



## Turkish Mother Tongue Instruction in Sweden

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### ABSTRACT

Home language education has a long tradition in Sweden and includes the teaching of Turkish to children who grow up bilingually with Swedish as their societal language and Turkish as their home and heritage language. The present paper characterises Turkish mother tongue instruction (MTI) and discusses its current status in the light of Swedish language policy, as it is reflected in official documents (legislation, policy papers and curricula) vis-a-vis its practical implementation by the municipalities. The paper also presents findings from a research project on Turkish-speaking preschool and primary school children and their families, concerning MTI attendance and attitudes towards Turkish, as well as on the experiences of Turkish MTI teachers in a Swedish setting.

**Keywords:** Children, Minority language, Mother tongue instruction (MTI), Sweden, Turkish

## 1. Introduction

Sweden has long offered mother tongue education to children with home languages other than Swedish and prides itself on a multilingually oriented language education policy. In international comparisons, such as the MIPEX or Eurobarometer, Sweden is indeed often ranked ahead of other Western countries, because of its public support for minority languages in education, state integration policies and multiculturally oriented politics (e.g. the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, Solano & Huddleston 2020); Multiculturalism Policy Index (2021); Special Eurobarometer 469 (European Commission Directorate-General for Communication 2018)). Some recent studies have probed how well this language policy is implemented in the Swedish educational system (e.g. Spetz 2014; Ganuza & Hedman 2015; Salö, Ganuza, Hedman & Karrebæk 2018).

Whilst Swedish is officially the principal language of Sweden and the majority language of society, many other languages are spoken in Sweden. Of these, five languages (Sami, Finnish, Meänkieli, Yiddish and Romani) have received official status as ‘national minority languages’. These indigenous languages have been spoken for centuries on the territory of the Swedish nation-state, but they have only small numbers of speakers today, due to earlier acts of minority language suppression and all-Swedish schooling. Following extensive immigration from different parts of the world, many residents of Sweden nowadays speak other minority languages (e.g. Arabic, Somali, English, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Spanish) and pass on their heritage language to their children. One of these minority languages is Turkish, which will be in focus here.

Like other minority languages, Turkish receives educational support from the Swedish state. In particular, so-called mother tongue instruction (MTI) is offered to children who have Turkish as their home (or family) language. MTI is offered to children aged between 6 and 16, and sometimes even earlier (i.e. to preschoolers), as well as to pupils in upper secondary school (aged 16–19). Most MTI takes place at primary and lower secondary school level. To date, the teaching of Turkish in Sweden has received but little attention as a research topic.

MTI has a long tradition in Sweden, and the present paper aims to characterize Turkish MTI and discuss its current status in the light of Swedish language policy. In addition, insights from a large-scale research project on bilingual Turkish-Swedish preschool and primary school age children and their families will be reported, making use of a parental questionnaire and interview data. Many of these families enroll their children in Turkish MTI classes, and they view MTI as a means of supporting and developing the heritage language Turkish. The voices of some Turkish MTI teachers will be heard as well.

This paper is structured as follows. After some brief information on Turkish speakers in Sweden (Section 2) and on the Swedish schooling system (Section 3), Section 4 outlines, from a historical perspective, how minority language rights and mother tongue education were introduced via legislation and policy documents at the level of the state. Section 5 describes

how MTI is implemented today by Swedish municipalities, pointing out changes, challenges and obstacles. In Section 6, statistics are provided on the provision of Turkish teaching today. Section 7 captures findings from the BiLI-TAS project pertaining to Turkish MTI, first for children and their parents (7.1), and then from the perspective of Turkish MTI teachers (7.2). Section 8 concludes the paper.

## 2. Turkish speakers in Sweden

Following several waves of migration from Turkey since the 1970s (see e.g. Başer & Levin 2017), Turkish-speaking immigrants and their second- and third-generation descendants constitute a sizeable community in Sweden. They mainly live in urban areas, particularly in and around the three largest cities, Stockholm in the east, Gothenburg in the west and Malmö in the south (Statistics Sweden 2017). In general, Sweden has seen less migration from Turkey, both in total numbers and percentage-wise, than other Western European countries such as Austria, Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands. Turkish is an important minority language in Sweden, but far from the most frequently spoken one, ranking somewhere in between 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> position.

The exact number of Turkish speakers in Sweden is not known, since authorities do not collect census data regarding ethnicity and speakers of a certain language. Estimates range from a conservative 45,000 (Parkvall 2015, p. 26) to 120,000 (according to the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm).<sup>1</sup> Census data for country of origin suggest that there are around 100,000 Turkish speakers in Sweden, when the number of Turkey-born residents is combined with the number of Sweden-born residents with Turkey-born parents (Statistics Sweden 2021). Note that country of origin cannot directly be equated with language spoken, as there may be residents of Sweden with family roots in Turkey who do not speak Turkish, as well as Turkish-speaking residents whose country of origin, or their parents' country of origin, is not Turkey. Still, the figures suggest that roughly 1% of the population (10 million) is Turkish-speaking or bilingual in Turkish and Swedish.

