and which aims to ensure that newly arrived students are also full members of the school community' (NIFU, 2024, s. 157).

Inclusion takes the diversity of resources, knowledge, and identities among all students as a starting point to promote their participation and development within the school community. This means adopting a holistic approach that ensures newly arrived students are given the opportunities established in laws and regulations. It also involves securing teachers' professional development (e.g. in second-language acquisition), providing students with access to multilingual teachers and assistants, ensuring the school has expertise in assessment and individualised adaption, facilitating good collaboration between different professional groups, and making sure newly arrived students have access to health services and socio-pedagogical support (NIFU, 2024, p. 157).

The Board of Education in Sweden lists four dimensions of inclusion in the research overview *Integration och utbildning* (integration and education). These are physical, social, pedagogical, and self-experienced. It is important that each student experiences a sense of social inclusion, motivation, and hope for the future. All four dimensions need to be involved.

Social inclusion also involves developing a culture of communication within the class and school, so that children learn to communicate across languages and cultures. Teachers are responsible for creating a safe and supportive learning community and act as role models in how to communicate with the children who are learning the language of the school and society.

This also involves building on students' resources and needs linguistically, academically, and socially. As Maria Ahlholm emphasised in the webinar, the teacher must pre-plan support and employ language-aware methods, and students need support in their mother tongue to be socially included in the classroom and to develop subject learning. Without support, the student may be physically included, but still not experience inclusion.

We often say that language is a key to society, but we also need to recognise that society is a key to language. This means that society needs to give access and keys to the language.

Pedagogical leadership

Research (NIFU, 2024; Bunar, in webinar) on promising practices for the inclusion of migrant students highlights the same factors we know from wider school development: municipalities and leaders must actively participate in and support change. The municipalities, along with the school management, have broad responsibilities for planning and facilitating. There must be a well-anchored plan, and the entire school must be responsible in accordance with their roles.

Research (Gillett et al., 2016; Chapman & Harris, 2004; Harris et al., 2006; Harris, 2004) also indicates the following linked strategies for effective leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances:

- Establish a clear goal and vision to foster a culture of improvement through shared expectations and aspirations.
- Focus strongly on teaching and learning to generate a belief that all students have the capacity to learn, in order to dispel the notion of 'cultural deficit'.
- Set high standards and expectations for both staff and students to strengthen belief in the school and promote academic excellence.
- Create a positive school culture that nurtures community among staff, students, and the wider public.
- Encourage ongoing professional development for principals and other leaders to build a responsive and collaborative learning community.
- Apply flexible leadership to address complex challenges creatively, including empowering others to lead.

Language learning and support

Systematically working on second-language development – developing vocabulary and concepts – is important for many students with immigrant background, not just newly arrived students. There are indications suggesting that pupils benefit when schools adopt a systematic approach to language and second-language development across subjects.

Teachers and school leaders serve as role models for communication that promotes inclusion and belonging across languages and cultures through their acts of communication and language use. All students within the school community should become partners in creating safe linguistic environments where languages are welcomed, learned, and used to generate meaning.

A new book on teacher education for working in linguistically diverse classrooms highlights findings from studies of teacher training in the Nordic countries, which emphasise the need to develop appropriate practices regarding language learning and multicultural education.

The final chapter of the book, written by Ingrid Piller (2025), describes the necessity of shifting from a monolingual to a multilingual habitus and explains that schools must address the threefold challenge of language education: ensuring all children develop academic proficiency in the school language, learn English or another instructed language, and, for students with home languages different from the school language, they need to have opportunities to develop academic proficiency in their mother tongues.

Increased focus on reading

Although it was not directly addressed in the webinar, the network wants to emphasise that language learning and reading are closely linked, and support for second-language learning needs to be responsive to the literacy needs of the students involved. Students with immigrant backgrounds, both those who have immigrated themselves and those born in a Nordic country with immigrant parents, are over-represented among students who perform at the lowest levels on reading tests.

In our network, we have discussed the topics of reading and second-language development. We want to emphasise that it is important to analyse the specific challenges faced by students performing at a low level to implement appropriate measures.

At the national level, we need to ask ourselves: Do general measures to improve reading skills account for the needs of language minority students? Do we also require some targeted measures?

This topic raises important discussions in several countries about the need to support language (and reading) development across all subjects and to ensure teachers have skills in second-language acquisition.

A Swedish example is the report *Så minskar vi läsgapet i svensk skola* (How to narrow the reading gap in Swedish schools) from Svenskt Näringsliv (Confederation of Swedish Enterprise). Another example comes from Iceland, where discussions about the education and professional development of teachers focus on improving knowledge of second-language teaching and on methods for teaching older students to read.

Special attention should be given to how schools can support newly arrived students with refugee backgrounds, trauma experiences, and often disrupted schooling. When assessing their prior learning and addressing their educational and social needs in a trauma-sensitive manner, there is a need to combine language support with reading assistance based on the students' linguistic and literacy backgrounds.

Language-aware pedagogy

Many newcomers, especially those with a refugee background, have experienced interrupted schooling and trauma that must be addressed. When children arrive at school, it is necessary to explore their background knowledge, prior learning, literacy and numeracy, and plan the learning accordingly. This is important for both refugee children and all children who have newly arrived in a school culture and language.

While all students are multilingual, they need to learn to use the language of the school in new, more abstract ways. Alongside academic language, students use foreign languages, their own mother tongues, dialects, and a constantly evolving spoken language. This challenges schools to recognise and acknowledge multilingualism and to provide space for various languages.

