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Emergent literacy instruction: ‘continua of biliteracy’ among newly immigrated adolescents

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on the instruction of recently immigrated adolescents with limited educational backgrounds who are developing emergent literacy. It is based on an ethnographic study conducted in a public Swedish language introductory class in 2017/2018. Its purpose is to investigate how the students engaged in literacy practices during the instruction, and how they were supported by their teachers. Empirical data, which included field notes, audio recordings, and interviews with students, were analyzed with the help of two dimensions of Hornberger’s continua of biliteracy, namely, the content and development of biliteracy. Analysis of the content of biliteracy indicated that students’ previous knowledge, as well as class field trips and tangible examples, served as important foundations for their instruction. Analysis of the development of biliteracy showed that the teachers’ engagement with the students’ diverse linguistic and other semiotic resources contributed to the students’ participation in literacy practices. While the framework applied to the data includes several dimensions of literacy, indispensable for research in this complex context, the analysis also illuminates the need for the inclusion of additional dimensions in order to account for the role of interpersonal relations.

Introduction
Multilingualism in education research that focuses on students with short or interrupted formal education who are developing literacy in an additional language has, to date, been quite limited (Tarone 2010; Young-Scholten 2015). Even when this category of students is taken into account, avoiding a deficit perspective has been a challenge (Bigelow and Vinogradov 2011). Studies on oral processing, word recognition, the development of phonological or print awareness, and the use (or lack thereof) of metalinguistic strategies (Kurvers, Van Hout, and Vallen 2009; Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen 2009; Tarone 2010; Bigelow and Watson 2012) have contributed to an understanding of the development of reading and writing among these students. However, when literacy is viewed as a complex set of social and interactive practices (cf. Heath 1983; Street 1984; Freebody and Luke 1990; Martin-Jones and Jones 2000; Barton 2007; Gee 2015), it becomes clear that literacy practices may be valued differently in different contexts. Thus, close attention must be given to...
understanding and managing the literacy practices that are considered useful for academic and societal purposes within a particular school system. A case in point is migrant adolescents with limited previous experience of formal education (in American contexts labeled SIFE- or SLIFE-students, cf. Bartlett 2007; DeCapua and Marshall 2010). Teachers and their in-class instruction may play an important role in supporting students’ emergent literacy in this context. The aim of this article is to investigate how adolescents developing emergent literacy in Swedish engage in the literacy practices that take place in a classroom, as well as how they are supported by their teachers.

This study is part of a larger ethnographic project investigating the education of adolescent students with limited formal educational backgrounds in a language introductory school in Sweden. The analysis of the study is based on a comprehensive set of data collected over one year, including field notes, audio-recordings of classroom interactions, and transcribed interviews with students.

**Theoretical and analytical framework**

In order to capture the complexity of literacy practices, a nuanced analytical tool that explicitly accounts for several dimensions of literacy and multilingualism is needed. For this reason, I will employ Hornberger’s notion of the *continua of biliteracy* (Hornberger 1989) as a heuristic tool through which to analyze the complex instructional setting of this study (see Figure 1).

The continua of biliteracy model is an ecological framework that synthesizes theories of literacy and multilingualism in order to foreground the particular situation of minority language speakers in school and in society (Hornberger 2003). The framework represents an on-going project transforming over time and in response to new research findings, used for literacy studies on mobility, language learning, transnational literacies, communicative repertoires, and identity construction (Baynham 2007; Hornberger 2013a, 2013b). However,
to the best of my knowledge, it has not yet been used to analyze the literacy practices among adolescents developing emergent literacy. The purpose of this study is to find out more about this category of students, but also to test the heuristic in a wider context.

In this model, biliteracy is defined as ‘any and all instances in which communication occurs in two (or more) languages in and around writing’ (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000, 98). Four dimensions—the contexts, development, content, and media of biliteracy—are theorized as continua (Hornberger 1989). As Hornberger explains, ‘[t]he continua model posits that what (content) biliterate learners and users read and write is as important as how (development), where (context) or when and by what means (media) they do so’ (Hornberger 2013b, 160). These four dimensions are represented along twelve nested and intersecting scales, which demonstrate the interrelationships between bilingualism and literacy (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000, 96). Two important aspects of this model are its fluidity and its focus on established power relations, or scales, moving from what are described as less powerful extremes on the left, to more powerful endpoints on the right. However, the scales’ poles are not to be viewed as static. On the contrary, ‘powerful biliteracy is open to transformation through what actors—educators, researchers, community members and policy makers—do in their everyday practices’ (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000, 99).

