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Multilingual Affordances in a Swedish Preschool: An Action Research Project

Åsa Ljunggren¹

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Abstract This article summarizes the work and the main findings of an action research project that was conducted in an early childhood education and care setting in the city of Malmö, Sweden in the autumn of 2013 and spring 2014. Rönnerman's model (Aktionsforskning i praktiken: förskola och skola på vetenskaplig grund [Action research in practice: preschools and schools on scientific basis]. Studentlitteratur, Lund, 2012) for action research was applied, and the article responds to the research question What happens when parents are involved in constructing a multilingual environment through the use of digital tools in the daily activities in preschool? The analysis was performed collectively by a researcher from the Swedish Research Schools for Preschool Teachers; a teacher with graduate diploma in special needs education, specialized in children's language development and the staff from the participating preschool. The children were aged from 1 to 3 years and had different first languages. By following, documenting, and analyzing the children's encounters with digital tools that recorded parents' verbal monologues, three main themes were identified: Moving from a question-answer pedagogy to new ways of interaction, children's awareness of the different languages in preschool, parents' and teachers' feeling of togetherness.

Keywords Action research · Affordance · Early childhood · Multilingual

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Introduction

This article is about an action research project that was conducted in the city of Malmö in the south of Sweden. Malmö is the third largest city of Sweden. It is also a city of migration, and 48 % of the children of Malmö have a language other than Swedish as their first language (Swedish National Agency for Education 2010). In Sweden, the *Riksdag* (Parliament) and the government set out the goals and guidelines for the preschool and school through the Education Act and the national curriculum. The importance of supporting children in their multilingual language development is emphasized in national policy documents in Sweden. The Education Act (Swedish Ministry of Education 2010) and the Curriculum for the Swedish Preschool (Swedish National Agency for Education 2010) clearly emphasize the importance of supporting children whose first language is other than Swedish to have the opportunity to develop in both the Swedish language and their first language. The municipalities and independent principals who are responsible for preschools must be equipped to observe the Education Act and meet the curriculum goals. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate is a state agency that scrutinizes schools and preschools. In 2011, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate pointed to the lack of effectiveness and fulfillment of goals concerning the support of children's multilingual development in preschools in the city of Malmö. The Inspectorate also stressed that preschool teachers needed better knowledge, increased and better methods, and more information about how they could work with young children's multilingual language learning in everyday practice. As a result, economic investments in language development of the early childhood and care organization of the City of Malmö were initiated. As a part of this effort, an action research project

for preschool teachers was started, in close cooperation with the Swedish Research Schools for Preschool Teachers and the University of Malmö. The research schools are based on the idea that the knowledge and qualifications of preschool teachers are the most crucial factors for a preschool of high quality.

Investments in high quality early childhood education and care has long been recognized as beneficial for children, families and society as a whole (Urban et al. 2012).

The methodology of this project demonstrates a way to collaboration between research and practice and reveals a way to collaboration between ECEC settings and Further Education institutions.

This article summarizes the work and the main findings of the action research project that was conducted in autumn 2013 and spring 2014.

Aim and Research Question

The overarching aim of the project was for the teachers *to develop a multilingual environment in their preschool setting*. The idea was that all the children's first languages would become natural parts of the everyday work, even though the teachers did not speak the same languages as the children, and even though the children had many different first languages. This article responds to the research question *What happens when parents are involved in constructing a multilingual environment through the use of digital tools in the daily activities in preschool?*