In a language-aware school culture, the importance of language in teaching and all school activities is recognised. Language teaching naturally provides many opportunities to make languages visible and valued. In a language-aware school, all languages studied and the students' mother tongues are inherently present.

Language-aware working methods require collaboration among teachers. This work will benefit from well-established structures and conditions that support such collaboration. Thus, school leadership plays a key role: a language-aware school culture cannot emerge without language-aware leadership.

Teacher competencies

The significance of skilled teachers for successful language development was emphasised during the webinar, and it is also a subject we have discussed within the network on multiple occasions.

We recognise that there is potential for development across all the Nordic countries, as well as great opportunities to learn from each other's good practices. Just as there is no single method of language learning that suits all students, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. However, we can identify certain aspects of teacher education and professional development that benefit all learners.

One important area for development is teacher education, which – if we take researchers' suggestions seriously – should also involve second-language learning and diversity competencies. Also, we recognise the need for continuous professional development in the holistic follow-up of the needs of newly arrived pupils.

There are many good examples of such professional development initiatives across the Nordic countries, and our hope is that by sharing experiences and learning from each other, we can help influence both teacher education and professional development in each country.

Some thoughts on moving forward

Schools in the Nordic countries have powerful and important missions. Schools should promote learning and encourage pupils to develop both knowledge and values. Schools should also promote students' personal development into active, creative, competent, and responsible individuals and citizens.

Additionally, schools should do this in collaboration with students' families. This mission applies to all students in the school, whether they are newly arrived or not, whether they have a mother tongue other than a Nordic language or not.

During the webinar, we heard researchers discuss the benefits and challenges they see in education for newly arrived students. It has been very enlightening to learn from their expertise.

There is still a need to further enhance our knowledge base with a range of projects employing various methodologies – descriptive and qualitative studies, as well as quantitative research. With the increasing share of immigrant populations in the Nordic countries, the grounds for more studies using experimental and quasi-experimental designs and comparisons between municipalities and different programmes may become more feasible over time.

We also recognise significant potential and the necessity for researchers from transdisciplinary fields to collaborate and co-create studies that examine the trajectory of language learning from a holistic perspective.

The Nordic Network for Education for Newly Arrived Students is eager to contribute to greater sharing across the Nordic countries, facilitating gatherings and dialogue among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. By sharing research and promising practices, we lay the groundwork for more inclusive education for all.

Key sources and recommended reading

Chapman, C., & Harris, A. (2004). Improving schools in difficult and challenging contexts: Strategies for improvement. *Educational Research*, 46(3), 219–228.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0013188042000277296>

Gillett, J., Clarke, S., & O'Donoghue, T. (2016). Leading schools facing challenging circumstances: Some insights from Western Australia. *Issues in Educational Research*, 26(4), 592–603.

Harris, A. (2004). Leading on the edge: Successful leadership in schools in challenging circumstances. *Education Today*, 60(1), 3–5.

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Lødding, B., Kindt, M. T., Vennerød-Diesen, F. F., Randen, G. T., Grøgaard, J. B., Tahir, H., & Samuelsen, Ø. A. (2024). [*Vilkår for inkluderende opplæring: Sluttrapport fra prosjektet Forskning på opplæringstilbud til nyankomne elever*](#). NIFU rapport 2024-4.

Piller, I. (2025). Changing teachers' monolingual habitus. In A. R. Warren, J. S. Iversen, & B. Straszer (Eds.), *Teacher education for working in linguistically diverse classrooms: Nordic perspectives* (pp.209–214). (Current Issues in Bilingualism 5). Language Science Press. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15147416>

Appendix 1. Summary of study findings

The main findings of each study selected for the research review by Wollsheid et al (chapter 2) are outlined below with respect to the research questions discussing second-language learning. Each synopsis includes a brief introduction to the background, the methods, and a summary of the main findings. In total, 16 studies were included, five of which were effect studies.

Effect studies (experimental or quasi-experimental design)

Andersen, S. C., Humlum, M., & Guul, T. (2017). Modersmålsbaseret undervisning – Modersmålsundervisning på 1. klassetrin. TrygFondens Børneforskningscenter

Andersen et al. (2017) evaluated a programme that integrated first-language instruction for small groups of bilingual students in 1st grade. A cluster randomised controlled trial was used, with a random selection of two rounds in the school years 2014/2015 and 2015/2016. For second-language learning, no measurable effects were found on students' linguistic abilities in Danish, the second language. However, it was shown that first-language instruction could increase some students' well-being and motivation, in addition to parents' school engagement. The authors recommend further investigation into whether first-language instruction might have long-term effects on students' competencies in Danish, when they reach 2nd grade and take national tests in Danish. Based on test results it might be possible to study whether there are any effects of first-language instruction on students' competencies in Danish. Furthermore, the authors conclude that these findings do not provide evidence to recommending first-language instruction, if the purpose is to improve the students' second language.

Andersen, S. C., Guul, T. S., & Humlum, M. K. (2022). How first-language instruction transfers to majority-language skills. Nature Human Behaviour, 6(2), 229–235.

