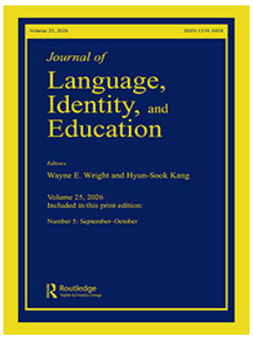

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Supporting Newly Arrived Students via Their L1: Competence for Study Tutors in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In Sweden, newly arrived students are provided with a special support measure called "study tutoring in the mother tongue." In study tutoring, a study tutor regularly meets the students to support them in their subject learning via the use of their L1 in alternation with L2 Swedish. The job of a study tutor in Sweden is loosely defined and remains under-researched. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the regime of competence, this study explores the competence that study tutors perceive as important for their work and its relevance for their work tasks. The research material was collected through 10 individual interviews and was analysed thematically. The analysis reveals six competence areas as essential for study tutors: multilingual competence and pedagogical translanguaging; communication and interpersonal competence; subject knowledge; knowledge of the Swedish context; assessment of prior knowledge; and qualifications and professional development. Considering the complexity of their role, it is remarkable that professional training for study tutors is practically nonexistent. Clarifying study tutors' professional role and providing them with training opportunities would certainly contribute to strengthening their status in education.

KEYWORDS

Study tutoring; mother tongue; multilingual education; immigrant students; regime of competence; communities of practice

Introduction

In Swedish schools, newly arrived students should be provided language support in their subjects through an internationally rare educational special measure called "study tutoring in the mother tongue" (henceforth "study tutoring") (studiehandledning på modersmålet) (Education Act, [SFS 2010:800, 2010], Chapter 3, § 12i). In this special support measure, a study tutor meets one or several newly arrived students before, during or after lessons to support them in their subject learning by discussing content using their first language (L1) in alternation with L2 Swedish. According to the Education Act (SFS 2010:800, 2010), newly arrived students have the right to be provided with study tutoring until they have developed a sufficiently high level of proficiency in Swedish. The role of study tutoring, thus, can be summarized as employing students' L1 in alternation with L2 Swedish as a strategy to enhance the learning of both content and L2 Swedish. Study tutoring is therefore often described by researchers as a space for translanguaging in the literature (see Fuster et al., 2024).

As an initiative, study tutoring aims both at inclusion and integration. The role of study tutors is considered crucial not only for individual students' learning and identity, but also for moving towards a more inclusive and equal society. Study tutors make a unique connection by using language to support the students' subject content knowledge. As speakers of the students' L1, study tutors act like "language bridges" between the students and their learning in school, between the country of origin and Sweden, and even between the school and their social life (Munhall et al., 2024). Additionally, study tutors act as "cultural bridges," drawing on their own country of

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origin and cultural background to support students' learning and integration (Munhall, 2024). The work of study tutors seems to contribute to academic success for newly arrived students in Sweden, encouraging student participation in classes as well as content and language learning (see, for example, Harju-Autti & Mäkinen, 2022; Rosén et al., 2019; Statens offentliga utredningar [SOU], 2019).

While study tutoring has existed since the 1980s, studies show that study tutors have low social status within schools and the support measure remains probably the most under-researched educational area of Swedish schools (Avery, 2017). As Avery (2017) points out, a small body of studies on study tutoring has begun to emerge only since 2015 (e.g., Reath Warren, 2017; Rosén et al., 2019), linked to a considerably increased level of immigration between 2010 and 2020 (Sweden Statistics, 2023). Research on study tutoring has been conducted especially since 2018, when the regulation was reinforced so that all newly arrived students at the end of compulsory schooling should be provided study tutoring "unless obviously unnecessary" (Education Act [SFS 2010:800, 2010], Chapter 3, Section 12i, our translation).