Several international surveys have investigated issues of urban multilingualism and identity in Turkish speakers in Sweden, including the Multilingual Cities Project, involving school children in Gothenburg (Nygren-Junkin & Extra 2003), and the TIES project (The Integration of the European Second Generation), involving second-generation 18- to 35-year-olds in Stockholm (Westin 2015)). Whilst not primarily linguistically oriented, these surveys report a high degree of Turkish language maintenance in their adult and adolescent second-generation participants (Aktürk-Drake 2017, 2018). It has been suggested that the high degree of heritage language maintenance may be due to a strong pattern of endogamy, which has also been

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1 The Turkish Embassy generally refers to Statistics Sweden for population estimates. According to a former ambassador, ca 60,000 residents of Sweden with Turkish nationality are in contact and registered with the Embassy. If all residents with Turkish roots were included (i.e. also those with only Swedish nationality), the figure would double.

observed for Turkish migrants and their descendants elsewhere (Backus 2004; Extra & Yağmur 2010). Setting up family with a partner from the same country of origin supports the upkeep and transmission of the home language to the next generation. Moreover, the second (i.e. Sweden-born) generation with Turkish roots often marry and have children with a newcomer from Turkey (Aktürk-Drake 2017; Swedish Migration Agency 2017; Bohnacker 2022). Such endogamy may influence family language practices, revitalise the use of Turkish in the home and support heritage-language transmission to the next generation. Children from these families are often enrolled in Turkish MTI classes. Other family constellations involve mixed-language marriages. When the parents are not both speakers of Turkish, the family often chooses the majority language (Swedish) as their predominant means of communication. Whilst one parent may still communicate with the child in Turkish, at least sometimes, exposure will be limited, and upkeep and transmission of the minority language becomes much more of a challenge. Children from such families are also enrolled in Turkish MTI classes.

Whilst most speakers of Turkish in Sweden have their family roots in Turkey, not all self-identify as Turks or consider Turkish to be their only mother tongue. Kurdish and Syriac (Neo-Aramaic) are proportionally more strongly represented in Sweden than they are in Turkey,<sup>2</sup> and they also appear to be more strongly represented in Sweden than in other countries with large-scale immigration from Turkey (Svanberg 1988; Westin 2003; Aras 2015; Bohnacker 2022). Children from such families often also attend Turkish MTI.

### 3. Early child education and schooling in Sweden

The Swedish welfare system is generally regarded as highly developed and successful in alleviating poverty and deprivation. Immigrants enjoy full access to schooling, health and social services. Early years education is comprehensive and available regardless of the family's (or the child's) social and economic situation. All children and adolescents who are registered residents of Sweden (including temporary residence-holders) have the right to education through publicly funded preschooling and schooling, as well as recreational childcare after school hours (*fritids*). In Sweden, most parents work outside the home, and institutional childcare is widespread. According to recent figures from Statistics Sweden (2019), 94% of all 3- to 5-year-old children attend preschool. Indeed, preschool (*förskola*) starts at a very young age (age 1 or 2), and most children, including migrant children, attend preschool for a major part of the day (6–8 hours/day, 30–40 hours/week). Preschools are bound by the national curriculum (*Lfpö18*, Swedish National Agency for Education 2018) to actively foster language and general cognitive and social skills, although there is variation in how this curriculum is put into practice. Preschool (for children between age 1 and 5–6) is followed by *förskoleklass*

2 According to the independent KONDA Social Structure Survey September 2006 (based on interviews with ca 50 000 people in Turkey), 76% identify themselves as ethnic Turks, 15.6% identify as ethnic Kurds, and 8.3% as belonging to other ethnic groups. 84.5% consider Turkish to be their mother tongue, 13% state that Kurdish is their mother tongue, and 1.5% consider other languages to be their mother tongue (KONDA 2007: 20-23).

(Grade 0), an optional preparatory year for primary school proper. Grade 1 of primary school starts at age 7. School is compulsory for nine years (*grundskola*, Grade 1–9, age 7–15), though most pupils also complete three years of practically or academically oriented upper secondary education (*gymnasium*, Grade 10–12). Preschools and schools are generally run in Swedish.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. Introducing minority language rights and mother tongue education

Sweden's official language policy at state level encourages multilingualism and the development and upkeep of home languages other than Swedish. The Language Act (*Språklagen*, 2009, §14) states that persons with other first languages “are to be given the opportunity to develop and use their mother tongue”.

Minority language rights were given protection in the 1974 constitutional reform (Swedish Ministry of Justice, 1974, Ch. 1, §2): “the possibilities for ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities to preserve and develop a cultural and social life of their own should be strengthened”. Soon after, the 1977 Home Language Reform introduced home language education for minority-language children. The aim of this reform was to develop “active bilingualism” (*aktiv tvåspråkighet*) in both immigrant and indigenous minority-language children. At the time, there was general agreement that home language education would have positive effects for the individual as well as for society at large. Here, the Home Language Reform was also an ideological project to promote the idea of Sweden being (or becoming) a progressively minded, pluralistic and multicultural society. Home language education became a cornerstone of official state language policy (Hyltenstam & Milani 2012; Salö et al. 2018; Bohnacker, under review).