Andersen et al. (2022) applied a randomised controlled trial to investigate the effect of an asset-based approach to first-language instruction on children's engagement in school, and how this might transfer into better second-language (Danish-language) skills later. The asset-based approach stems from Cummins (1986) who argues that minority students' first-language skills and cultural background should be seen as assets rather than deficits to be considered in school. These findings support an asset-based approach, suggesting that first-language

instruction facilitates students' engagement in school and their learning, also in their second language (Danish). At the same time, the authors point to the fact that the results do not exclude the possibility that first-language instruction may also be affected by generic language instruction. Some of the effects might also be the result of increased instruction time or smaller group instruction. One year after the intervention ended, reading skills in the second language were significantly improved for students in the intervention group (asset-based approach) compared to the control group. Reduced behavioural problems could account for half of this improvement. Andersen et al. (2022) argue that average treatment effects might hide substantial variation across students with different first languages. One could expect weaker effects on second-language decoding skills, if the writing system and orthography of the students' first language are distinct from those of the second language. For languages such as Arabic, Turkish, and Somali smaller effects on decoding skills were found in language comprehension, which may reflect variation in writing systems and orthographies between these languages and Danish. However, statistical power was limited to estimate subgroup effects with precision.

Tegunimataka, A. (2021). Does first-language training matter for immigrant children's school achievements? Evidence from a Danish school reform. Nordic Journal of Migration Research, 11(3), 316–340.

Tegunimataka (2021) used a difference-in-difference approach to investigate the effect of the removal of first-language training on students' grades in Danish (L2) and mathematics in grade 9 measured with standardised tests. The background was the latest Danish educational reform, which aimed to remove first-language training for students with foreign language backgrounds. Until 2002, supplementary first-language education had been provided to all children with at least one parent whose first language was different from Danish, if this language was spoken daily. After that year, state-financed support for supplementary first-language education was removed for students from non-European countries. Municipalities could, however, decide to keep mother-tongue education for children from other countries, if they funded it themselves.

Negative effects were found of the removal of first-language education on grades in Danish. More specifically, removing first-language training had negative effects on male students' learning, but not on female students. According to the author, female students tend to have more training in their first language at home than male students, and they score better in first and second language. This means that male students are more dependent on additional instruction in their first language. Further, negative effects of the reform were also found on mathematics skills. This is explained by a decrease in problem-solving ability and thus proficiency in first and second language because of the reform. Additionally, before the reform,

first-language (mother-tongue) teachers might have enhanced mathematics skills via first-language training, and more time at school might further boost overall achievement. The study found only negative effects for students with foreign-language background in the first generation, leading to the assumption that the time of exposure to the second language matters for the outcomes. Tegunimataka (2021) found negative effects in mathematics for students whose parents had a foreign-language background. These students might have lower competencies in the first language compared to first-generation immigrants and might have stronger needs for training in their first language. Because multilingualism can be related to mathematics achievements, there are negative effects after first-language education is removed. Furthermore, students who have a stronger need for additional school support seem to be affected more negatively by the reform.

Bylund, E., Hyldenstam, K., & Abrahamsson, N. (2021). Age of acquisition – not bilingualism – is the primary determinant of less than nativelike L2 ultimate attainment. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 24(1), 18–30.

Bylund et al. (2021) challenged the assumption that age of acquisition (AoA) – not bilingualism – is the main factor in second-language learning. They applied a unique experimental, 2x2 factorial design that included the following four groups: monolingual L1 speakers of Swedish, simultaneously bilingual L1 speakers of Swedish and Spanish, sequentially monolingual L2 speakers of Swedish (adoptees), and sequentially bilingual speakers of L1 Spanish and L2 Swedish, i.e., students who had immigrated to Sweden with their parents between the ages of 3 and 8. Findings indicate consistent effects of age of acquisition, but only limited effects of bilingualism on ultimate second-language learning. Thus, it is shown that age of acquisition, not bilingualism, is the primary determinant of L2 ultimate attainment. However, the study also shows that bilingualism might have a certain effect on some linguistic domains, e.g., lexis, while age of acquisition has more consistent effects over several domains. It is therefore important to consider the heterogeneity among students with foreign language backgrounds when measuring effects of bilingualism (Bylund et al., 2021). This requires a larger sample size.

Thordardottir, E. (2020). Are background variables good predictors of need for L2 assistance in school? Effects of age, L1, amount, and timing of exposure on Icelandic language and nonword repetition scores. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 23(4), 400–422.

Thordardottir (2020) studied Icelandic proficiency of a larger group of school-age second-language learners over time at three different grade levels and the effect of the students' first-language skills. What lay in the background of the study was the Reykjavik School Board's response to the sudden and dramatic increase in students with a home language other than Icelandic. The school board provided special support services to these students in Icelandic as a second language. Allocation

criteria for eligibility for the support services needed to be formulated in the absence of specific evidence for this context. The initial criteria were based on two factors: length of residence (LoR) in Iceland and home- language background: depending on whether children's home language was not tonal or tonal, the children were allocated two or three years of services. The first criterion was related to the assumption that weak Icelandic skills were to be expected during an initial period of adaptation to a new language and environment, with subsequent improvement such that children could eventually be expected to function in the Icelandic school environment. The second criterion was based purely on teacher observation that children from tonal language homes encountered more difficulty in the school environment. It was assumed that L2 speakers of Icelandic would score lower than their L1 counterparts, and that individual variability would be associated to previous exposure to Icelandic. Additionally, it was assumed that L2 speakers would perform similarly to L1 speakers on Icelandic, i.e., within normal limits (WNL), defined as students scoring at or above – 1 standard deviation (SD) relative to L1 grade peers.

Findings indicated that L2 learners as a group were lagging significantly and visibly behind L1 learners in their performance of Icelandic language. A large proportion of the L2 speakers, specifically among the oldest, performed more than 2 SDs below native peers. This implied that a large group of L2 students in Icelandic schools might require services to support them in Icelandic instruction.