The model can be used to analyze the nature of the content in literacy events and how the individual’s development of biliteracy occurs in different contexts and through various media. The context refers to the situation in which literacy practices are analyzed, for example in one-to-one-interaction on a micro level or the language situation in the larger social context. Examples of this macro-level interaction occur in studies on language planning (Hornberger 2003) and language policy (Hornberger 2002) in oral or literate and multilingual or monolingual contexts. The media of biliteracy concern the languages in question, to which the language user might have been exposed successively or simultaneously and which might have similar or dissimilar structures with divergent or convergent scripts.

Although all four dimensions of the model need to be considered in order to understand ‘any particular instance of biliteracy’, it is also possible to emphasize some over others (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000, 35). In this study, the context and the media of biliteracy are considered key conditions for the educational process. In this particular setting there are also other spaces and options open to the teachers (cf. Cummins in Hornberger 2003), such as what content to use in instruction, or how to support students’ individual development of biliteracy. The dimensions of the learning content (the ‘what’) and the individual’s development of biliteracy (the ‘how’) will therefore be focused on as reference points for the analysis, recognizing that these dimensions inevitably have an impact on the other two continua and vice versa. The scales of these two dimensions will be presented below.

**The content of biliteracy**

The content of biliteracy is represented by three scales. The first scale concerns whether the content of literacy is based on the experiences and interests of the minority group, or of the majority, thus relating to research on literacy instruction that emphasizes the importance of starting from students’ own interests and knowledge (Moll et al. 1992; Martin-Jones and Jones 2000; Sánchez 2007; Nocon and Cole 2009; Reyes 2012), as well as their existing languages (Blackledge and Creese 2010; Canagarajah 2013; Garcia and Wei 2014) when
teaching new languages and content. Previous studies on emergent literacy instruction have also highlighted the importance of teachers creating a community of respect for all, setting high expectations, following a daily routine organized around themes, and drawing on students’ background knowledge and experiences (Freeman, Freeman, and Mercuri 2001; DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang 2009; Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen 2009).

The second scale, vernacular–literary, is oriented around ‘society’s traditional power weighting of the continua towards the majority and literary ends’ (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000, 108). This means that students’ vernacular language could be built on in literacy instruction, as discussed in Bruna’s (2007) study of the informal literacies of Mexican newcomers in American classrooms. The traditionally more powerful end of this continuum, the literary, is related to forms that may be part of the academic, knowledge-related language expected in school. This brings us to the third scale of the content of biliteracy: contextualized or decontextualized language. Contextualized language refers to the ‘parts of language that are analyzed and understood in the context of a whole text or texts’ (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000, 111), connecting to concrete and personal experiences and to vernacular language. Decontextualized language, on the other hand, consists of language parts divorced from the whole, such as the grammatical abstractions often found in school textbooks. In Warriner’s (2007) study of immigrant women in an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) program, it was shown that this kind of form-focused instruction, mainly ‘teaching to the test’, does not necessarily prepare the students for the world beyond the classroom, nor value the experiences and linguistic resources that they brought to the classroom.

**The development of biliteracy**

The development of biliteracy in individuals ‘occurs along the continua in direct response to contextual demands placed on these individuals’ (Hornberger 2013b, 157). This dimension is represented by three scales which may impact on an individual’s communicative competence. The first scale represents reception and production. As suggested by Hornberger (1989), it seems crucial to the instruction of all students, and not least to recently immigrated students, that not only is input made available, but also that they have the opportunity to produce ‘comprehensible output’ (p. 281). Speaking and listening contributes to negotiating meaning in interaction, but the second scale represents a continuum of oral to written language, which might also include a wider range of modalities which ‘extends literacy beyond reading and writing to other domains, such as the visual, audio, spatial, and behavioral’ (Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2000, 107). So, input can be made available to the students in multimodal or multiliterate designs (Cazden et al. 1996; Canagarajah 2013). In order to develop communicative competence, students will also need to produce output, in whatever mode is suitable for the situation.

The third scale concerns the relationship between an individual’s first language (henceforth L1) and second language (henceforth L2). Though the entire linguistic repertoire of the individual is becoming more highly valued in educational contexts (Blackledge and Creese 2010; Garcia and Wei 2014), this scale draws attention to the historical prestige of the L2 in the context of minority language users’ learning of additional languages. The interconnectedness of this model becomes clear in considering the scales together. As Hornberger (1989) states, the ‘development within any one continuum draws on features from the entire continuum’ (281).
Context for the study

The data in this study come from participant observation in a language introductory class in an inner-city school in Sweden between September 2017 and June 2018. This school exclusively offers courses for immigrant students wishing to attain their elementary school diplomas and develop their Swedish language abilities in order to qualify for admission to high school. Students first take part in an introductory interview (with interpreters) regarding their previous school experiences, followed by an assessment of their level of literacy and Swedish language ability. They are then placed into groups according to these interviews and assessments. My study followed Elisabeth, the teacher of the group of learners with the least formal schooling, with whom I made contact through a university project. Elisabeth is in her sixties, has 20 years’ experience teaching students with limited formal education, and appears to be highly valued as a teacher by present and former students. Elisabeth is also the lead teacher, who is pedagogically responsible for this category of students at her school. Her experience and high level of rapport with students and staff contributed to my interest in following her classes in particular.