Before the Home Language Reform in 1977, municipalities were under no obligation to offer home language education, although some had done so in different forms and via a range of initiatives. For instance, in the 1960s, municipalities with many Finnish-speaking immigrant children started to offer Finnish classes. The Home Language Reform, and the state funding that came with it, allowed municipalities and schools to more widely offer *hemspråksklasser*, i.e. transition or bilingual classes for newcomers (*hemspråksklasser*), where all pupils in class spoke the same first language (L1) and subjects were taught in the L1, or in the L1 and in Swedish. In the 1970s and 1980s, these classes were offered separate from the Swedish mainstream classes in areas with a high intake of children with the same L1, and this included Turkish. However, many of these programmes were later discontinued.

A more lasting outcome of the Home Language Reform 1977 was the introduction of *hemspråksundervisning* (home language instruction). Here the minority-language children attended Swedish-language mainstream schooling, but in addition were offered instruction in their home language. The lessons were devoted to developing oral proficiency, and later,

3 Whilst there are some bilingual (pre)school programmes (mainly for English/Swedish), no such bilingual programmes exist for Turkish/Swedish.

literacy, in the minority language. This system is still in place today. When home language instruction was introduced in 1977, it was organised by the state and relatively well-funded, with earmarked MTI funds, where the municipality received a fixed share of full-time equivalent teacher salary from the state for each child enrolled in MTI. As a result, permanent MTI teacher positions were created, and a two-year MTI teacher study programme was put in place. From its inception in 1977 until 1988 (when the programme was discontinued), more than one thousand MTI teachers were trained, according to Hyltenstam & Milani (2012, p. 59).

During the 1980s and 1990s, some MTI restrictions were imposed. For instance, a child would only be eligible for MTI if the language in question was the daily language of communication in the home, and if the child already possessed basic skills in that language. The prerequisite of basic language skills has repeatedly been criticised by the Swedish Equal Opportunities Ombudsman, by several minority rights organisations, and by the Council of Europe, as it excludes many children from MTI.<sup>4</sup>

In 1989/1990, the Swedish government decentralised the national educational system, and schooling responsibilities, including MTI, were transferred to municipalities. They lie with them to this day. Previously earmarked state funding for MTI was abolished, and the local authorities could from now on set their priorities differently. This has greatly affected the provision of MTI over time (see Section 5).

Another change concerning home language education was a terminological one. In 1997, policy makers decided to replace ‘home language’ (*hemspråk*) in official educational documents by the term ‘mother tongue’ (*modersmål*). From then on, home language instruction (*hemspråksundervisning*) was to be referred to as mother tongue instruction (*modersmålsundervisning*). The idea behind this change was to signal that one’s mother tongue was important and not only confined to the home. Unfortunately, the change in terminology had the unwelcome side effect that Swedish was no longer considered a ‘mother tongue’, and only languages other than Swedish were now referred to as mother tongues. This is confusing for many people to this day, and informally, many still speak of *hemspråk*.

The Swedish Education Act of 2010 (*Skollagen*) enshrines children’s rights to mother tongue instruction. MTI is devoted to developing minority-language oral proficiency and literacy. MTI is offered as an elective subject as part of the school curriculum in primary and secondary school. MTI is thus not regarded as an extra-curricular activity organised by volunteers, minority organisations, or foreign agents, as it is in many other countries (Salö et al. 2018; Yağmur 2020). Unusually from an international perspective, preschoolers and school-age pupils are entitled to MTI by law. In Swedish legislation and state-level language policy documents, the use of minority languages and MTI in schools is openly promoted. Yet the actual implementation of MTI is wrought with problems, as will be shown in the next section.

4 This restriction was eventually lifted for MTI in the five national minority languages, but is still in place for all other minority languages.

## 5. The implementation of mother tongue education in Sweden today

Whilst the Swedish Education Act (2010:800 §7) states that MTI is to be offered nationwide to all children growing up in families with a home language different than Swedish, conditions have tightened considerably over the past decades.

MTI is a non-mandatory, elective subject. Children in Grade 0 (*förskoleklass*) and in Grades 1–9 of compulsory school (*grundskola*) are only eligible for MTI if the mother tongue, e.g. Turkish, is spoken in the home on a daily basis, and the child has basic knowledge of the language. Moreover, the School Ordinance (2011:185, *Skolförordningen*) allows local authorities to opt out of MTI if there are fewer than five pupils who have applied for MTI in a particular language in the district. The School Ordinance also allows local authorities to opt out of MTI if no suitable teacher can be found (Ch. 5 §10). In upper secondary school (*gymnasium*), pupils are only eligible for MTI if they have received a Pass grade in MTI in Grade 9.

Apart from MTI lessons, pupils are also legally entitled to ‘mother-tongue study guidance’ (*studiehandledning på modersmål*) if needed. This means that a MTI teacher will sit in during lessons in other school subjects, to translate and help the child understand subject matter. The extent to which this service is provided varies.