Theoretical Frames: Affordances as an Analytic Tool

Gibson's theory of affordances shows how different environments *afford* different possibilities for action, so-called *affordances*. Reed (1993) further developed Gibson's theory of affordances and claimed that affordances can be highlighted and explained through *joint action*. The ways that the affordances are introduced and shared are therefore crucial for children's use of them (Reed 1993). Reed considers it is not easy to take advantage of the full potential of affordances if they are linked to so-called *social constraints*. The less that rules are linked to affordances and the way they can be used, the easier it is for children to use them in new, creative ways (Reed 1993). Ljunggren (2013) shows how Reed's theory can be applied to analyze the practice of a multilingual preschool. Using the concept of affordance as an analytic tool, Ljunggren (2013) emphasized the close relationship between the teachers' didactic ways of organizing practice, and children's opportunities to communicate with each other. The result indicated a relation between regulations of materials

and the ways children communicated. The less strict regulations were linked to the materials and the playrooms, the greater was the communication between the children. The children also tended to have longer conversations when the regulation was less strict (Ljunggren 2013). In this article, we use the concept of *multilingual affordances* to highlight what was provided by the classroom environment in terms of multimodal, digital, and analogue tools in many different languages.

Participants

The location for the project was the department of *Björnen [The Bear]* with 16 children aged 1–3 years. The department of *Björnen* belongs to the ECEC setting *Snödroppen [The Snowdrop]*. In Sweden, it is quite common that ECCE settings are named after nature; names of animals and flowers are frequently used. *Snowdrop* is the name of the first flower that blooms in spring. The two other departments that belong to *Snowdrop* did not take part in the project, just the 16 children of *Björnen*.

Following is a list of the participants and their first languages:

- The *Björnen children's* (we will refer to the 16 children who participated in the project as the *Björnen children*) first languages were Arabic, Danish, English, Wolof, Pashto, Farsi, Dari, and Albanian. Wolof is a language of Senegal, the Gambia, and Mauritania, and the native language of the Wolof people. Pashto is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan, the other one is Dari. Farsi is a modern version of Old Persian, primarily spoken in Iran, and as a different dialect in Afghanistan, Dari.
- The four teachers of *Björnen* (and their first languages) were Rosalinda Estrada Leza, (Spanish), Irina Buzanova (Russian), Ann-Sofie Hansson (Swedish), and Shazia Hamid (Urdu).
- Staff from two other ECEC settings took part in the research circle (a clear explanation of what a "research circle" means follows under the heading "[Methods](#)"). in total five preschool teachers.
- The *Björnen children's* parents and guardians participated; approximately 30 persons with different backgrounds and first languages.

Following is a list of the different roles of the participants:

The role of the participating parents The parents' participation involved four different steps. First, they participated in a parental evaluation. Second, they were introduced to the project and to its main ideas. Third,

they participated in the research actions and recorded themselves on films and audio files. Fourth, they participated in a second parental evaluation.

The role of the participating children The children's participation consisted of encounters with different digital tools. These encounters were filmed. The children also had conversations with the teachers that were documented by memos.

The role of the participating staff from the two other ECEC settings The five teachers from the other two ECEC settings that took part in the research circle did not introduce the digital tools used by *Björnen* staff to the parents of their own ECEC settings. These five teachers were, at the same time as the research circle was running, working with slightly different methods in their own settings. They were also focusing on the overarching aim, i.e. *developing multilingual environments* in their own settings, but they did not focus especially on digital tools and parental cooperation. Accordingly, this article only focuses on the result of the *Björnen* work. In relation to the *Björnen* project, the role of the five other teachers from the two other settings was above all to take part in the process of analyzing the *Björnen children's* encounters with digital tools.

Data

The data consist of memos of each meeting with the research circle, video films (partly the films recorded by the parents, partly the films showing children's encounters with these films), unstructured written observations ("field notes") describing children's encounters with the digital tools, conversations with parents documented by memos, and teachers' evaluations of the project. The author of this article does not own all of the data, but has had free access to it during the project. The staff of the department of *B* own some of the data. Following is an overview of the data.