Elisabeth’s group consisted of thirteen boys and girls between 16 and 19 years old, most of whom had no formal schooling, but some of whom had been exposed to Qur’anic schools that covered the rote memorization of specific Arabic scripts, suggesting that certain literacy competencies had been developed more than others (Berglund 2017; Boyle 2006). The group changed slightly during the school year, but the majority spoke Somali. Table 1 includes only the ten students who remained in the group for the entire year.

Most of the interactions took place in Swedish, but the instruction also occasionally connected to other languages, such as the L1 of the students. Some of the students could speak English, like Adam from the Gambia and a few of the Somalian students who had spent time in English-speaking African countries. In accordance with Swedish law, the class also had access to study guidance from tutors in Farsi and Somali for two to three hours a week. There was no Mandinka-speaking tutor available, so Adam received individual instruction in Swedish during study guidance. Since the Somali tutor, Mohammed, was in charge of the majority of the students in the group, I chose to follow his study guidance more closely, both while instructing the group on his own and when assisting Elisabeth. He also appeared to be an important adult figure, since he could explain academic content and language, as well as general school practices and expectations, to students.

Most of the students had been in Sweden for between six months and one-and-a-half years at the start of my fieldwork, and some of them had already spent some time in another school before joining the group. Samia, Adam, Zubeyr and Hamid managed to make themselves understood in everyday Swedish, whereas the others had great difficulty doing so. Some had emigrated on their own, while others had done so with their families. They all appeared motivated to learn Swedish in the course of the school year, even though some of them seemed affected by previous traumatic experiences and the difficult present conditions they faced in their life outside of school. The fact that the students came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds could potentially have had an impact on how they responded to the same instructional practices. However, following my ethnographic observations, I found that this was not the case in this specific class.
Collection and analysis of data

I followed the group as a participant observer for two to three days each week for three to four hours per day, totaling 165 hours over the course of the school year. My observations were restricted to Elisabeth’s lessons on Swedish as a second language and introductory social sciences, but the group also studied basic English, mathematics, and physical education with other teachers. During observation, I would sit at the back of the classroom and take field notes and audio-record interactions. I would also move among the students, helping them with assignments, or talking to them in lessons or during break time, to build researcher–participant rapport and to get a sense of their written and oral production. I was cautious not to intervene in their interactions with the teachers. In order to complete the ethnographic observations, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with eight of the students at the end of the school year (in pairs or individually, in Swedish, English or with assistance from the Somali tutor; see Table 1). These interviews focused on the students’ language and literacy experiences before coming to Sweden and on their thoughts of the instruction that I had observed.

I entered the observation site with no preconceptions of what literacy practices I might find in this complex educational setting, although the focus of my observations might have been influenced by my own experiences teaching Swedish to both adult migrant classes and public high school classes. After each day of observation, I elaborated my field notes, organized as descriptions and reflections in order to identify regular patterns in the interactions (Creese 2010; Levon 2013). I also summarized them monthly in conceptual memos (cf. Delamont 2008; Heath and Street 2008). In that way, I could detect and further analyze recurrent themes in the empirical data during the school year.

After collecting one month’s observations and field notes, I noticed that dynamic movements in the interactions and activities in the classroom began to emerge from my data. For example, it seemed that the teacher would introduce new themes orally before making the students write texts, and that new content was introduced in relation to students’ experiences. These observations were also in line with other descriptions of teacher practices in emergent literacy groups (Freeman, Freeman, and Mercuri 2001; DeCapua and Marshall 2011). Thus, I began looking for a theoretical framework in order to capture and describe these movements in the students’ and teachers’ engagement in literacy practices. The continua of biliteracy seemed to offer a dynamic and complex view on multilingualism and literacy, which could make it useful as a framework for analysis.