Due to the decentralized nature of the Swedish education system, the implementation of study tutoring varies greatly across the country, and at times it is not included in the regular planning led by school leaders and teachers (Swedish National Agency of Education [SNAE], 2019). Being "a special support measure" and not a school subject, study tutoring is not mentioned in the curriculum but only regulated shortly in the Compulsory School Ordinance (SFS 2011:185, 2011) and described in more detail in the support material published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE, 2019).

While previous research has examined study tutor practices (e.g., Lindén, 2024; Reath Warren, 2016), working conditions (e.g., Avery, 2017; Rosén et al., 2019), and their positioning within schools (e.g., Dávila, 2018; Reath Warren, 2013), there is a lack of research that defines the competence structure underpinning study tutoring as a professional practice. In particular, little has been written about how study tutors themselves perceive the competences required for their work and how these perceptions are shaped. The present study addresses this gap by conceptualising study tutoring as an ill-defined professional practice and empirically articulating its regime of competence through study tutors' own perspectives, using a Communities of Practice (CoP) framework. To guide the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What competence areas do study tutors perceive as important to correspond to their work demands?
2. How do those competence areas relate to the work tasks of study tutors?

Within the CoP framework, competence is employed as a core analytical concept to examine the capacities study tutors perceive they need to effectively carry out their work. For the present study, competence, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, refers to the capacity to actualise an activity in a given context. Competence is dynamic, and it has a developmental and situated nature (Antera, 2021). Competence is an umbrella term for competency, which refers to a smaller part of competence, and it describes the ability to perform a specific task (Mulder, 2014).

Study tutoring in previous studies

The number of studies focusing on study tutoring is still limited, but studies conducted thus far give a picture of study tutoring as a crucial support measure that suffers from a series of problems related to a low status.

Study tutors are employed by either schools or the municipalities to provide study tutoring, usually to newly arrived students for a few years, until their level of proficiency in L2 Swedish is deemed to be sufficient (Dávila & Bunar, 2020). Consequently, study tutors often have temporary contracts and are often employed in several schools at the same time (Avery, 2017; Munhall et al., 2024; Valenta, 2009). Of the 4,600 study tutors employed in the academic year 2019/2020, only 60% held a permanent

contract (SNAE, 2020). Previous research has stressed how the lack of full-time contracts influences study tutors' participation in school, in terms of both being accepted as colleagues and feeling free to take initiatives or even to participate in the organisation of processes (Avery, 2017; Rosén et al., 2019).

Furthermore, study tutors are not required to possess a university degree in general or a pedagogical degree in particular (SOU, 2019). The recruitment as well as the assessment of study tutor candidates' competence is the school principal's responsibility. This flexibility is needed to ensure a higher number of applicants and thus potential study tutors (Sheikhi, 2019).

According to Rosén et al. (2019), there is no institutional identity that follows the assignment of study tutors, as there are no formal requirements for their employment, even though there is a series of competences that study tutors are expected to possess, as listed by the SNAE in their support material. More specifically, study tutors should master both Swedish and the minority language they are hired to support newly arrived students through. This competence includes not just being able to speak and write in these languages but also having a general knowledge of academic concepts core to the different school subjects (Avery, 2017; Sheikhi, 2019). Several studies show, however, that some study tutors themselves are newcomers in Sweden, some of them having just completed their own education in L2 Swedish. In comparison to study tutors, who have been in Sweden for a longer time, newly arrived study tutors have reported lower self-confidence and a feeling of underperformance (Avery, 2017; Rosén et al., 2019).

Researching the functions of multilingual practice in study tutoring, Reath Warren (2016) has shown how using students' L1 alongside L2 Swedish helps students develop both metalinguistic and sociocultural awareness. This illustrates how study tutors' work extends beyond language development and how it also plays an important role in students' broader educational and social development. Accordingly, study tutors are expected to have not only language competence, but also knowledge of the educational system and of wider cultural and societal contexts in both Sweden and the students' countries of origin, as Sheikhi (2019) also highlights. In her study about scaffolding practice in study tutoring, Lindén (2024) identified two types of content: subject and school knowledge. While subject knowledge was dominant and consisted of school subjects, like mathematics, school knowledge refers to knowledge about the school's routines and values. School knowledge was initiated by students' explicit questions, and it was largely derived by the study tutors' own experiences and their judgment of required support. Hence, mastery of school knowledge required study tutors to be familiar not only with the Swedish school system but also with the students' prior educational experiences. Overall, the research highlights language competence, knowledge of both the Swedish and students' prior school systems, understanding of school routines and values, and the ability to support various students' learning needs as competencies for study tutors.