Data	Proprietor
Two annual parental evaluations of the pedagogical programs of <i>Björnen</i> , one from spring 2013, one from spring 2014	The staff of <i>Björnen</i>
Documented conversations between the parents and the staff of <i>Björnen</i>	The staff of <i>Björnen</i>
Films and audio files in various languages recorded by the parents	The staff of <i>Björnen</i>
Unstructured written observations describing children's encounters with the digital tools	The staff of <i>Björnen</i>
Film observations (video films) describing children's encounters with the digital tools	The staff of <i>Björnen</i>

Data	Proprietor
Note observations or "field notes" of the dialogues that the staff of <i>Björnen</i> had with the <i>Björnen children</i>	The staff of <i>Björnen</i>
Memos from each meeting with the research circle	The researcher
Teachers' evaluation of the project	The researcher

Transcription of Film

The transcription published in this article was made in order to reproduce the films in a written form, but we did not use transcriptions for the analysis. All the films were analyzed real time collectively within the research circle; the episodes published here have been marked as particularly interesting for the findings and have therefore been transcribed. As the films were analyzed real time, all the participants of the research circle took part. The researcher took notes of the findings. In the transcriptions we used bold font style to mark the Swedish words.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Councils (2012) were followed. The children were given pseudonyms in the transcriptions to protect their identities, although the parents agreed for the films to be showed for pedagogical purposes. The name of the ECEC setting is accurate and was used in consultation with the staff and the parents.

Initially, an inquiry of participation in the action research project was sent to preschool directors in Malmö. The preschool director of *Snowdrop* was willing to participate and sent an inquiry to her staff about their willingness to participate. The department of *Björnen* agreed to participate in the project for 1 year. The *Björnen* staff then informed parents about the project by different means, such as letters and personal meetings. The duration of the project was from September 2013 to May 2014.

Parents consented to participate in the study as well as consenting to their children's participation. The parents consented to staff filming their children and to the use of the films for educational purposes. The photos in this article are published with parental consent. When the project was introduced to the parents, the researcher explained to them how they would be personally involved in the recording of voices on digital tools. Some parents did not agree to having their faces revealed in the films. In these cases it was agreed that they would only record their voices. The parents were also informed of their right to withdraw from the project if they wished. Ethical issues were raised and discussed throughout the process. The children were never forced to participate in anything.

Methods

We applied Rönnerman's model (2012) for action research. According to Rönnerman, action research involves collaboration between researchers and practitioners; in this collaboration, it is crucial to take advantage of the knowledge and expertise that exists among the staff and to challenge both scientific and practice-based knowledge and skills. The role of the researcher was therefore to challenge the staff by asking questions related to the analysis. Rönnerman (2012) describes the action research process as a spiral where the different parts intertwine in an ongoing process. The process typically begins with an identification of a problem in practice, and then actions are planned based on experience. The effects and the outcomes of the actions are then reflected on and valued; new actions are then planned on the basis of these reflections.

Every 2–3 weeks, the staff of *B* gathered together in a meeting with the researcher, the special needs teacher, and the staff from the other two ECEC settings. The purpose of these meetings was to analyze the data together from different angles and areas of knowledge and, in consultation with others, to initiate new research actions. This way of organizing a research project may be titled a *research circle* (Persson 2010). A research circle is based on meetings between practicing teachers, student teachers, and researchers from the university. It has its roots in the 1970s, when university courses were introduced for union representatives as part of efforts to organize and develop the exchange of knowledge between the union and the researchers (Persson 2010). After completion of the project, an evaluation was carried out, in which teachers estimated what they had learned from the project.

Throughout the meetings with the research circle, the researcher had slightly different roles in the various parts of the project. At the start, the researcher's role was to help the staff in identifying a problem and to introduce them to theories, literature, and previous research related to their project. The researcher was also involved in constructing the overarching aim and the specific research question in the beginning of the project. As the project progressed, the researcher's function was to help the staff to ask questions about the collected data and to inspire them to take new actions. The role of the special needs teacher was to support the process of analysis, in terms of asking questions and directing the analysis toward specific language areas such as children's language awareness.