Table 1. Linguistic repertoire and formal schooling of students in the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Reported spoken languages other than (some) Swedish</th>
<th>Reported years of formal schooling</th>
<th>Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>Mandinka, English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Alone in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>Somali, some English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>With Balqis, in Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balqis</td>
<td>Somali, Amharic, some English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>With Amina, in Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuad</td>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>With Zubeyr, in Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamid</td>
<td>Dari, Farsi, Arabic, Kurdish</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Alone, in Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawa</td>
<td>Somali, Arabic</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maram</td>
<td>Somali, Arabic, some English</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>With Sumaya, in Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samia</td>
<td>Somali, Arabic, some English</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Alone, in Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumaya</td>
<td>Somali, some Arabic, some English</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>With Maram, in Somali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zubeyr</td>
<td>Somali, English, Swahili</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>With Fuad, in Somali</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As a result of adopting this framework, I actively paid attention to the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of the instruction with regard to this back-and-forth movement on the scales and analyzed my data in two cycles (Saldaña 2009). First, I color-coded the relevant sequences of instruction in my field notes and extracted the examples manually to a separate document in order to analyze them in the second cycle of analysis. At the same time, I was alert to the possibility that certain elements would not fit the model, providing insight into the fit of the chosen framework for this analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The extracted color-coded examples were then categorized within the scales of the two selected dimensions of the model, the content and the development of biliteracy. Each example was coupled with a corresponding scale, then the entirety of the interaction or situation the examples were a part of was analyzed for the kind of movement occurring therein. In this way, empirical data was collected in interaction with the theoretical framework in an abductive, theoretically informed ethnographic approach (Willis and Trondman 2000; Beach 2008). I coded, extracted, and analyzed the examples from my field notes and present extracts in this article to illustrate and represent the categories. After the observation period ended, I read all of my fieldnotes again (supported by the audio recordings) alongside the transcribed interviews in search of additional (or contradictory) instances of the emergent categories.

Analyzing literacy practices in emergent literacy instruction

As described above, the analysis of my ethnographic observations, in relation to two dimensions of the model of the continua of biliteracy—the content and the individual development of biliteracy—exemplified several literacy practices along the continua. In the section below, these findings are presented as the ‘what’ and the ‘how’. However, when analyzing my data, it was clear that I needed another dimension to describe how these movements were supported by the teachers. This dimension is exemplified in ‘Interpersonal relations in literacy instruction’.

Moving between the poles of the content of biliteracy: the ‘what’

In the instruction I observed, the teacher clearly linked new themes or content areas to the students’ perspectives and previous knowledge, in order to enhance their understanding (as suggested by Moll et al. 1992; Sánchez 2007; Nocon and Cole 2009; Reyes 2012). When new content was contextualized through connection with the students’ previous knowledge, and sometimes also with vernacular language, the instruction was oriented towards the minority end of the continuum. Examples of these practices follow below.

During geography lessons dedicated to the world map, as well as to the geography of Sweden, the starting point when explaining the Swedish equivalents for country, city, and capital was locations well known to students, such as Somalia, Afghanistan, the Gambia, Mogadishu, Kabul, and Banjul:

The teacher is holding up laminated slips with geographical names: Sweden? Is that a country or a continent? How about the Gambia? Who’s from the Gambia? Is that a country or a continent? Elisabeth has cut out miniature pieces shaped like countries and attached them to the whiteboard. Zubeyr is asked to put them in the right location on the map. (Translation of field notes 2017-09-19)
Besides starting from the students’ existing knowledge of the world, Elisabeth contextualized the new concepts by presenting them in the form of tangible material, which allowed the students to feel and see the shape of the countries, and to size up the proportional relations between a country and a continent. At a later stage new concepts were presented in whole phrases in a Swedish booklet, starting with Somali geography. In conversation with the Somali tutor, Mohammed, the students filled in a worksheet, and described the landscape and climate of Somalia, consolidating the meaning of new terms, before using them in the new (i.e. the Swedish) context. Two weeks later, during study guidance, Mohammed repeated the concepts again, comparing the Somali and Swedish contexts, and then revised the old concepts before explaining the new ones that had been introduced by Elisabeth:

Mohammed explains social sciences as a subject in Somali, mixed with Swedish. Suddenly he says in Swedish: And what we will talk about now is Sweden. They seem to talk about the Swedish geography, cities, the capital Stockholm, inhabitants, the highest mountain, and the rivers, filling in concepts in their booklet. I hear him say in Swedish: there is no desert in Sweden. (Translation of field notes 2017-11-15)

In using the students’ previous experiences and knowledge, the teachers deployed the minority content to help learners understand the new country and the majority content, enabling them to describe and compare the geographical conditions in Somalia, the Gambia, Afghanistan, and Sweden. Furthermore, new experiences that the group went through together, like a field trip, or a visit to a concert or museum, constituted a natural starting point for literacy instruction. Instruction thus moved from contextualized language involving personal experiences, to decontextualized modes (cf. DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang 2009) supporting the use of more literary practices. When discussing the observations from the field trips, Elisabeth pushed the students to use the exact terms to describe what they saw:

What’s this river outside the window called? The teacher loftily raises her eyebrows and sweeps her hand in a movement of nonchalance at the window. The students give the correct answer in a choir [of a river whose name is difficult to pronounce correctly in Swedish]. You see, she’s turning towards me, speaking so that the class can hear her. These students don’t just say ‘water’, but they know the name of the river. (Translation of field notes 2017-09-26)

In this way, students were encouraged by the teacher to substitute general terms with more precise ones. This excerpt also conveys the teacher’s high demands on the students, as she pushes them to expand their linguistic resources. Elisabeth’s attempt to empower the students is also exemplified when she makes them repeat an unusual word, ‘dieder’, which is the name of a particular kind of statue that stands outside near the school:

It’s called ‘dieder’. Only you in the whole school know this. You can ask the teachers and the headmaster what it’s called. Nobody knows. Only us! (Translation of field notes 2017-09-27)

She thus emphasizes that the students have special knowledge—they know more than most students at the school, or in fact most people—and in that way strives to construct their identities as students.