Furthermore, according to SNAE (2019), study tutors are expected to follow the learning goals of the different subjects, and thus they should have general subject knowledge. Subject knowledge in several different subjects cannot always be guaranteed. Hence, there is a need for constant collaboration between study tutors and the different subject teachers (Avery, 2017; Sheikhi, 2019; SNAE, 2019). However, several studies show that study tutors and subject teachers rarely collaborate sufficiently (e.g., Avery, 2017; Roux Sparresko, 2023; Sheikhi, 2019). Even though study tutors do not formally engage in assessment, the assessment of students' prior subject knowledge and of their progression in Swedish language is also an unofficial task for them (Munhall et al., 2024; Sheikhi, 2019). Other competence implicitly present in the SNAE (2019) support material includes communication competence, ability for collaboration with subject teachers, and adaptability to different student needs.

In contrast to the peripheral position that school staff ascribes to study tutors (Reath Warren, 2013), study tutors have identified themselves mostly as a type of teacher and highlight their crucial contribution to newly arrived students' school success (Munhall et al., 2024; Rosén et al., 2019). A research study from the United Kingdom (UK) (Kakos, 2022) showed that multilingual teaching assistants, who have a role similar to study tutors, have a low professional status and can be marginalised by school staff in general (see also Avery, 2017, for a similar result in Sweden), although they acquire a pastoral role, creating safe spaces for students. While their role is often peripheral in the

teaching practice, they often experience power dynamics between themselves and the classroom teachers, with the latter viewing the practice of study tutoring as non-essential (elective) and of low status (lacking resources, books, and qualified teachers) (Reath Warren, 2013). Some study tutors in Kakos (2022) study have referred to their role as liaison agents between the school and the parents as well, with their role being extended outside of the classroom setting. From a system perspective, Swedish study tutors are generally more formally integrated into schools, working towards both language and content curriculum goals, whereas UK study tutors remain more peripheral, focusing primarily on language mediation with less formal recognition in policy (Kakos, 2022; Lindén, 2024; St John, 2023).

The above-mentioned studies offer an insight into study tutors' practice and working conditions, while some of them touch upon issues of identity. This study approaches study tutors through the lens of the theory of Community of Practice with the aim to investigate how their individual actions and struggles influence the formation of an informal but relevant regime of competence; a set of competencies that are important for their everyday work as study tutors.

Conceptual framework: Competence and legitimate peripheral participation

With a focus on the social aspect of learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) described learning as participation in a community and a practice, which they called a Community of Practice (CoP). According to the theory of Communities of Practice, the newcomer gradually becomes a member in a practice while partaking in tasks and actions that are included in the practice. At the same time, the newcomer develops competence and habits that are important and relevant for the practice (Wenger, 1998), learning how to be a member of the community.

Communities of Practice serves as an analytical framework focusing on how learning happens in coordinated participation. The theory has three core concepts. First, *mutual engagement*, which refers the active cooperation between individuals; second, joint enterprise, which describes the participants' common goals and intentions, but also the idea of performing a shared task, and third, shared repertoire, which addresses the shared culture between the members and the shared knowledge, often expressed as social tools (e.g., language, rules, routines) (Wenger, 1998). For the present study, the CoP under discussion is the school teaching community, including teachers, study tutors, and school principals.

Individual participants undertake tasks related to practice to a smaller or larger extent. With this participation, they move from being in the *periphery* of the community, where they have legitimate peripheral participation, closer to the centre, to full participation. Hence, *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) describes how individual membership in the respective community changes, reflecting also the involvement and interaction between newcomers with old-timers and with the practice itself. This interaction leads to a legitimised position in the CoP.