Process of Analysis

The teachers were thoroughly prepared for each meeting with the research circle in terms of testing and documenting various actions and reading literature and theories linked to the project. At the meetings with the research

circle, the teachers shared the documentation that they had collected since the last meeting, and then the data were analyzed collectively by all the research circle participants (i.e. the other five teachers also took part in the process). The concept of affordance was used as an analytic tool in the way suggested by Ljunggren (2013) directing the focus to how the didactic ways of organizing practice have implications for children's opportunities to communicate.

The meetings usually started with a film show or a common reading of an excerpt from a teacher's notebook. When the film was shown or the excerpt recited, the researcher helped to highlight various issues that the data had raised by asking questions of the participants. The findings were documented at each meeting by memo notes taken by the researcher. After the termination of the research project, a second analysis, or "meta-analysis," was performed by the researcher in which the findings were categorized into three different themes.

Generalizations cannot be made based on this study, but the interpretation of qualitative data, in the form in which it is presented here, can still be valuable for the interpretation of new observations (Bryman 2012).

Problem Identification and Mapping of Practice

The annual parent evaluation before the research study had revealed that parents thought their children's language and mathematical development in preschool was not made visible to them. The staff had decided they needed to develop cooperation with the parents by involving them more in the daily work of the preschool.

By "mapping" the setting and its equipment and methods (Rönnerman 2012), the staff were able to find out what methods needed to be developed and in what way this could be done. The setting was equipped with computers, tablets, and "talking pen" technology; the latter uses a small toy pen that comprises an mp3 recorder/player, scanner, microphone, and speaker. The staff had already experienced these tools as valuable for language development, although not previously with the youngest children at *B*. It was decided to develop the ways and means of using this technology in close cooperation with the parents.

Teachers' and Parents' Actions

First, the parents were instructed how to give presentations in their mother tongue, based on big, colorful posters of animals. The presentations included sentences of the type "*This is a big elephant. It has four legs and a trunk.*" Some families chose to let the elder siblings do the presentations, while others included songs related to the posters. The parents were also instructed how to record these presentations with the talking pen. Each presentation or "monologue" was then



Fig. 1 Boy placing the talking pen on a sticker located on a poster of an elephant. This activates the pen, and the boy hears his mother's voice saying, "This is the elephant's big ear"

scanned onto stickers, so-called "hot spots," with a separate sticker for each language. The audio files were later activated by the children as they touched the talking pen on the stickers on the poster (see Fig. 1).

Children were able to listen not only to their own first language, but also to the other children's first languages. Versions in Swedish were also recorded by the Swedish-speaking teacher.

Next, the procedure was repeated, but this time parents were asked to make short presentations about toys. They were also asked to display and talk about their own family photos. Other photos showed *B* children in different activities. These presentations were scanned and the stickers were then placed on toys (Fig. 2, left) and on photos and other illustrations (Fig. 2, right).

The parents were also filmed as they talked about various objects or activities in the ECEC setting; for example, they were asked to give a presentation about a stuffed octopus toy that the children seemed to like a lot (Fig. 3). The children's encounters with the digital tools were also filmed by the staff.

Children's Actions

The various digital tools were introduced to the children in a playful way. They were not directly demonstrated by the



Fig. 3 A boy uses a computer to watch a video of his mother talking about a stuffed toy

teachers, so the children were more or less free to discover the different functions on their own. This provided as many affordances as possible and hindered social constraints (Ljunggren 2013; Reed 1993). Some children liked to use the talking pen on their own; others wanted a friend or a teacher along with them. Children were allowed to ask for the talking pen or a tablet whenever they felt like using or playing with them, as long as the teachers were there with them.

Findings

The findings were organized under three main themes, each of which will be explained and developed in this section:

- Moving from a question–answer pedagogy to new ways of interaction
- Children's awareness of the different languages in preschool
- Parents' and teachers' feeling of togetherness

From Question–Answer Pedagogy to New Ways of Interaction

Preschools and schools have had a long tradition of a "question–answer" pedagogy (Fleer 2003). Often children



Fig. 2 *Left* A girl touches the talking pen to a sticker located on a toy. *Right* A girl touches photos and illustrations of her home and family with the talking pen

are asked questions so the teacher can control what they have learned, rather than as a natural way to converse. Fler (2003) emphasizes the importance of challenging “what teachers take for granted” and considers it crucial to “think beyond one interactional style and begin to develop a range of ways of interacting—a diversity of ways that reflect the diversity of the children” (Fler 2003, p. 75).