Elisabeth attempted to contextualize and explain phenomena which can be difficult to grasp for students lacking formal schooling. This also included the explicit use of objects.
When she taught the students the Swedish words for body parts (2018-02-20), Elisabeth carried a three-dimensional plastic torso into the classroom, to the delight and dismay of the students. She explained what the various organs are called, and distributed the plastic replicas among the students, before asking one person at a time to return the stomach, the heart, liver, colon, or small intestine, etc. The students memorized the words, and then learned to place the body parts in the correct order into the torso, touching and handling them, before writing down the words for the parts. As during earlier theme work, Mohammed confirmed the students’ understanding of the words in Somali. Students were also encouraged not only to name the organs, but to use them in a more literary language in context:

*Can you repeat after me? ‘The skeleton holds the body upright.’ You should repeat this even when you go to bed at night.* She's showing the function of the skeleton with the help of Balqis's scarf, which is ‘standing’ on its own, supported by a ruler. (Translation of field notes 2018-02-22)

During the following week, the students were able to remember the names of internal organs in Swedish, including ‘the circulatory system’ and ‘kidneys’, and distinguishing ‘veins’ from ‘arteries’. They also memorized sentences using more academic language, like in the example above, and wrote down short sentences describing bodily functions. All of the students that I recorded the following month remembered the names of the organs, and explained their functions with enthusiasm. This would suggest that Elisabeth’s instruction was helpful: the fact that she started with a physical model, but then gradually encouraged the students to start using more literary forms.

In summary, the teacher’s instruction took the minority pole of the content of biliteracy as its starting point, including known and contextualized content. This content was used to introduce unknown content to the students, and thus helped them move along the continuum to understand the majority content. The teacher’s use of objects and the students’ participation in excursions seemed to facilitate their understanding of more decontextualized literacy practices, and the use of a more literary language, although their written texts were still very short.

One difficulty the teacher faced was that although most students in the group came from Somalia, not all of them did. The fact that most examples came from the Somali context might have excluded some students from the meaning-making process. Similarly, group experiences (such as field trips) were important, but not every student was able to participate, and some seemed later to have problems understanding what was going on during the sessions that built on these experiences. At the same time, all were able to experience the reports made on the excursions using pictures and text on the group’s digital chatroom, where the teacher posted exercises, images, and audio recordings of the day’s activities. In this way, students were also encouraged to use informal literacy practices (such as on their mobile phones) to better understand the formal content of schooling (cf. Bruna 2007). This access to the lesson content after school hours seemed important to the students, and was emphasized when two of the girls praised their teacher: ‘We always have her’ (pointing to their cell phones) (Translated Interview, Balqis and Amina, 2018-04-18).

**Moving between the poles of the development of literacy: the ‘how’**

The examples above indicate that students could use previous knowledge, as well as their L1 and occasionally English, to learn new concepts and describe previously unknown
phenomena, which could then be translated into the L2. These translanguaging practices (Blackledge and Creese 2010; Canagarajah 2013; Garcia and Wei 2014) were also characterized by movement on the oral–written scale, and an activation of both receptive and productive competence. For the Somali students, Mohammed was an important resource in this process. However, he and the other tutor were only available for a few hours per week, which obliged the teacher to be inventive when teaching a class in their L2 on her own. Elisabeth did however use the few words of Somali or Dari that she knew. Notably, she also used her body, gesture, and other multimodal resources (Cazden et al. 1996) to communicate meaning when the common oral linguistic resources were not enough. This pattern can be analyzed on the oral–written scale, which extends to other semiotic modes. Examples of these practices follow below.

During study guidance in Somali, the words ‘country’, ‘city’, ‘lake’, ‘island’, and ‘desert’ were accompanied by illustrations, and translated into Somali by Mohammed:

The class and the tutor are speaking in Somali but sometimes utter words or phrases in Swedish. I hear the students saying *Tellus* [a Swedish Latinism meaning ‘earth’] and *globe*, and reviewing the names of the oceans and the continents. Mohammed is drawing a table on the whiteboard presenting ‘what is wet’ (the oceans) and ‘what is not wet’ (land). Then the students read in their booklet about the Swedish mountains. Mohammed also seems to explain the indefinite article in the neuter gender and the conjugation of the noun in the plural. At the end, he checks the students’ translation of the Swedish words into Somali. (Translation of field notes 2017-10-27)

On several occasions, students revised and consolidated new terms in Somali with Mohammed before translating them into Swedish, and the instruction thus moved along the L1-L2 scale. Also, they revised the Swedish words several times in order to memorize them orally, and then practiced writing the words correctly in their booklets, moving along the oral–written scale.

