



# Controversial topics and teacher answerability in Swedish for immigrants classes for refugees<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses a dialogic framework to analyse how teachers of Swedish as a second language to adult refugee learners in Sweden position themselves in terms of both planned and contingent approaches in the classroom in relation to values teaching and controversial topics. The paper draws on a narrative study which explored the stances of five *Swedish for Immigrants* teachers in relation to problematic topics through the use of narrative frames, picture prompts and interviews. Findings from the study suggest that teachers' choices to engage with or avoid values teaching and controversial topics can best be understood in terms of dialogic answerability, namely a moral responsiveness and responsibility to students as well as to the host society.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, significant media attention has been devoted to issues pertaining to migration, refugees, resettlement, integration, and the threat of radicalization. However, relatively little is known about how language teachers – often crucial in the integration process – position themselves in relation to prevailing discourses and their contingent approaches in relation to controversial topics in the classroom. Language teachers in migrant and refugee classes tend to occupy a unique position of responsibility, or answerability, as often the sole respondent to a range of questions and issues arising from the settlement process. Further, though teachers may feel powerless in the face of increasing hostility towards new settlers from the host society, they have significant agency within the classroom space. As teachers, they are regularly required to deal with difficult dichotomies such as cultural relativism/values teaching, tolerance/critical teaching and topic avoidance/exploration both contingently and in terms of planned approaches. These decisions take place in a setting that is further complicated by having newly settled students who are dealing with the effects of trauma. The teaching space thus becomes a high-stakes environment that may lay the foundation for successful integration but may also serve to alienate individuals or groups of students if they do not find the

space culturally and emotionally safe. An earlier study I undertook in a New Zealand context indicated that practitioners tended to prioritize a safe, positive classroom atmosphere over critical exploration of cultural values, avoiding contentious topics and guiding students away from conflict as far as possible (Brookie, 2016).

This article is based on a study undertaken in the context of *Swedish for immigrants* (Sfi) provision in Sweden, a context that lends itself to an exploration of teachers' answerability and choices around values teaching and controversial topics. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, due to Sweden's liberal policies regarding migration – and especially asylum seekers and refugees – the global refugee crisis has impacted that society; discourses surrounding societal and cultural integration are common in the public and semi-private domain. Secondly, Sweden has a set of clearly defined “fundamental values,” which are mandatory in all adult education and include values such as LGBT rights and gender equality – values which may be contested by other cultures but which form an integral part of Swedish education, including adult language education (Carlson, 2015; Rosén, 2013a, 2013b). Against this background, the study sought to explore the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do Sfi teachers interact with current discourses of integration personally and professionally?

RQ 2: How does answerability impact on Sfi teachers' choices regarding values education, controversial topics and intercultural sensitivity?

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RQ 3: How do current integration challenges interact with teachers' emotions, identity and agency?

While the focus of this article is primarily on the second research question, findings from the other two will be used to inform the discussion.

## 2. The Swedish context

In addition to migration under family and employment criteria, Sweden, a country of approximately 9.5 million people, accepts 1700–1900 quota refugees yearly (Migrationsverket, 2015a) and granted asylum to over 100,000 asylum seekers over the three years preceding the 2015 global refugee crisis (Migrationsverket, 2015b). As a result of the 2015 refugee crisis, over 160,000 asylum seekers entered Sweden in 2015 (Migrationsverket, 2016) and in 2016 around 70,000 asylum seekers were granted residence (Migrationsverket, 2017). With such large numbers, the issue of integration has received significant attention publically and politically. As a member of the European Union, Sweden conforms to EU's (2004) "Common Basic Principles" which acknowledge integration as a two-way process with emphasis on democracy, education, labour market integration, language and culture acquisition and multicultural acceptance. However, low employment rates for foreign-born residents (Andersson & Weinar, 2014), together with increased segregation, difficulties around integration and perceived threats to Sweden's welfare and culture have contributed to creating a climate where one-way 'integration' – into the labour market and also into the local culture and value systems – has increasingly become viewed as the only solution. Changes in public perceptions around immigration and integration are reflected in the rapid growth of the nationalist party, *Sverigedemokraterna* (the Swedish Democrats, SD) who polled at nearly 13% in the 2014 general elections.