The transferral of schooling responsibilities from the state to the municipal level has had certain detrimental effects for MTI. For budgetary or other reasons, town councils do not always strive whole-heartedly to support MTI. A survey by the Swedish Language Council (Spetz 2014) found that MTI provision varied greatly across the country, and that only 25 percent of municipalities offered MTI to all pupils who were eligible and had applied for it (Spetz 2014, pp. 28–29). The report pointed to constant problems with implementation and marginalisation. For instance, MTI lessons might be offered at only one school venue in the municipality, making it cumbersome for children from other schools to attend. Quite often, pupils entitled to MTI do not get taught because of small class sizes or because no suitable teacher can be found. Alternatively, children of different ages and very different proficiency levels are combined into one class to make up the numbers. Such heterogeneous groups of pupils are a challenge for MTI teachers, and effective pedagogy can become difficult (Spetz 2014; Ganuza & Hedman 2015). Unlike for other school subjects, there are no guaranteed minimum teaching hours for MTI. MTI lessons range in duration from 30 to 100 minutes per week, where 40 to 60 minutes are typical (Swedish National Agency for Education 2008 Appendix 1 p.13; Spetz 2014).

MTI is organised in different ways by the municipalities. Some MTI teachers are directly employed by the school, though this only happens in some municipalities and for languages with large enrolment (e.g. Arabic, Somali). More commonly, MTI teachers are employed by a central municipal unit (e.g. *Modersmålsenheten*, *Språkcentrum*, *Språkskolan*) and are then ‘supplied’, i.e. sent out, to different schools. Such MTI teachers have to shuttle between schools as their pupils are distributed all across town or even across different towns. In an ethnographic study of Somali and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian MTI, Ganuza & Hedman (2015)

found that peripatetic MTI teachers were very common, with one teacher serving up to 12 different schools. This precludes MTI teachers being properly integrated into the workings of a particular school. They have insufficient contact with other teachers and are rarely included in regular staff meetings. Sometimes MTI teachers even have to ‘hunt’ for a classroom to conduct their lessons in. The working conditions of many MTI teachers are thus far from optimal. MTI tends to be poorly integrated with other school subjects and other aspects of school life, and it is often tagged onto the timetable of children at the end of the school day.

Altogether, this signals that MTI and minority home languages have a lower status than other school subjects, including foreign languages (English, Spanish, German, French).

In contrast to the relatively detailed curricula and syllabi for other school subjects in Sweden, the national curriculum for MTI (*Lgr11*, revised in 2019) is formulated in very general terms, stating only some overarching learning objectives: “MTI should give pupils the opportunity to develop knowledge in and about their mother tongues”, and “develop their cultural identity and become multilingual” (Swedish National Agency for Education 2019, p. 87). One and the same curriculum is meant to cover *all* mother tongues, and nothing is said about content and skills in the individual language, e.g. Turkish. This gives MTI teachers a lot of freedom in interpreting learning objectives, choosing content and pedagogical approaches. It also means that content and quality of MTI teaching is variable.

The training and study background of MTI teachers is very heterogeneous (Spetz 2014; Ganuza & Hedman 2015), which is hardly surprising, as there is a lack of formal MTI teacher training programmes in Sweden. They are native speakers of the language they teach; other qualifications vary. The teachers may have college or university degrees in a relevant subject and extensive training in language teaching either from their home country, from Sweden, or from a third country, whilst others are less well trained, both academically and concerning language didactics. Municipal MTI units and schools may offer in-service pedagogical training to MTI teachers. Whilst some Swedish universities have made attempts to establish MTI teacher programmes, full-fledged programmes are lacking and/or have been put on hold. Generally, only some short courses (e.g. 7.5 ECTS) for classroom and remote teaching are offered, for only some languages, and with relatively few enrolments. The only programme specifically geared to Turkish MTI teachers in Sweden, run by the Department of Education in collaboration with the Turcology unit, has recently been discontinued.

Over the years, the hours afforded by municipalities to MTI lessons have been reduced to 30–60 min/week for school-age pupils. Even more dramatically, MTI in preschools has largely disappeared altogether. Preschools are still legally required to provide opportunities for developing the minority language. The national curriculum for preschools (*Lpfö18*, Swedish National Agency for Education 2018) states that “children with a mother tongue other than Swedish should be given the opportunity to develop both their Swedish language and their mother tongue” (Swedish National Agency for Education 2018, p. 9). Exactly how this is to be



done is not spelled out in the preschool curriculum. Multilingual practices certainly do occur in preschools, due to linguistically diverse child intake and multilingual staff recruitment in many urban areas. Some children might thus have one or two staff members speaking and/or understanding their home language. However, this is not the same as having MTI teachers in preschools. Until around 2014–2015, many municipalities still offered MTI for preschoolers (30–60 min/week), so-called *modersmålsstöd* ('mother tongue support'). When this was criticised as being too little, some of the largest municipalities responded not by increasing the number of hours, but by discontinuing MTI for preschoolers altogether; for instance, this happened in Stockholm, and as recently as in 2016 in Uppsala (e.g. Lindström 2016). Today, very few preschool children receive MTI, unless the parents arrange for private tuition.

Taken together, there is a discrepancy between the strong status of MTI in Swedish legislation and policy documents, and its actual practical implementation. However, since its inception nearly 50 years ago, MTI has received continuous and staunch support in Swedish official opinion, which is encouraging and noteworthy in an international context. In many other countries, the winds are changing on mother tongue education. Sweden's neighbouring country Denmark, for instance, as well as several other Western European countries, such as Belgium or the Netherlands, have recently abandoned earlier pluralistic language policies, and substantially reduced or abolished state-funded MTI (e.g. Salö et al. 2018).