One important goal of this study was to evaluate if service allocation criteria for L2 students were appropriately used in schools in Reykjavik, based on length of residence and home- language background. Findings did not support the use of these criteria. No difference was found in Icelandic mastery between students from tonal vs. non-tonal home-language background. For length in time of residence, no specific length in number of years was identified which was related to WNL performance in Icelandic. However, for the two oldest groups, an exposure level of 40% or higher was correlated with WNL status. The association between amount and timing of exposure and Icelandic mastery was shown to be complex and different across age groups. Thordardottir (2017) concluded that learning L2 in the school context is time-consuming and is not automatically successful. The poor mastery of L2 Icelandic of a large group of L2 students compared to L1 students does not imply language impairment, as it only reflects part of the overall language knowledge. However, low performance has implications for students' future access to education and employment opportunities. Informed by findings of this study, the Reykjavik School Board changed its allocation criteria, which now comprise individual assessment of Icelandic proficiency. Further research to refine the criteria is in progress according to the study author.

Other study designs

Finland

Two evaluation studies and one doctoral thesis were selected for Finland:

Repo, E. (2023). Together towards language-aware schools. Perspectives on supporting increasing linguistic diversity [Doctoral dissertation, Faculty of Education, University of Turku].

Repo (2023) explores the transformation of the reformed language policies into practices at different levels of the education system in Finland. Her mixed methods approach draws on student and teacher data and documents from teacher education institutions. Taking a holistic approach, she argues that language awareness is a foundation to support increasing linguistic diversity based on the assumption that language policies are implemented in everyday practices in multilingual schools. However, supporting increasing linguistic diversity seems to require agency on different levels. She concludes that student agency in multilingual school settings is dependent on whether they have possibilities for activities that result from cooperation. Further, the importance of the voice of vulnerable student groups is mentioned. Repo (2023) advocates changes in teacher education to prepare practitioners to support students who are also learning the language of instruction in other subjects than the Finnish language. She argues for providing more attention to second- language learning in broader discussions on immigration and integration.

Laimi, T. V., S., Saarinen, J., Seppälä, S., Hietala, R., Kaivola, J., Merimaa-Jovanovic, R., Sulonen, K., & Yeasmin, N. (2024). Myöhään maahan tulleet oppilaat koulupolulla – Kehittävä arviointi maahanmuuttotastaisten oppilaiden koulunkäytännöksiä tukevassa toimenpideohjelmassa. (Education paths of immigrant students who arrived in Finland late. Enhancement-led evaluation in the action plan supporting the capabilities for attending school of students with an immigrant background).

Laimi et al. (2024) evaluated the instruction of students in grades 7–9 who had attended school in Finland for no more than four years, defined as newly arrived students. They investigated ways of arranging instruction for newly arrived students as well as support for and monitoring of the development of their basic skills. Only little information seemed to be available on these students' basic skills when they came to Finland. To facilitate a smooth start to their school attendance, the authors recommended easy access to information about students' knowledge and skills, even if their second-language skills were still weak. It was regarded as a problem that not all required information affecting school attendance on the students' background was captured in the student information system. This had clear consequences for planning the organisation of teaching. The schools' ability to

support newly arrived students seems to be further affected by the short period in which students must complete basic education, when they are still learning the language of instruction. Laimi et al. (2024) conclude that teachers are often expected to find out the difference between evolving language proficiency and learning challenges, and that they often lack adequate tools to address this. Further, instructions seem to be unclear on how increasing language proficiency should be accounted for in student assessment.

Venäläinen, S., Laimi, T., Seppälä, S., Vuojus, T., Viitala, M., Ahlholm, M., Latomaa, S., Mård-Miettinen, K., Nirkkonen, M., & Huhtanen, M. (2022). Linguistic skills and capacities to attend school. Evaluation of preparatory education and instruction in the student's own mother tongue. In: Finnish Education Evaluation Centre.

Venäläinen et al. (2022) evaluated the national instruction programme to prepare for basic education. The evaluation focused on the achievement of the instruction objectives and forms of providing education, and further factors strengthening and hindering learning. For *teaching enhancing factors* it was found that the availability of skilled teachers could facilitate first-language instruction. Additionally, an adequate group size makes the organisation of teaching easier. Offering instruction close to students' home or in their own school and including the instruction in the students' timetable as part of the school day was another positive factor. First, language instruction was assessed positively by school leaders, as they believe in the importance for students' development to learn their own first language and its benefits for schooling in general. The recruitment of first-language teachers was regarded as a challenge. Recruitment challenges were related to candidates that lacked teacher training or other academic education, and a lack of experience in teaching or non-sufficient skills in Finnish language (Venäläinen et al., 2022).

Norway

For Norway, larger formative evaluation studies were found that combined quantitative and qualitative methods.

Lødding, B., Kindt, M. T., Randen, G. T., Lynnebakke, B., Vennerød-Diesen, F. F., Vika, K. S., & Grøgaard, J. B. (2022). Norskinnlæring, faglig utvikling og nye venner – er det mulig på samme tid? Delrapport fra prosjektet Forskning på opplæringstilbud til nyankomne elever (8232705809). (NIFU-Report 2022:26).

Lødding, B., Kindt, M. T., Vennerød-Diesen, F. F., Randen, G. T., Grøgaard, J. B., Tahir, H., & Samuelsen, Ø. A. (2024). Vilkår for inkluderende opplæring: Sluttrapport fra prosjektet Forskning på opplæringstilbud til nyankomne elever (8232706376). (NIFU-report 2024:4).