In the periphery, participants have less connection to the three core elements of the CoP and their membership is partial. While their participation increases, so does participants' competence, meaning that the learner, and in this case the newcomer study tutor, moves from "'novice,' 'advanced beginner,' 'competent,' and 'proficient' to 'expert'" (Poortman et al., 2011, p. 267). With increased participation and developed competence, participants can be recognised as full and active members. This translates as members taking up more or more important tasks in the community. Importantly, this process involves not only the development of specific skills but also the continual adjustment of members' roles, enabling them to meet the previously unaddressed or hidden needs of the CoP. Becoming members in a CoP means that the participants have demonstrated that they are capable to perform the tasks included in the practice. In other words, they meet the *regime of competence* required by the community. Thus, the regime of competence is a set of expectations for members, a series of competencies, including knowledge, values, and skills that all members are supposed to have in order to be full members.

To become full members, individuals need to show that they can be accountable to the regime of competence instructed by the CoP. Consequently, newcomers try to align their prior competence with the regime of competence of the CoP (Wenger, 1998). At the same time, members with their own personalized set of competence affect the synthesis of the regime of the CoP, especially in ill-defined practices or CoP (Antera, 2023). The competence regime is not a standard set of requirements; instead, it is a dynamic set of competence demands that is affected by contextual factors as well as by the practice and the community members (Handley et al., 2006).

In loosely defined professions, the regime of competence and, therefore, the conditions for membership, are determined to a high extent by the communities that deal with the professional practice (Antera, 2023). In the case of study tutors, where their job tasks are ill-defined, the individual study tutor´s interpretation plays an important role in defining the practice and its competence regime. In an ill-defined practice like study tutoring, the individual and their interpretation of the practice and of what is required for it play a crucial role in formulating the practice, setting its boundaries and instructing what type of competence can be of relevance, shaping the regime of competence. In that sense, exploring study tutors' perceptions of their practice and the required competence for it is a solid basis for exploring how the profession of study tutors is being shaped in Sweden. Furthermore, this can illuminate the diverse educational needs of the communities in which study tutors operate, highlighting aspects of learning and inclusion that may be overlooked by subject teachers.

Methods

The study adopts a qualitative research design. The data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews with 10 study tutors in different areas of Sweden. The informants were recruited through an open call on social media, and the interviews took place in person or on Zoom, in either Swedish, English, or Spanish (in which the authors are fluent), based on the interviewees' preference. The informants were informed about what participation entailed and provided written consent to participate. In the analysis, all personal data were anonymized.

The interviews lasted around 60 min each. They were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the authors. Guided by the research questions, the interview discussions covered the role of study tutors, questions about tasks that study tutors perform, the competence they need for these tasks, and the employment and working conditions for study tutoring. The data analysis was thematic and followed the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The informants had varied backgrounds. Most of them were employed partly as study tutors and partly as Mother Tongue Instruction teachers. They worked predominantly in multiple schools and with at least several students. Finally, in most cases they were employed by the municipal language centre (*språkcentrum*), while some were employed directly by schools. Their educational background varied from upper secondary education, general and vocational, up to master's studies.

Findings

The findings present competence areas connected to the work of study tutors as discussed by the informants. In the analysis, we could identify six main themes or competence areas for study tutoring, namely: (a) multilingual competence, linguistic awareness and pedagogical translanguaging; (b) communication and interpersonal competence; (c) knowledge of Swedish society and school; (d) subject knowledge; (e) assessment of students' prior knowledge and progress; and (f) qualification and professional development of study tutors. Together, the themes presented below constitute the empirically derived regime of competence for study tutors, as articulated through their perceptions of everyday work tasks and responsibilities.