During field trips, the students took turns video-recording or taking pictures of their visit. Back in the classroom, these images typically constituted the common basis for discussions about the trip. After a recap of the events, Elisabeth distributed written sentences on cards that the students were asked to combine with the relevant picture. The images provided important stimuli to discussions about the experiences, seemingly leading to receptive understanding of Elisabeth’s written texts, which were combined with the pictures. Finally, the students were asked to write about the pictures themselves, which led to their own production of text, and to visible engagement. During three observed sessions following this pattern, the students seemed motivated, and even unwilling to go for a break. The practice of naming and discussing the images of the embodied experience thus seemed to support students’ production of written text, and to motivate them to make a significant effort to express their experiences in writing.

In connection with the classes on the human body (2018-02-20) described in the previous section, Elisabeth taught the students verbs like ‘wave (your hands)’ and ‘jump’. The students worked in pairs taking pictures of each other with iPads, writing down phrases that included these words, while recording themselves reading the phrases. They compiled these texts into a digital, multimodal booklet. In this way, reception was combined with their own production both when they pronounced the words, and when they combined the text with pictures. The result was a space of augmented creativity. In this exercise, they not only learned to use specific vocabulary in this concrete creativity. In this exercise, they not only learned to use specific vocabulary in this concrete situati
led to a general understanding of how linguistic resources can be used, as suggested by Warriner (2007).

Elisabeth often used images, objects, films, and other multimodal resources to illustrate concepts. But an even more prominent feature of the instruction was her use of her body and facial expressions to convey meaning. She even constructed theatrical scenes in order to establish a concept and help students expand their vocabulary. She also used her body to illustrate the syllables of words, in order to help students memorize them. Elisabeth thus danced and stamped the rhythm of difficult and long words in the text, like ‘febertermometer’ [thermometer] or ‘blodomloppet’ [blood stream], to clarify their pronunciation. In one example, when learning the names of the continents, the students had difficulties pronouncing ‘Antarktis’ [Antarctica]:

She stamps her foots in time with the syllables and waves her arms gracefully in a pseudo-oriental dance and keeps repeating ‘An-tark-tis, An-tark-tis’. The class laughs. (Translation of field notes 2017-09-12)

She repeated the dancing movement on at least one other occasion (2017-09-14) to facilitate the students’ reception, and they later used the same rhythm when trying to pronounce the word in their own production. The students practiced writing the names of the continents on the chart, as described previously. Later, these geographical terms were revised orally when projected onto the screen. But one continent was missing. ‘What should be down here?’ Elisabeth asked. Antarktis, several students answered at once (2018-02-27), perhaps linking the name and the concept with the memory of Elisabeth’s dancing. I noticed that two students who hadn’t been in the September classes had problems pronouncing and remembering the word. The students declared in the interviews that Elisabeth was good at explaining things to them. Two of them explicitly mentioned her dancing, including Hamid:

Anna: So, you say that she’s explaining well, she’s repeating the same sentences two or three times. And what else does she do?

Hamid: Explains very well

Anna: Yes? In what way is she explaining?

Hamid: (laughing) Difficult!

Anna: Yes, it’s difficult to explain [to me].

Hamid: On dance or […] then many students understand. Not just read two three times

(Translated interview from Swedish, 2018-06-01)

Hamid and other students thus confirm what was suggested during my observations: that Elisabeth’s use of her body is important for producing comprehensible input for the students.

In summary, the instruction started with oral modes in L1 or L2 and then moved back and forth on the oral–written scale. It seemed clear that the students’ opportunity to use their L1 helped them understand abstract concepts, like continents. Since the students were invited to use several linguistic resources, both productive and receptive skills could be activated to establish the concepts. The oral discussions, in L1 or L2, led to production of
written texts. However, this was not a linear process starting at one pole and finishing at the other, but a gradual construction of the field over three months. New concepts were constantly revised, and actualized again sporadically after six months, when physical experiences were expressed orally first, and then in written form. However, even though the students knew the words orally and could copy them in writing from examples, independent writing was still a challenge.

The teacher's gestures and facial expressions as well as her dance and rhythm facilitated students' understanding when oral language was not enough to mediate meaning. But in spite of these scaffolding practices, not everyone managed to remember the words, or write them down correctly. Sumaya was engaged and active in the oral discussions, but still had difficulties after several months in answering questions in written form. Maram repeatedly explained to me that it was too difficult for her to remember the words, or to write them independently. Still, these girls reported that Elisabeth's instruction, using her body and explaining in various ways, helped them to understand and to learn new concepts.