It should also be said that in spite of the aforementioned shortcomings in the municipal offerings, MTI can still make a crucial difference. Even though an average MTI lesson only lasts for 40–60 min/week, cumulative positive effects may add up over the school years. Indeed, several large-scale studies have found that MTI attendance correlates with, and might contribute to, better academic achievement in school. When the school results of more than 9,500 pupils with a foreign background (*elever med utländsk bakgrund*)<sup>5</sup> were compared, children who had been attending MTI reached higher grades in Grade 9 in a range of subjects than those who had not attended MTI (Swedish National Agency for Education 2008, pp. 66–67). A recent report by the Swedish Ministry of Education (SOU 2019:18) refers to a large-scale study where the school results were analysed for all 26,500 9<sup>th</sup>-grade pupils that were entitled to MTI in 2017; about half of them attended MTI, half did not. Here the MTI-attendees (as a group) had significantly higher school results than the non-attendees. In another, carefully designed, study of 120 Somali-Swedish bilingual school children, Ganuza & Hedman (2019) compared pupils' vocabulary and reading comprehension skills for MTI attendees vs non-attendees, as well as gains over time. Interestingly, pupils who had been attending Somali MTI for at least one year not only performed better than non-attendees on the Somali tasks, but also performed better on Swedish reading comprehension. Increased training in literacy during MTI lessons may be one of the reasons why MTI attendees in the abovementioned studies showed better school results than non-attendees.

5 *Med utländsk bakgrund* ('with a foreign background') is an official term used in Swedish statistics. It includes both children who were born outside Sweden and moved to Sweden, as well as Sweden-born children who have one or two foreign-born parents (i.e. parents born outside Sweden).

Irrespective of these results, it should be emphasised that MTI also has a symbolic function, signalling to minority-language children that the mother tongue is valued and worth investing time in. When parents, teachers and schools are openly positive towards multilingualism and MTI, pupils will feel that their multilingual resources are appreciated, and that they may want to attend, and also continue to attend, MTI throughout their school years.

## 6. Statistics on Turkish MTI

The Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) registers how many pupils are eligible for MTI. These figures do not include children under the age of 6, older children in upper secondary school, or children for whom parents have not requested MTI. During the academic year of 2021/2022, 28.6% of all pupils in Grade 1–9 (age 7–16) were entitled to MTI, and 58.5% of these pupils also received MTI (Swedish National Agency for Education 2022).

Turkish is one of the languages with the highest MTI attendance. Every year, roughly 6,500–7,500 pupils are eligible for Turkish in Grade 1–9 (the figures vary somewhat from year to year). Slightly more than half of these children, on average 54%, receive Turkish MTI, though provision and attendance rates vary dramatically between different municipalities (27%–75%, and in some places close to zero). Table 1 shows the municipalities with the largest numbers of Turkish-speaking children during the school year 2016/2017. The figures provided here are the most recent publicly available ones. Since 2017/2018, Skolverket has published no more figures for the individual municipalities and individual MTI languages, such as Turkish.

	Entitled to MTI	Received MTI	% MTI attendance
<b>Greater Stockholm region</b>			
Stockholm (Stockholms kommun)	1494	1003	67
Botkyrka	661	499	75
Huddinge	459	273	59
Haninge	331	193	58
Järfälla	147	91	62
Sollentuna	114	34	30
<b>Rest of Sweden</b>			
Gothenburg (Göteborgs kommun)	834	416	50
Malmö	599	353	59
Uppsala	135	51	38
Helsingborg	110	30	27
Gävle	105	48	46
<b>All of Sweden*</b>	<b>7307</b>	<b>3928</b>	<b>54%</b>
*Note: All of Sweden refers to all Swedish municipalities combined (i.e. not only those listed above with > 100 children entitled to Turkish mother tongue instruction). Source: Swedish National Agency for Education (2017).			

For many decades until 2016, Turkish was amongst the largest MTI languages in Grade 1–9, but it is no longer amongst the top ten. This is not due to lower enrolment figures or less Turkish MTI; in fact, the numbers of pupils eligible for Turkish have increased slightly. However, there are nowadays many more children eligible for other MTI languages (especially Arabic, Somali, English, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Kurdish, Persian, Spanish, Albanian and Polish). As a result, the proportion of Turkish out of all MTI languages has shrunk.

For Grade 0 (*förskoleklass*), i.e. children in the preparatory year between preschool and first grade of primary school, Turkish is one of the languages with the highest MTI attendance. Every year, 850–1000 children in Grade 0 are eligible for Turkish MTI, and about half of them also receive it. Turkish has long been and is also currently (2021/2022) amongst the ten largest MTI languages in Grade 0.

As for MTI in preschools, there are no national statistics on the numbers of preschoolers that receive mother tongue support in Turkish. Due to municipal cuts in recent years (recall Section 5), the number is likely to be very low.