When working with the talking pen or tablet, the children were seldom asked questions that the teachers already knew the answers to, or questions only to control what they had learned. Instead, both children and teachers discovered new areas of knowledge together. (For example, the children were asked, *What is your mummy/daddy/sister talking about?*). The teachers described this way of working as a somewhat new and different way of interacting with the children. This transcript of one of the film sequences illustrates one of the situations in which this type of interaction occurred:

Transcript: Rana’s encounter with the talking pen

Rana places the talking pen on one of the posters showing an elephant. As she does this, the player is activated and she hears her sister singing a self-composed Arabic song about an elephant:

Det är Sara! Det är Sara! Min syster! It’s Sarah! It’s Sarah! My sister! Rana joyfully declares, turning toward her teacher.

Vi får fråga vad den fina sången handlar om. Jag förstår den inte. Oh, we must ask your sister what this nice song is about! I cannot understand it, the teacher says.

The data show that children quickly understood the functions of the pen and demonstrated their knowledge to their peers; they found new ways of using it together, such as for playing songs and playing together. Interesting, new ways of being active occurred, as shown in the next transcript:

Transcript: Hassan’s encounter with the talking pen

Hassan is playing with the talking pen and uses it on one of the toys (a cow in the shape of a puppet) marked with stickers. As he does this, the pen is activated and starts to sing a song in Swedish about a cow. Hassan starts to move back and forth, making dance movements. Then he holds the pen to his mouth like a microphone and starts singing the song into it.

Children’s awareness of the different languages in preschool

When the children heard the presentations, they became aware of the different languages and quickly learned which

sticker was linked to their own language, as demonstrated in this transcription:

Transcription: Ada’s encounter with the talking pen

Ada places the talking pen on some photos of children dressed up as Spiderman. As she places the pen on one of the stickers, she hears her mother’s voice speaking in Wolof about the photos. Her face shows great joy and she looks surprised, holding her hands to her mouth.

Det är mamma! It’s mum! She declares several times, turning toward the camera.

Then she decides to use the pen to point to another sticker. The player is activated and starts to talk in Swedish:

Jag är ett spindelbarn. I am a Spider kid, it says.

Ada looks surprised again and repeats her action over and over again. When placing the pen on one sticker, she hears her mother speaking Wolof; when she places it on another sticker, she hears the same thing in Swedish.

- ***Vilken är din mamma?*** “Which one is your mother?” the teacher asks, and Ada shows her teacher three fingers.
- ***Jaha, trean, är trean din mamma?*** “Ah, number three, is that your mother’s voice? Is that your mummy?” the teacher asks, and Ada nods her head.

Another sign of the awareness of the different languages was the use of translation. Children were able to translate into Swedish the different utterances that they heard from the talking pen. The next transcription demonstrates one of the girls translating an Arabic sentence into Swedish. It is also interesting to note that the two Arabic-speaking girls are talking Arabic to each other, yet Lina is able to quickly switch from Arabic to Swedish as she talks to her teacher.

Transcript: Maria’s and Lina’s encounter with the talking pen

Maria and Lina are looking at a poster of an elephant. Maria demonstrates how Lina should use the pen to point to the different parts of the elephant. When Lina uses the pen, a female voice talking in Arabic is activated. Lina repeats some of the sentences, and Maria and Lina start to have a conversation in Arabic. They use the pen to point to different parts of the elephant:

- ***Vad pratar hon om?*** “What is she talking about?” the teacher asks Lina in Swedish.
- ***Jag vill inte säga.*** “I don’t want to say it,” Lina answers and continues to point to the different parts of the elephant. She now points to the elephant’s mouth.
- ***Hon säger: jag har tänder.*** “She says, ‘I have teeth,’” Lina suddenly says in Swedish.