**Interpersonal relations in literacy instruction**

The continua of the content and the development of biliteracy have been shown to be useful for analyzing the students' and teachers' engagement in literacy practices. But the interpersonal relations which appeared crucial to the instruction are not easily captured within these scales. The more emotional aspects of Elisabeth's teaching seemed clearly to facilitate the kinds of movements along the scales exemplified in the previous sections. Examples of where this was the case are discussed below.

As discussed in the previous section, Elisabeth used gesture and body movements repeatedly, expressing emotions that contextualized and gave meaning to new phenomena, thereby deepening her relationship with the group. In one example, at the beginning of the semester, Elisabeth described her view of the Somali girls, putting one hand on her hip and moving gracefully with one hand in the air like a proud model on a catwalk. This she contrasted with her opinion of Swedish teachers, whom she imitated by walking with her back hunched, gloomily staring down at the ground (2017-09-19). These explicit physical sketches seemed to be appreciated by the group, and seemed to me to be an attempt to empower the girls. Every time I heard Elisabeth talk about 'girls', she repeated the same pose, associating the word with her earlier sketches, and thus making a multimodal connection.

As mentioned above, oral discussions about field trips helped contextualize the content and facilitate written and more decontextualized practices. On one occasion, the class was discussing what they had seen and learned during an excursion, and Elisabeth wrote new vocabulary on the whiteboard:

They are discussing how the people in the photos look. *Are they smiling or laughing? What's this called?* asks Elisabeth. *A jetty* [brygga], some students respond. *Wow!* She looks impressed by their knowledge. [...] They talk about the streets, the jetty, people, water. [...] *Here come three pretty girls*, Elisabeth says while walking in a 'feminine' way, moving her hips. The class laughs. *Everybody is happy, they have nice shoes, nice boots, nice dresses, striped and patterned. Right, Adam? Aren't they pretty?* (Translation of field notes 2017-09-26)
What could be viewed as an objectification of the three ‘pretty’ girls could also be assessed as a conscious way of showing appreciation for the students and a technique for strengthening bonds between group members, in line with previous observations. Elisabeth expresses her satisfaction with students using precise vocabulary, in what seems to be an attempt to recognize their knowledge, as was evident on several occasions.

These examples can be read as evidence of the loving relationship Elisabeth developed with her students, which became apparent during my observations. Their close connection was both emotional and physical. The students often embraced her at the beginning and end of the school day, and she often made physical contact with them in a friendly way, or held them when they were distressed. She would also often express her feelings verbally to them, as in the following example where the school was to be closed early due to a teacher meeting:

Samia: *Teacher, today we finish at 11?*

Elisabeth: *Yes, I was going to tell you now. But I was thinking maybe I shouldn't tell you, so that we could be alone here all day. You know, I am so fond of you and I want to spend many hours with you. She's pretending to cry. Elisabeth sad, says Zubeyr. Yes! She's nodding confirmatively. (Translation of field notes 2018-01-25)*

Elisabeth here stressed the fact that she enjoys spending time with her students. She also used this as an argument for stretching out the lessons, in order to manage time efficiently. On Friday afternoons, when other teachers let their groups leave earlier for the weekend, Elisabeth's students were often still in the classroom, working hard. Her affection for the students was also clearly reciprocal:

Elisabeth: *Now I want you to copy the homework for Wednesday.*

Zubeyr: *That's good, very clever teacher. I love you!*  

*Oh! Elisabeth looks happy and touched. Looks towards me: So, I come here in the morning and am told that I am good and that the students love me. Say it one more time! One more time! Laughter. But you know, Zubeyr, I think it's because I love you too! (Translated field notes 2017-10-10)*

The teacher’s affection was a feature that was highlighted during my interviews with the students. They mentioned that she was a good teacher since she could explain things to them in a variety of ways, and also that she was kind. When I asked about Elisabeth's high demands on them, and suggested that she also seemed rather strict at times, Amina answered:

Yes, that's right. But I think that what she's doing is, like, for our sake, so that we use our time in the best way (Translated Interview, Balqis and Amina, 2018-04-18)

In summary, the practices described above seem to be grounded in the strong interpersonal bonds cultivated by Elisabeth, which appear to be crucial in motivating the students to work hard. These results are in line with Bartlett's (2007) description of how the teacher ‘Maria’ eschewed the stigmatized label of ‘SIFE-student’ by adapting to the school-based practices at a bilingual high-school, supported by some of the teachers and administrators. Also, Cummins’s *literacy engagement framework* accentuates the need for teachers to affirm
students' identities to elaborate their language (2017, 113), which is a clear feature of the observed instruction.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this article has been to explore how students with limited previous formal education engage in literacy practices in a language introductory school, and how this instruction and engagement is supported by their teachers. The *continua of biliteracy* (Hornberger 1989) was used as a point of reference in the analysis. Since the intersecting continua of the *content* and *development* of biliteracy depend on each other (and on the context and media of development) they are not easily separable. Still, the literacy practices can be described through movements along both of these scales, as illustrated in the results section.