There are no national statistics available concerning the number of Turkish MTI teachers in Sweden. To give the reader some idea, we requested data for the four largest cities (Greater Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö and Uppsala), where the lion's share of Turkish teaching in Sweden is provided. There are 28 full-time equivalents (FTE) for MTI teaching positions in Turkish in these cities. This number has remained relative stable for the past 10 years.<sup>6</sup>

## 7. Insights concerning Turkish MTI from a recent research project

As part of a larger research project (BiLI-TAS) at Uppsala University on the language development of bilingual children with Turkish or Arabic as their home language, data was collected from more than one hundred Turkish-Swedish bilingual children aged between 4 and 7 and their families. The families lived in urban municipalities in Eastern Central Sweden, more specifically in the conurbation of Greater Stockholm and in two large cities (Uppsala and Gävle). The children had Turkish as their home language, whilst Swedish was the language of schooling and society. Whether and to what extent Swedish was spoken at home varied. Only children who were able to speak both Turkish and Swedish were included in the study. Most children were bilingual, but some trilinguals participated as well (mainly Turkish-Kurdish-Swedish). The children were recruited by contacting more than 200 preschools and schools, their principals and teachers, as well as through other channels. These included Turkish MTI teachers who established direct contacts with families, leaders at places of worship, word-of-mouth recruitment within the Turkish diaspora, social media, as well as personal connections. In the end, the children came from more than 50 (pre)schools in different locations.

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<sup>6</sup> We obtained these figures by phone calls to the respective municipalities. See also Aras (2015).

The BiLI-TAS project<sup>7</sup> was primarily geared towards investigating the children's language comprehension and production skills in Turkish and Swedish, and we collected language data on a range of tasks (vocabulary, grammar, phonological processing, storytelling (narrative macrostructure), and inferential comprehension). We also administered an extensive questionnaire to the parents of the children about family background, language use and child language development, and thus also received some information on MTI attendance and attitudes towards MTI. In addition, a subgroup of the participants was seen again two years later as part of a longitudinal follow-up, where the parents were systematically interviewed about language practices and home-language maintenance efforts. We also interviewed some Turkish MTI teachers. All this data was anonymised.

Below we report some of the insights gained during the project as they pertain to MTI.<sup>8</sup>

### 7.1. Child participants, their parents and MTI attendance

The Turkish-speaking children (N=105) in the *cross-sectional part* of the BiLI-TAS project were aged 4.0–8.2 and fairly evenly distributed across age and gender (27 4-year-olds, 23 5-year-olds, 27 6-year-olds, and 28 7-year-olds (including two who had just turned 8 years)). Nearly all children (90%) were born and had lived in Sweden all their lives, only a few (10%) had moved to Sweden as young children. By contrast, many parents were born in Turkey, and in most families both parents had Turkish as their first language (or Turkish as one of their first languages, the other language sometimes being Swedish or Kurdish). There was much diversity in family types concerning parental country of birth, parental education and occupation, and length of residence in Sweden (for more details, see Öztekin 2019, Bohnacker 2020, and especially Bohnacker 2022).

Despite this diversity, some common traits in language practices and beliefs emerged, including a strong focus on the transmission of Turkish in the home in most families, whilst the children acquired Swedish mainly through preschool. Most children had attended institutional childcare extensively and from an early age. Nearly all parents valued Turkish highly and expressed an interest in providing input and support to their children in Turkish. They all wanted their children to be good at both Turkish and Swedish, and employed a range of language practices to maintain and develop the heritage language (for details see Bohnacker 2022).

7 The BiLI-TAS acronym stands for Bilingualism, Language Impairment, Turkish, Arabic & Swedish. This research project was originally funded by the Swedish Research Council (VR 421-2013-1309, PI: Ute Bohnacker) with the title: 'Language impairment or typical language development? Developing methods for linguistic assessment of bilingual children in Sweden' (2014-2019), and also included a group of children with language impairment (not reported on here). A longitudinal continuation of the BiLI-TAS project is funded by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (RJ P19-0644:1, PI: Ute Bohnacker) with the title: 'Heritage language and Swedish language development from preschool to primary school' (2020-2024).

8 Please note that the main results from the Turkish part of the BiLI-TAS project concern other topics and these are reported in publications elsewhere (e.g. Bohnacker, Lindgren & Öztekin 2016; Öztekin 2019; Lindgren 2018; Bohnacker 2020; Bohnacker & Karakoç 2020; Bohnacker, Öztekin & Lindgren 2020; Bohnacker, Haddad, Lindgren, Öberg & Öztekin 2021; Bohnacker, Lindgren & Öztekin 2021; Bohnacker 2022).

One of these deliberate language management efforts was mother tongue instruction, as signing up a child for Turkish lessons is a conscious parental decision. 54% of the children in the sample attended Turkish MTI. This need not mean that all the remaining 46% families opted against MTI; it could also mean that their applications were not granted. Attendance was heavily skewed for age. The oldest children attended MTI much more frequently (age 7: 82%) than the younger children (26%–59%), see Table 2. This uneven distribution probably reflects the recent cuts in municipal MTI for preschoolers, i.e. under 6-year-olds, as described in Section 5. At the time of data collection, some municipalities were still offering MTI for preschoolers, whilst others had stopped doing so.