Multilingual competence, linguistic awareness and pedagogical translanguaging

Multilingual competence was discussed by all the study tutors as one of the most essential competence areas for study tutoring. Study tutors presented the need to be fluent in both the student's L1 and Swedish. As pointed out by several study tutors, many students also have knowledge of English, and study tutors therefore sometimes also use English as a resource to explain new concepts in Swedish. In our study, all the study tutors were L1 speakers of the language (besides Swedish and English) that they were working with. However, for a few students, this language was not an L1, but an L2 in which they were fluent from an early age.

> Because I have a few students whose native language is something obscure and we don't have it in our repertoire in the Language Center.[1] One of them I'm not sure what his first language is, but the other one is Nepalese. And we don't have Nepalese teachers. So, he is okay. He gets by like in everyday English, so I am his only resource, that they can give him at the Language Center. So, I mean, we just struggle to get whatever kind of message across … with pictures, I try as many words in English as I can. (Ariel)

As shown in the excerpt above, while multilingual competence is essential, an important challenge for study tutoring is that it is sometimes difficult to recruit study tutors who speak both Swedish and the L1s in question, as these languages are not always frequently spoken in Sweden. This is problematic because, according to the regulation, study tutoring should be given in the student's L1 or strongest language, which may not always be possible in practice (SFS 2011:185, 2011). Another challenge is that study tutors are often newly arrived themselves and have not yet developed a very high level of proficiency in Swedish.

> So, my Swedish isn't perfect. I think it's pretty good, but … It's not so good that I would see myself helping them with, for example, Swedish which … It's … And I don't get that. And I don't do that (to help them with Swedish) because I still make mistakes. And all the mistakes I make, they pass on (to the students). (Diana)

Raising students' linguistic awareness of similarities and differences between languages also plays an important role in study tutoring. Study tutors often engaged in crosslinguistic comparisons as well as in explanations of morphological or grammatical rules in either of the languages, for instance, regarding word order or how compounds are formed. Discussing grammar, Anna pointed out that she often makes comparisons between Swedish and Spanish. For instance, she gives an example that in Swedish there are no question marks at the beginning of the sentence because the position of the verb already indicates that it is a question. In Spanish, by contrast, question marks at the beginning of the sentence are what distinguish an affirmative from an interrogative sentence, given that the position of the verb does not change. Another example includes the bilingual glossaries that Maria often asks students to fill in when learning new academic concepts such as "chemical reaction." This type of bilingual glossaries can be a way of strengthening the learning of new concepts in Swedish through concepts in the L1 that students are already familiar with, but also a way of learning new concepts in both Swedish and the L1 simultaneously. Thus, study tutoring can also play an important role in promoting maintenance and development of students' minority L1s, which is part of the multilingualism goal in Swedish schools (Fuster & Bardel, 2024). These activities can be referred to as "pedagogical translanguaging," that is, as systematically using several languages within one lesson in order to strengthen language and/or content learning (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). As pointed out by Fuster, Antera and Munhall (2024), however, study tutors often engage in this type of crosslinguistic activities spontaneously rather than in a way that has been planned beforehand to achieve a certain learning goal.

Communication and interpersonal competence

As derived from the research material, communication competence refers to study tutors' ability to communicate efficiently with others involved in the study tutoring process, students, teachers, parents and school principals, as well as with staff from the language centres. Interpersonal competence

describes the competence enacted during an interaction among individuals. Interpersonal competence facilitates the initiation as well as the maintenance of relationships.

In the case of study tutors in this study, the focus lies on students and the study tutor–student relationship. Study tutors met the newly arrived students not long after they arrived in Sweden. They described themselves as being among the few people in the students' environment who speak their L1 (or strongest language), and for that reason they saw their role as very important. The study tutors discussed also providing socio-emotional support, including listening to students' concerns about life in general, in addition to their support with subject and Swedish learning. For example, there was a study tutor helping the newly arrived students to find groups and activities in the society relating to the students' own interests.