Parents' and teachers' feeling of togetherness

It became clear to us that the voices of the parents were very important to the children. All the films show how thrilled and pleased the children were, as they were hearing their parent's voices, Rosalinda says in one of the meetings with the research circle. We felt like we really needed the parents, as if the parents were the key. In fact we could not have done this without them, she continues. Yes, Ann-Sofie says, and I also noticed how it is much more fun talking to the parents when we have this project in common. Before, we had more conversations about the practical stuff—for example, reminding parents about bringing the diapers. Now it's another kind of dialogue, like "What is this and this called in your language?" We didn't really notice the different languages as much before. I feel we've come closer to the parents by working this way.

Before the project started, the annual parent evaluation had shown that parents were not aware of the methods and the work in preschool. While the project was ongoing, teachers described how much these attitudes changed. In various contexts, parents expressed the feeling that the project had increased their understanding of the work in preschool and that they felt more involved. The second parental evaluation confirmed this.

Discussion

Today a majority of the world's children are growing up as bilingual or multilingual (Baker 2006). In this article, we use Kemp's (2009) definition of multilingualism; that is, multilingualism can be regarded as a generic term including bilingualism. Globally, multilingualism is a natural part of the context in which many ECEC settings are embedded. Both at an individual level (children, parents, teachers) and at an institutional level (curricula, policy documents), it is equitable to talk about a growing number of multilingual schools and ECEC settings (Kemp 2009). Thomas and Collier (2002) show that bilingual children's proficiency in both languages has significance for their school success. Consequently, a large number of families and early childhood educators across the world are affected by the same issue: How do we support children's multilingual development? Dixon et al. (2012) stress the significance of collaborating with parents, and parent's participation is also highly stressed in every policy document concerning preschool, on local, national, and international levels (Tallberg Broman 2009). However, Tallberg Broman questions the idea that schools and homes can be regarded as "two different social rooms" and claims new theoretical frames to describe the ongoing, large-scale changes affecting modern childhood. It is not fruitful to see the home context and the preschool

context that modern children are embedded in as being dichotomies, since these contexts are both parts of the same childhood. It is also undeniable that a modern childhood includes a digital world, and we argue that bringing digital tools into the early childhood and care organization is a way to meet children's everyday world and experiences. The talking pen and the other digital tools allowed the children to create their own literacy events. The stories recorded by the parents can also be regarded as a way create a personal e-book.

The findings of this project can be regarded as a small contribution to a new understanding of children's home and preschool contexts. The findings primarily point to parents' and teachers' mutual feeling of togetherness. The staff did not define themselves as the only professionals, but rather they described how they thought providing the best education and care arose in cooperation with the parents. It is fair to argue that the project in some ways contributed to the dismantling of the boundaries between home and preschool. By using modern technology, it was possible to bring the home environment and the different languages into the preschool. The data provide examples of children reflecting upon the different languages they were exposed to. These reflections can also be a starting point for increased linguistic awareness.

Reed (1993) demonstrates how affordances can be shared and revealed by joint action. The learning of a second language during the preschool years differs from both the learning of the first language and from adult learning of a second language, since young children's communication strategies are primarily associated with activity (Nicholas and Lightbown 2008). The fact that the children in this study were active together as they used the tools was most probably beneficial to their learning.

This action research project serves as an example of how the classroom environment can be used to develop bilingual children's vocabulary in close cooperation with the parents, as suggested by Dixon et al. (2012). The different, multilingual affordances that were directed to the children resulted in many conversation openings and other types of interaction. But above all, the project shows that involving parents in the work is a key to success. We argue that cooperating with parents can be regarded as a valuable affordance for the work in multilingual preschools; namely, that a possibility for action is embedded in this cooperation.

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