<b>Age group</b>	<b>MTI attendance</b>
4 yrs	44% (12/27)
5 yrs	26% (6/23)
6 yrs	59% (16/27)
7 yrs	82% (23/28)
Total	54% (57/105)

Other than age, we could not discern any tendencies concerning which families enrolled their child in Turkish MTI (Bohnacker 2022). Attendance was not higher (or lower) for Turkey-born vs Sweden-born children, children whose parents had Turkish as their first language vs parents who had another first language (such as Swedish), or for children with parents of a particularly high or low level of education. Neither did there appear to be any link between MTI attendance and which language the parents considered to be more important (this was a question we asked in the questionnaire). A large majority of parents (80%) considered Turkish and Swedish equally important for their child to learn, but some parents (14%) considered Turkish more important than Swedish, and 3% regarded Swedish more important. However, only 46% of those parents who regarded Turkish as more important than Swedish had enrolled their child in Turkish MTI, which was lower than average. As for trilingual families, children are only entitled to receive MTI in one of their languages, so the family has to choose. Thus, opting for Turkish means opting out of MTI in another language. Here it was interesting to note that children from Kurdish/Turkish homes attended Turkish MTI as frequently as children from purely Turkish-speaking homes.

The children who attended Turkish MTI typically received 40–60 minutes of tuition per week, which corresponds to what the literature has reported for MTI in other languages (e.g.

Swedish National Agency for Education 2008; Spetz 2014).<sup>9</sup> In some cases, parents reported that their children only received 30 min/week. Two families had arranged for extra, private Turkish tuition, and in one case this resulted in an exceptional total of 3.5 hours per week.

For the *longitudinal follow-up*, out of the 27 four-year-olds in the cross-sectional study, 10 children were seen again two years later when they were 6 years old. They did the same language tasks in Turkish and Swedish (not reported here, see Öztekin 2019), and were observed in their school environment. During a home visit, a native Turkish-speaking researcher observed the child in his or her family environment, took field notes and carried out a face-to-face interview with the parents in Turkish concerning language practices. Here we only report on aspects of Turkish MTI and Turkish language use at (pre)school.<sup>10</sup>

All ten children had previously attended institutional daycare from an early age (starting at 12–27 months, 26–40 h/week). Two years later, most of them attended *förskoleklass* (Grade 0) of primary school. Their schools had a high intake of children from many different language backgrounds. Whilst the main language of communication inside all schools was Swedish, we observed that some staff spoke Turkish or other languages to their colleagues or to the parents during school hours. The parental interviews revealed that at the child's earlier preschool, all 10 children had been able to speak Turkish with at least one staff member, as well as with some schoolmates, something that had not been evident from the questionnaires. Some parents confirmed that at their child's new school, there was a Turkish-speaking staff member who spoke Swedish and Turkish with their child. Several children also had Turkish classmates. However, four children no longer met any Turkish-speaking staff, and one family reported that whilst there were two Turkish-speaking teachers at the new school, the children were not permitted to speak Turkish. In general, these observations suggest that multilingual practices in school are commonplace. Often, the use of the minority languages, including Turkish, appears to be encouraged or at least tolerated on (pre)school premises. In one school however, we found a language policy that discouraged the use of Turkish.

Seven out of the 10 children (at 6 years) were enrolled in municipal Turkish MTI, on average ca 60 min/week. At the individual level, MTI attendance had changed compared to two years earlier. Some children who did not attend at age 4 were now enrolled at age 6, whilst others no longer attended. When we asked why this was so, some parents said that the child was no longer interested in going there. Some parents were happy with the MTI offered, whilst a few pointed out problems with the practical implementation of MTI, such as after-school hours and children of different proficiency levels in the same class. Several parents also expressed regret that so little MTI was offered for preschoolers, reflecting recent municipal cuts.

9 In the BiLI-TAS project, corresponding data were collected also for a group of 100 Arabic/Swedish-speaking children age 4–7. Comparing Arabic MTI with Turkish, we found that the Arabic-speaking children were not only more often enrolled in MTI, but also that the Arabic MTI attendees were receiving twice as much tuition time (on average, 1.9 hours) than the Turkish MTI attendees (0.9 hours). See Bohnacker et al. (2021).

10 See Öztekin (2019) and Bohnacker (under review) for results on other aspects of the longitudinal data.

## 7.2. Turkish MTI teachers' experiences

We also interviewed four Turkish MTI teachers in 2014 and 2021 about their experiences. Their backgrounds and service lengths were mixed; two had been working as MTI teachers in Sweden for many years, two others were relatively new. They all had academic degrees and extensive pedagogical training from Turkey or Sweden or a third country. They had attended in-service teacher training to varying degrees.

All pointed out the difficult working conditions of being a peripatetic teacher (recall Section 5). None of the teachers were employed at one school only, but all were sent out to different schools by the municipal MTI supply centres. One of the teachers was responsible for children in more than a dozen locations in a large province, and additionally covered locations in several other provinces of Sweden. This involved a lot of travelling but also remote teaching via video calls; note that this was several years before the Covid19 pandemic struck and before remote teaching became widespread. This teacher enjoyed providing her services to children across the country, often on a one-to-one basis, but also pointed out the vulnerability of such lessons, due to frequent technical failures. The other three MTI teachers were stationed in one city and in one case, mainly at one school, but all were teaching children at several (or many) different schools. One teacher provided not only mother tongue instruction to school children, but also mother tongue support (*modersmålsstöd*) to preschoolers. This was before that particular municipality abolished MTI for preschoolers. Some of the teachers had also provided mother-tongue study guidance in Turkish to older pupils.