The aim of this evaluation was producing in-depth knowledge about the educational situation of children and young people aged 6–24 who had recently arrived in Norway. Lødding et al. (2022) argue that educational programmes addressing newly arrived students should strive for a balance between language, academic, and social support. Further, they stress the importance of schools providing well-grounded plans for the inclusion of newly arrived students in the school community, competent teachers in second-language teaching, bilingual teachers, and the schools' systematic work to facilitate newly arrived students' building of relationships with other students. Lødding et al. (2024) surveyed teachers on their perspectives and experiences with newly arrived students. Teachers in the survey pointed to advantages of separate classes for newly arrived students instead of placing them in ordinary classes. This enables teachers to provide individual students with more attention, adaptation, and follow-up. Teachers in separate classes reported to a far greater degree than their colleagues in ordinary classes that newly arrived students felt confident in speaking Norwegian in the classroom, considered to be important for the learning process (see also Rambøll Management, 2016b). Further, Lødding et al. (2024) found great variation in how municipalities arrange education for newly arrived students (see also Rambøll Management, 2016a). These students have a right to adapted instruction in Norwegian language and, if necessary, bilingual subject teaching and first-language instruction. The importance of teachers' competencies in teaching Norwegian as a second language is further mentioned, as is the capacity to divide lessons into different levels, and access to bilingual teachers for bilingual teaching in subjects, in line with earlier studies (see also Rambøll Management, 2016b).

Other research identified the importance of more systematic mapping of foreign-language students' skills and updated information of these students (Laimi et al., 2024). For Norway, Lødding et al. (2024) found that four of ten teachers had used the assessment tool provided by the Directorate of Education. This tool measures students' skills in Norwegian L2. Assessing students' language skills is, however, time-consuming, requires professional competencies, and requires cooperation between colleagues and follow-up of students. Students might not get the same assessment everywhere (Lødding et al., 2024). Further, there was variation between schools in terms of support of newly arrived students. Some schools might prioritise this group of students, while others might not. Further, there were variations in whether counties, which are responsible for upper secondary education, require documentation (such as passing compulsory education), and the right to upper secondary education. Finally, Lødding et al. (2024) found that some teachers and school leaders in their sample criticised that there was no curriculum in English for newly arrived students some of whom had never studied English. However, the legislation seems to provide unused possibilities for time allocation, both for students in ordinary classes and introductory classes.

Rambøll Management (2016a). Evaluering av særskilt språkopplæring og innføringstilbud. Utdanningsdirektoratet.

Rambøll Management (2016b). Kasusundersøkelse – innføringstilbud for minoritetsspråklige elever.

Rambøll Management (2016a) evaluated introductory offers for newly arrived students and to which degree it provided students with necessary skills in Norwegian so that the students could be transferred to ordinary classes. Many schools seemed to have identified good arrangements for organisation and content of the adapted language offer. Further, many school owners limited the programme originally scheduled from two years to one year to make transfers to regular classes more quickly, but it was shown that the one-year programme appeared insufficient for certain student groups. Legal amendments in terms of adapted language instruction in the Education Acts in 2012 seemed to have little impact on the design and organisation of the introductory offer. Differences were found between compulsory and upper secondary schools. At the county level, more school owners had established an introductory offer for upper secondary schools.

Rambøll Management (2016b) provided a detailed description of the organisation of the introductory offer by nine counties and municipalities. It showed that the introductory offers were mainly organised as partially integrated programmes with separate introductory classes in regular schools. Younger students, however, received mostly instruction through an integrated programme with individual adaptation in regular classes. At upper secondary school level, newly arrived students were provided education as a 'zero' year, i.e., students did not use their youth rights while attending the programme. It was a negative consequence that students did not have the same rights under the Education Act as regular students and had no right to special education. Changes in the Education Act, however, abolished the time limitation to the right to upper secondary education. Students now have this right until they have completed their education, and students in re-enforced compulsory education (§ 97) have the right to adapted language training and special education.

Rambøll Management (2016b) found that Norwegian language instruction was the priority, even though most introductory offers arranged their teaching around five subjects. Further differences were shown in whether schools and school owners emphasised that students in introductory offers should attend regular classes, with a clear distinction between compulsory and upper secondary school. At upper secondary school level, it was not usual for students to attend regular classes in contrast to compulsory school. There were more guidelines at primary school level for transitions. Key aspects for introduction programmes to operate appropriately for newly arrived students were: 1) School owners providing overall guidelines on the content in cooperation with expert teams and providing the foundation of well-functioning processes. 2) Teachers' competencies were highlighted, given that

students form a heterogeneous group. 3) Additionally, the two-year period was considered too short for an introductory offer, specifically for students arriving in Norway with little or no educational background. (Rambøll Management, 2016b). Overall, introductory offers were considered necessary and appropriate for many students, but more knowledge was required on programme quality and students' results.

Aarsæther, F. (2021). Learning environment and social inclusion for newly arrived migrant children placed in separate programmes in elementary schools in Norway. Cogent Education, 8(1), 1932227.

Aarsaether (2021) explored how schools facilitate education and social inclusion for newly arrived students in elementary schools. Applying a qualitative small-scale design, differences were shown across the three programmes, which might influence the quality of education. First, age differences between students seem to limit teachers' possibilities to promote learning for all students. Second, bilingual instruction, when provided, might ease newcomers' access to the curriculum, and students might learn faster than in classrooms without bilingual instruction. Third, teachers trained in second-language instruction might provide a better learning environment than those without, which could to some extent be linked to a certain lack of clarity in national guidelines (see also Rambøll Management, 2016a; Norozi, 2019).

Sweden

For Sweden, a total of five studies were identified to investigate methods and practices of second-language learning and translanguaging. Unlike in Norway and Finland, no large evaluation studies were found for Sweden.