My observations during one school year revealed a highly contextualized instruction (as suggested in DeCapua, Smathers, and Tang 2009 and Tarone, Bigelow, and Hansen 2009) which drew on students' previous knowledge, experiences, and linguistic resources (Moll et al. 1992; Garcia and Wei 2014; Cummins 2017) to develop their linguistic and literacy competence, with the help of the language tutors. Like the teacher in Freeman and Mercuri (2001), Elisabeth was respectful towards the students, but also had high expectations, and followed a daily routine organized around themes.

In the framework, it is theorized that the right-hand poles have traditionally been connected to power, which has valued a majority, literary, and decontextualized content, and a development of biliteracy towards written production in the majority language. This movement also appears through the empirical data of the present study, which is not unexpected given that the teacher is preparing the students for future studies within a school system that stipulates certain practices traditionally connected to power. But it is also clear that the teacher focuses on the endpoints traditionally less connected to power in order to make room for minority, vernacular, and contextualized content in oral and L2 forms, where reception and multimodal meaning making are also valued. Several examples in the result section indicate how multimodal practices (e.g. compiling a multimodal booklet or using images, objects, films as teaching and learning resources) can complicate the distinction between less powerful/more powerful endpoints of the continuum of (for example) reception/production or oral/written literacy. It could be argued then that the continua in the model are somewhat too static for capturing the complexity of multimodal practices in the classroom. The model can, however, highlight how the teacher's movement to the left of the scales seems to provide the students with the understanding, motivation, and security that they need in order to be able to move towards the powerful poles of the scales. Yet these practices also have a value of their own, since the definition of literacy has evolved beyond the narrower technical skills of reading, writing, and calculating to 'all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning' (OECD 2019). Clearly, literacy is not only about writing and reading in the traditional sense, but about using a variety of interacting modes, which is, in fact, called for in the school curriculum of Swedish as a second language (Skolverket 2018). This view of literacy permits the students to use their strengths and resources, which can support their agency within the school system and the set curriculum, while motivating them to engage with the norms of educational institutions (Canagarajah 2013, 9).
Elisabeth has her own way of teaching, and other teachers might prefer other methods. While this has not been formally assessed, my ethnographic insights together with what the students themselves said during the interviews indicate that the back-and-forth movements on the continua have the potential to support learning. On the other hand, getting stuck on one end of the continuum does present a risk to learning, if for example the content of literacy is always concrete or contextualized, and students are never encouraged to produce written texts independently, or if the instruction is carried out exclusively in L2. Instruction characterized by an effort to use the students’ resources, while simultaneously being quite demanding, seems to ease these iterative movements. The importance of a tutor speaking the student’s L1 is apparent in this context, while the translanguaging practices in the classroom facilitated students’ meaning making (Canagarajah 2013; Garcia and Wei 2014; Reath Warren 2017).

It is thus clear that interpersonal relations and the deployment of affective strategies are crucial for the development of biliteracy among these students. However, as with multimodal practices, interpersonal relations and affective strategies cannot be analyzed as movements on the existing continua but would require further expansion of the model. Nevertheless, as shown in the result section, the movements on the continua were supported by the close, respectful, and caring relationship between the teacher and the students, which is characterized by a high degree of trust. Hence, interpersonal relations are resources that can facilitate the movements on the continua.

The teacher’s explicit strategy to build a strong group could also motivate reluctant or unhappy students to engage in school activities. At the same time, the teacher maintains strict routines and sets demanding standards for her students, challenging them both intellectually and emotionally. Through this mutually respectful relationship, she pushes them to expand their linguistic repertoires, and at the same time, it would seem, strengthen their identification as students and adolescents in a foreign society, which is also a part of being literate (Bartlett 2007; Cummins 2017).

The continua of biliteracy help to illuminate that contextualizing new knowledge and making content concrete renders the processes of educational institutions intelligible to students. Other models, such as Cummins’s quadrant model (1981) and Gibbons’s mode continuum (2002), could also clarify this movement from contextualized to academic language through scaffolding, but the continua of biliteracy allows analysis of movement on multiple levels and in different directions. Indeed, the whole point of the model is to draw attention to this movement, and to the continuum, which also helps avoiding a deficit perspective when describing the learning processes of students who lack previous formal schooling experiences. It is evidently also important to involve emotions or affect to understand this process. Further studies on emergent literacy instruction which focus on the interpersonal language and relations in schools might find ways to include those dimensions.

Note
1. The names of teachers, tutors, and students are pseudonyms.

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