Since Turkish is not one of the largest mother tongues in Sweden, it is not surprising that none of the teachers we interviewed taught large groups of pupils. They said that they usually taught one to five children at a time. Concerning group teaching, all teachers said they felt challenged by the fact that children with widely different proficiency levels enrolled in the same class. Sometimes, it was possible to divide up the children into pairs with similar proficiency levels (but different ages) to be taught together or to teach children individually, albeit for a shorter time. This is somewhat different from what is reported in the literature for larger mother tongues such as Somali and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, where ethnographic studies have found that there are usually five to ten, and sometimes up to 26 pupils, in a MTI class (e.g. Ganuza & Hedman 2015).

The teachers also pointed out a mismatch between parent and teacher expectations. In their experience, some parents send their child to Turkish MTI with very high expectations, namely that the MTI teacher makes up for lost opportunities at home. Some parents with Turkish roots do not speak much Turkish with their child at home and realise after some years that the child does not really speak Turkish at all. They then apply for MTI and expect the teacher to teach the child Turkish from scratch. However, this is not in accordance with the regulations for MTI, since the law requires that children already possess basic communication skills in Turkish in order to be entitled to MTI. According to one teacher, “parents often lie” and claim that the child

speaks Turkish at home, contrary to fact. Once enrolled in MTI class, it transpires that the child barely understands any Turkish, let alone speaks it. MTI teachers are then saddled with children of widely divergent proficiency levels, some speaking fluent Turkish and ready to embark on literacy training, others with hardly any knowledge of Turkish at all. One can teach (and learn) only so much during a 40-minute lesson, and when the child does not make a lot of headway, the parents criticise or blame the MTI teacher. One of informants also reported that occasionally some parents had tried to exert pressure on the teacher to give their child a Pass grade.

The teachers we interviewed emphasised that many Turkish-speaking children in their municipality were not enrolled in MTI, because “many parents are simply not interested”. Conversely, a large proportion of the teachers’ clientele did not come from monolingual Turkish homes, but from homes where Kurdish was spoken as well. This impression meshes well with what is known about migration from Turkey and the Turkish-speaking population in Sweden (see Section 2). Thus, children sometimes bring a mix of Turkish and Kurdish into class, and/or different Turkish dialects (and not just standard Turkish). The teachers emphasized that such multilingualism and dialectal variation needs to be handled sensitively. One MTI teacher said he was aided by being a Turkish/Kurdish bilingual speaker himself.

Whilst all four teachers took much pride in their work, one of them pointed out that MTI teachers were underpaid and not always held in very high esteem (by parents, schools and other teachers). This comment is reminiscent of the unsatisfactory working conditions of MTI teachers described in the literature (Spetz 2014; Ganuza & Hedman 2015; see Section 5). In fact, by 2021, one of the MTI teachers previously interviewed had left the profession for this reason and was instead working as a college lecturer.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has provided a historical perspective on home language education in Sweden, outlining how minority language rights and mother tongue instruction (MTI) were introduced via legislation and policy documents at the level of the state, but also how MTI has been implemented since the 1970s to this day. A special focus has been on Turkish, and the paper has described the preconditions for and the ways in which MTI is currently being offered by Swedish municipalities to Turkish-speaking children. In addition to nationwide MTI provision rates, results have also been reported from a research project in Eastern Central Sweden, involving more than 100 Turkish-Swedish children aged 4–7 and their families. These families generally value Turkish highly and consider the heritage language and the social language (Swedish) as equally important. Yet only 54% of the children in the sample attended Turkish MTI classes, sometimes due to a lack of interest, but also due to a lack of provision, especially concerning MTI for preschoolers. Interviews with Turkish MTI teachers revealed practical challenges, such as teachers having to shuttle between many different schools, co-teaching children at very different proficiency levels, and parents’ unrealistic expectations.



This paper has provided some insights into the workings of Turkish MTI in Sweden today. More research on this topic would be welcome. For instance, there have not been any observational studies of Turkish MTI teaching ‘in action’ as yet – what happens in class, what materials are used, and what pedagogical methods are employed? We know very little about such aspects of MTI, also for other mother tongues (the ethnographic study by Ganuza & Hedman (2015) on Somali MTI classrooms being a noteworthy exception). It would also be interesting to see whether the move towards more digital language learning materials and remote, online, teaching methods that were enforced during the Covid19 pandemic has spurred a lasting change. MTI teachers could be interviewed about these and other matters, including their beliefs about language learning and teaching. Also, pupils of different ages attending MTI could be asked how they perceive MTI and what they appreciate the most. In general, very little is known about pupils’ perspectives here, and the few studies there are have focused on older pupils, and none on Turkish.

Despite the challenges of implementation described in this paper and the sometimes insufficient MTI offerings by the municipalities, MTI in Sweden still has a relatively strong position, also in international comparison. Children might only be receiving 40–60 minutes of instruction in their mother tongue per week, but the positive effects of such classes accumulate over the school years. Last but not least, MTI can have an important symbolic value, signaling to children and others that mother tongues are held in high esteem and are worth investing time in.

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