Ingves, A. (2024). Vägar mot ett svenskt ordförråd: Nyanlända ungdomars ordförrådsutveckling på språkintruktionsprogrammet [Doctoral dissertation, University of Uppsala].

Ingves (2024) studied receptive vocabulary development in L2 Swedish among newly arrived students in the Swedish Language Introduction Programme (LIP). The study stressed the influence of language input and different learner-related factors on Swedish as a second language, regarding vocabulary as a dynamically changing system.

It was found that newly arrived students learn as great many Swedish words at a rapid pace despite the challenges they face. Further, the importance of providing basic literacy education and reading training has a prominent role in the LIP and is stated to bridge knowledge and skills gaps in the learner groups. While these students showed great development at a faster pace, these patterns differed across students over time. In general, this training did not seem to be sufficient to achieve the same level of knowledge as learners with longer or age-appropriate earlier school background.

The findings suggest that knowledge requirements for newly arrived students should be clearer, specifically with regards to reasonable expectations of Swedish language learning. Ingves (2024) points to a need to give clear specifications for students who have short, interrupted, or no previous school background. This also applies to opportunities to organise the LIP in a way that supports students' language learning in different ways. 1) Access to a range of school subjects is beneficial for all students. More Swedish instruction per week seems particularly beneficial for students with short, interrupted, or no school background at all. 2) Facilitating good treatment and a supportive learning environment that includes access to study guidance appears to benefit beginners and intermediate learners. The author highlights the variation among newly arrived students with varying backgrounds and explores how this variation changes and transforms with different impacting factors.

Fejes, A., & Dahlstedt, M. (2020). Language introduction as a space for the inclusion and exclusion of young asylum seekers in Sweden. International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being, 15, 9, Article 1761196.

Language introduction programmes (LIP) were set up in the wake of the upper secondary school reform of 2011 as one of the introductory offers in Swedish upper secondary school. These programmes seek to provide Swedish language instruction L2 to newly arrived students to enable them to enter a national upper secondary programme. LIP is a part of the Swedish educational system, regulated by the state. Municipalities have responsibility for provision and funding of the programme.

Fejes and Dahlstedt (2020) described a qualitative LIP design at five different schools: two ordinary schools run by the municipality, one independent upper secondary school, and two folkehøyskole. They found that while LIP students were offered the right to education, they did not always have the possibility to use this right for reasons such as a precarious and stressful life situation. Teachers worked hard to get students to attend school to create a sense of belonging. Certain organisational methods were used to facilitate the development of belonging, placing the LIP classroom in the middle of schools and organising activities across the entire school. The study also identified organisational arrangements that might have led to an exclusion of students. Students were in general positive and assessed their education as meaningful. It was concluded that the processes of inclusion and exclusion are complex, and often contradictory. Thus, to create an understanding of school as a place for inclusion, one needs to take a broad perspective, which helps to make it possible to identify these different dimensions and their relations.

Three studies were identified addressing translanguaging policies and multilingual classrooms.

Karlsson, A., Nygård Larsson, P., & Jakobsson, A. (2020). The continuity of learning in a translanguaging science classroom. Cultural Studies of Science Education, 15(1), 1–25.

Karlsson et al. (2020) explored how multilingual students use their first and second language as resources in authentic, meaning-making situations in a translanguaging science classroom (TSC) and how the students' usage of these languages might affect continuity of science learning. Findings indicate that TSC classrooms in general offer increased opportunities to multilingual students to connect the subject matter to their first language and prior experience.

Dávila, L. T., & Bunar, N. (2020). Translanguaging through an advocacy lens: The roles of multilingual classroom assistants in Sweden. European Journal of Applied Linguistics, 8(1), 107– 126.

Dávila and Bunar (2020) explored how multilingual classrooms (MLC) develop and keep translanguaging efforts to build students' learning and facilitate bicultural identities.

The study provides a critical examination of the perspectives of educators who work most closely with increasing numbers of newly arrived students in schools. First, the study offers nuanced understandings of teachers' translanguaging stances that bring focus to the ways in which Multilingual Classroom Assistants (MCAs) serve as advocates for newly arrived immigrant and refugee students. And second, there is an analysis of the intersection between educator agency and national language policy. The provision of MLCs for students with Swedish as a second language has a tradition going back to the 1970s, regulated in educational legislation for compulsory and upper-secondary school (MCA) (e.g., Skolförordning 2011:400, chap. 5 § 4). MCAs work with newly arrived students who have resided in the country for two years or less. They may have different roles depending on individual students' needs, for example the assessment of students' prior knowledge and experience, and short- and long-term social and academic language support across all subject areas. In 2013, a set of guidelines was published to advise schools to deploy MCA before, during, or after mainstream classroom instruction (Skolverket, 2013).

It was found that MCAs can facilitate culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014), adding to the wealth of knowledge and experiences newly arrived students enter school with. MCAs argued for strong support for translanguaging to reinforce students' identities, well-being, and learning. MCAs and their students worked to integrate translanguaging pedagogic practices in Swedish-medium classrooms. At the same time, MCAs seem to use a discourse which pushes back against official policy structures they believe marginalise them, their students, and parents. According to Dávila and Bunar (2020), the power of MCAs' agency in interpreting and shaping policy within schools must not be overlooked.