Adult immigrants who are granted residency in Sweden are entitled to free education through Swedish for Immigrants (Sfi),<sup>1</sup> a foundation programme progressing up to B1/B1+ on the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR); from this stage onwards learners should be able to manage day-to-day life, engage in entry-level and semi-skilled employment or progress to higher level Swedish courses. Though language is the main focus, the syllabus stipulates that intercultural competence is to be achieved through students "reflecting over their own cultural experiences, and comparing these with phenomena in daily, societal and working life in Sweden" (Skolverket, 2012a, p. 1). At the same time there is an expectation on Sfi as an organisation to foster integration through facilitating entry into the labour market (Lindberg & Sandwall, 2007; Rosén & Bagga-Gupta, 2013) and through promoting cultural integration and values education (Carlson, 2002; L. Gustafsson, 2015). Teachers working within the Sfi context are expected to promote certain "fundamental values" relating to democracy, individual freedom and equality. The *Curriculum for Adult Education Programme* (Skolverket, 2012b, p. 6) states that "... the purpose of the education... is for students to acquire and develop knowledge and values... and anchor among students - respect for human rights and underlying democratic values on which Swedish society rests." Examples of these values include "the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all human beings, gender equality as well as solidarity" (p. 6). At the same time, the curriculum promotes active measures against

discrimination and xenophobia, which should "be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures" (p. 6).

The expectation on teachers to simultaneously promote a set of democratic, Swedish values, and a relativizing understanding where no opinion is discriminated against can be problematic. Adopting prescriptive values teaching as a norm may lead teachers to adopt the role of socialiser (Carlson, 2002; Gustafsson, 2015) with a mandate to "school" participants, possibly creating resentment in students, while a more relativizing stance may conflict with the mandate to promote (culturally conditioned) fundamental values.

### 2.1. Critical culture teaching, controversial topics and values education

The relativizing stance on culture teaching and its relationship to fundamental cultural values has been extensively discussed in the literature. While traditional approaches to culture teaching advocated assimilation for language learners (Schumann, 1986), more recent approaches suggest that the teacher's primary responsibility is providing the learner with the ability to engage critically with culture (see Byram, Nichols, and Stevens, 2001 for an early discussion of this). Culture has increasingly become conceptualised as discursive meaning-production with intercultural competence conceived as not only a matter of tolerance and understanding, but also of "looking beyond words and actions and embracing multiple, changing and conflicting discourse worlds" (Kramsch, 2011, p. 356) through "a process of positioning the self both inside and outside the discourse of others," (Kramsch, 2011, p. 359) critically analysing discourse and discursive practices, subject positions and power dimensions. Elsewhere Kubota (2003) argues for a view of culture as discursively constructed, "diverse, dynamic, and fluid, constructed and transformed by political and ideological forces" (p. 70), and "always shifting and reshaping itself into new forms" (p. 78). Kubota's view of intercultural competence follows that of Byram (1997, 2012), but "moves beyond a neutral sense of the *intercultural* in everyday communication and confronts difficult issues of brutality, atrocity, and exploitation in order to search for moral responsibilities for teachers and learners as citizens of the local and global communities" (Kubota, 2012, p. 39). Kubota (2014) advocates using controversial historical narratives, such as the contested narratives around the bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima to encourage critical culture learning, and argues that "thinking and debating about controversial issues is educationally vital for developing critical thinking, building interpersonal skills in public discussion, and fostering morally responsible citizens in our society" (p. 230). Critical engagement as an approach to culture teaching is also supported by Pennycook's (1990, 2001) critical pedagogy, where culture is given "a fundamental role in the way we make sense of the world and is taken to be a productive rather than merely a reflective system" (Pennycook, 1990, p. 309).

Though potentially beneficial on educational, interpersonal and moral levels, the introduction of either critical cultural dimensions, values teaching, and/or controversial issues into language teaching, can be complex and conflicting. As McKinney (2005) points out, critical pedagogy, which simultaneously embraces both the promotion of diverse views and the promotion of fundamental values such as human rights, can be fraught with tensions for the teacher "balancing the role as the 'democratic' or 'fair' teacher who is open to a number of views, with [his/her] moral or ethical position, which judges particular views as unacceptable" (p. 383). Kubota (2014) also recognises that providing a balanced view can become problematic for teachers when controversial issues touch on things such as human rights and denials of well-established historical events or when the views of some students emotionally hurt other students. Byram et al. (2001, p. 7) solve the dilemma, perhaps simplistically, by referring to "a fundamental values position which all language

<sup>1</sup> Exceptions are immigrants from Denmark and Norway, whose languages are sufficiently similar to Swedish to make foundation level language learning unnecessary.

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