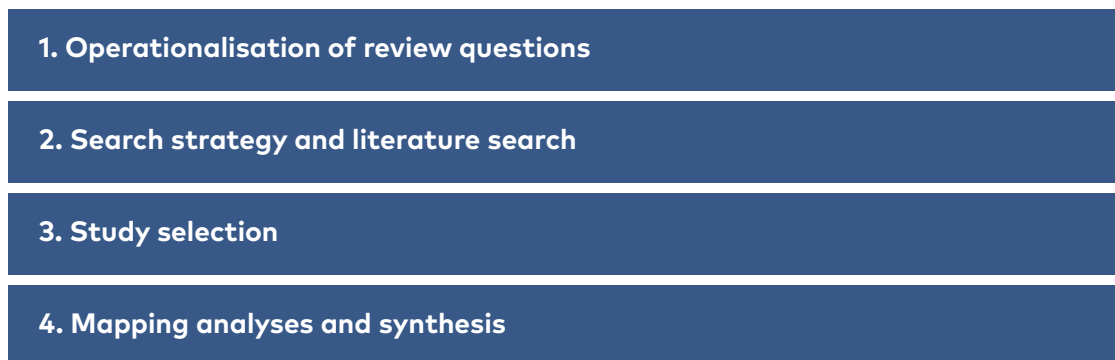
Warren, A. R. (2016). *Multilingual study guidance in the Swedish compulsory school and the development of multilingual literacies*. Nordland: Nordisk tidsskrift for andrespråksforskning, 11(2), 115–142.

Warren (2016) studied the functions of multilingual practices and the ways in which they help newly arrived students to reach their learning goals in subjects in the Swedish curriculum. She found that the functions of multilingual practices, such as reformulation, explanation and discussion, metalinguistic awareness, and task awareness show how the application of languages that newly arrived students understand besides their emerging Swedish help them understand Swedish words, concepts, and subject tasks and develop sociocultural awareness. Further multilingual study guidance (MSG) in the Swedish school can be regarded as a space for translanguaging to make sure that newly arrived students are not interrupted and that they are supported to achieve their learning goals of subjects. According to Warren (2016), the existence of MSG reflects an awareness on macro-level that the linguistic resources of newly arrived students are valuable and should be actively accessed to help them reach the knowledge goals of subjects. However, MSG was not always given to students who needed it, and there was high variation between schools and their understanding of MSG. Warren concludes that the potential of the translanguaging practices in MSG on the wider development of multilingual literacies remains to be addressed at the macro-level, given that MSG ends as soon as students have been considered ready for monolingual studies. As an elective subject, first-language instruction is regarded as the only possibility for the ongoing development of other languages by newly arrived students in Swedish school. Thus, the short-term perspective of MSG is considered negative and regarded as potentially impacting negatively on Swedish subject content.

Appendix 2. Methods: Systematic review

The study by Wollscheid (See [chapter 2](#)) applies a rapid systematic review. A systematic review is a form of secondary research that applies scientific methods and includes existing studies as data material. The approach is less resource-intensive than a full systematic review, but it still adheres to scientific methods. Less resource-intensive systematic reviews have been developed in response to the need for reliable evidence as a basis for political decision-making. The literature search (data collection) is limited in scope and is restricted by, for example, time frame, databases, and/or language (Thomas et al., 2013; Wollscheid & Tripney, 2021). Figure 1 provides an overview of different stages in systematic reviews.

Figure 4. Overview of different stages in systematic reviews



Eligibility criteria

The review includes research about second-language learning and teaching of students with foreign-language background in Nordic countries. The main question to be addressed in the literature review is:

What programmes are being used in the Nordic countries to facilitate and support second-language acquisition and instruction in compulsory and upper secondary education? How do these programmes work, and for which groups of students? What is the role of the first language for second-language learning?

Empirical studies addressing national programmes to support second-language acquisition among students with foreign-language background were included, either at compulsory level or upper secondary school level. Studies of programmes that aim at first-language learning or individual pedagogics only are not eligible. To be included, empirical studies must have been published in scientific journals or as a research report between 2014 and 2024. The publication language must be English, Norwegian, Swedish, or Danish. For publications in Finnish and Icelandic, English summaries were used. Among eligible studies addressing second-language learning, specific emphasis was placed on those with an experimental or quasi-experimental design, i.e., studies with a type of control group that might give an indication of how these programmes work, i.e., their effect. Examples include randomised controlled trials and difference-in-difference. As only a few studies with an experimental or quasi-experimental design were expected (see Wollscheid et al., 2017), observational studies and qualitative studies were also included, if they addressed second-language learning. The population–concept–context framework recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute for scoping reviews was used to operationalise the eligible criteria (Peters et al., 2015).

Table 2. Eligible criteria for the systematic literature review

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
P-population (Who?)	Students with foreign-language background	Students with native-language/majority background
C-concept (What?)	National programmes to support language acquisition First-language programmes to facilitate second-language learning Introductory offers Bilingual programmes (including the first language) Pedagogics when intertwined with national language policies	Programmes to support language acquisition in first language Special needs education Programmes supporting second-language acquisition of preschoolers Individual pedagogics, e.g., digital tools for L2 learning
C-context (With what qualifiers?)	Compulsory education Upper secondary education	Higher education Pre-School
Outcome	Main outcome: Second-language learning Secondary outcomes: Other educational outcomes Social outcomes	Teacher outcomes only First-language learning only
Time span	2014–2024	Before 2014
Publication status	Peer-reviewed journal articles, Research reports	Other types of scholarly publications (conference papers)
Language	English, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Icelandic (with English abstract)	Other languages than English and Nordic
Study design	Empirical studies with control conditions: experimental and quasi-experimental studies, e.g., randomised controlled trials, difference-in-difference, longitudinal studies Evaluations including qualitative and quantitative data Other studies addressing L2	Theoretical papers Small case studies, ethnographic studies, qualitative studies which do not address second-language learning
Geography	Nordic countries	Non-Nordic countries

Search strategy and sources

Research in education is interdisciplinary with heterogeneous study designs and a diverse publication culture comprising national languages in addition to English and different publication channels (Heck et al., 2024). Therefore, systematic searches in several international indexed databases and searches in national databases were combined. At a later stage, different types of supplementary strategic searches were added (e.g., consultation of country experts, snowballing), a common strategy applied in systematic reviews within the social sciences (Papaioannou et al., 2010). Peer-reviewed journal articles and research reports were included to reduce publication bias and included studies with different designs in the first step.

The following databases were searched for the period 2014–2024:

Web of Science Core (WoS) comprises the world's leading scholarly journals, books, and proceedings in the sciences, social sciences, and arts and humanities and navigates the full citation network. WoS enables limiting the literature according to geography (European countries) and languages (English and Scandinavian languages). WoS has a relatively low coverage of publications in the social sciences and the humanities in particular, and a low coverage of literature published in languages other than English, and book publications (Aksnes & Sivertsen, 2019). Additional searches were therefore conducted in national and field-specific databases, and strategic searches to address these limitations were added.

ERIC (Education Resource Information Center), sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education, is a leading full-text research database of full-text education journals. It provides scholarly research and information to meet the needs of education students, researchers, and policy-makers. It covers all levels of education from early childhood to higher education.

Kudos is a collection of documents such as public reports and white papers. Documents include evaluations, annual reports, strategy documents, and other policy documents. The Kudos database was searched for research reports.

Swepub collects metadata of research publications from Swedish higher education institutions in the form of scientific articles, books, theses, conference papers, etc.

DiVA is a common search function for all publications that have been registered and published with each DiVA member. Each title in the database contains bibliographic information, usually an abstract, and in several cases a link to the full text where the work is published.

IRIS is the Icelandic Research Information System and shows the research activities of Icelandic institutions. The National and University Library of Iceland is responsible for operating and supervising the system on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Culture. IRIS provides a public platform to examine research activity across institutions and the social distribution of research knowledge created in Iceland.

The portal makes it possible to view contributions and collaborations of researchers, institutions, and disciplines on a domestic and international level.

FINEEC (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre) is an independent agency responsible for the evaluation of education in Finland. It operates as a separate unit within the Finnish National Agency for Education and carries out evaluations related to education from early childhood education to higher education. The agency acts independently, and its evaluations are free from third-party influence. It has a member and an affiliate database.

FINNA is a search service that collects material from hundreds of Finnish organisations under one roof. Using versatile search functions, one can easily access millions of items, free of charge.

Supplementary strategic searches included consulting country experts, i.e., members of the reference group.

Analyses

The included studies were coded by reference, geography, population, programme, outcomes study design, and main findings. During the first round, a broader sample of studies addressing language learning more broadly was included, which was then reduced to studies with a focus on second-language learning. Further, the included sample of 16 studies was divided according to study design. Studies with an experimental and quasi-experimental approach were prioritised in the analysis.

Limitations

Generally, the scope of this literature review was broad, addressing students with a foreign-language background in compulsory school and upper secondary school and different measures facilitating second-language learning in the Nordic countries with different educational systems. As the researchers did not have high expectations of finding studies on the effect of second-language programmes (see also Wollscheid et al., 2017), the scope was not limited to studies with experimental and quasi-experimental design that are deemed to be most adequate to measure effects. The approach was informed by the systematic review methodology, which requires systematic searches in combination with strategic searches to identify eligible studies and rigor and transparency in the selection and analysis of studies. To achieve a balanced sample and prevent bias in the sample of studies, searches in general databases were combined with searches in specific databases and strategic searches via experts.

Each study, however, has its limitations. It is therefore possible that the researchers have missed eligible studies which were neither indexed in the selected databases nor published on eligible websites, nor identified by strategic searches. This may have introduced a selection bias.

Appendix 3. Additional knowledge resources

The following is a list of some online and physical resources that were either discussed during the webinar or suggested in the webinar chat.

Knowledge about the start of the project behind this report: [Language is the key to society, and society is the key to language!](#)

<https://www.norden.org/en/news/language-key-society-and-society-key-language>

Watch the [webinar video](#).

[A Cross-Nordic overview of educational policies regarding second language education across the educational system created by The research network Nordic Languages as Second Languages.](#)

Relevant reports from The Nordic Council of Ministers:

[Leaving Boys Behind? The Gender Gap in Education among Children and Young People from Foreign Backgrounds 2010–2020: A Nordic Review | NVC, 2022](#)

[Barnehage, en arena for barn og foreldres integrering i Norden: Børnehavn – Päiväkoti – Leikskóli – Barnehage – Förskola | NVC, 2021](#)

[Language Training Services for Adult Immigrants in the Nordic Countries - A Comparative Study | NVC, 2023](#)

All publications on integration of migrants and refugees in the Nordics:

<https://nordicwelfare.org/integration-norden/en/publikationer/>

Other studies:

A Norwegian report conducted by NIFU on Research on Educational Programmes for Newly Arrived Students (Lødding et al 2024): [Vilkår for inkluderende opplæring. Sluttrapport fra prosjektet Forskning på opplæringstilbud til nyankomne elever.](#)

A report by Josefin Nilsson and Karin Pettersson from the National Centre for Swedish as a Second Language at Stockholm University on how to improve early reading instruction for students who are learning to read in their second language (2025): [Så minskar vi läsgapet i svensk skola. Ett andraspråksperspektiv på läskrisen.](#)

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The role of language for integration – Strengthening second-language development in the Nordic languages among students from migrant backgrounds

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