Performing this unofficial task required not only good communication between the student and the study tutor, but also openness and flexibility from the study tutor, as well as empathy and an innate interest in helping students become members of life in the new society. The importance of this support is highlighted by Ali, who said that "if I don't have a good relationship, (the students) don't dare to come to me or ask questions." Most of the study tutors addressed their tendency to support student in this way as a result of being "humane" and helping others. In Antonio's words:

> I have to take care of my study tutoring students. I have to know, the school has to know what is going on in the family. if the parents have divorced for example, it is very important because … to understand how the student feels emotionally. Because otherwise the school doesn't work, it's very important. If it takes a few extra minutes, well, what does it matter?

Interpersonal competence is, therefore, required for supporting a hidden but very important aspect of study tutoring, the emotional support of students and their introduction to social life. The position of study tutors as closer to students entails the potential of highlighting also students' competence beyond linguistic and subject knowledge. This supports perceiving students as individuals with multiple different potential, rather than focusing solely on their weak language capacity in Swedish.

Communication and collaboration with subject teachers

This subtheme has a distinct position in the work of study tutors as discussed by the informants of the present study. In several interviews, study tutors described limited communication and collaboration with the subject teachers, as well as a lack of initiative on the part of the teachers for communication. Collaboration between teachers and tutors is crucial because it provides subject tutors with information about students' specific learning needs to be focused on in study tutoring. According to Ariel:

> I've never sent an email, because I feel like they (the teachers) don't answer my emails, when I need them to answer my emails. They're not going to answer an email. I don't know if they're going to read it. I don't think they want to read it.

Other study tutors, like Andreas and Diana, however, focused more on resolving this issue by reminding the teacher that the time for study tutoring was approaching. In Diana's words:

> Cooperation with school and teachers … It wasn't so easy in the beginning, but at most schools it works great, and as I said, I now have a routine for me, that I remind them (the subject teachers) two days before. Now it's time! Have you planned what should I do?

While overall communication with teachers was described as challenging, some study tutors engaged in proactive planning, actively identifying students' needs by reaching out to teachers and parents. For example, Anna sought meetings with teachers to discuss specific student needs, noting that she often had to initiate the communication herself:

> They (the subject teachers) don't have time, so they usually make sure that way … Can you come a little earlier, so that we meet an hour before and that I [from] briefly explain what this student needs or if there is anything special

> that you need to know? But but [*sic*], I'm usually the one asking (for this communication), because they think I might have gotten this information before, from someone else.

Similarly, Antonio contacted parents to clarify particular circumstances, such as a divorce, that might affect a student's learning (see Antonio's quote above). These efforts reflect the context in which study tutors operate, where tasks are often ill-defined and working conditions vary considerably, making initiative essential to ensure a quality learning environment.

Overall, these findings indicate that communication with teachers largely depends on study tutors taking initiative and proactively coordinating, as the working conditions for both subject teachers and study tutors do not readily support such communication.

Knowledge of Swedish society and school

The interviewed study tutors understood knowledge of the Swedish context as the ability to interpret and communicate aspects of Swedish society and the school system to students. While the Swedish context can encompass many areas of life, in this study it primarily concerned information about the Swedish school system, social norms and traditions, and formal rules. This emphasis likely reflects the focus of the interviews, which centred on the tutors' work with newly arrived students. This content is not defined in any formal way; it rather emerges based on students' needs. For example, both Malin and Diana presented themselves as a bridge between the country of origin and Sweden.

> And sometimes it is also the case that people talk about the difference between the home country school and the Swedish school. Why is this so? Why should we do it that way? Or what do they expect? And I'm the one who knows how it works or how, how it works in Country of Origin and knows how it works here in Sweden and can tell the students. What is the difference? What do you have to change, or how do they want education to be here in Sweden? (Diana)

Study tutors' tasks related to knowledge of the Swedish society and school were not limited to providing and explaining information. Study tutors often also tried to make sense of a situation that students encounter in their experience in Swedish education and society by using a similar element from students' other culture, language or context (e.g., explaining that school choice that is not available in the country of origin is available in Sweden). Combining the knowledge of the existing potential both in students (coming from the interpersonal relations) and the environment (coming from their knowledge of Swedish society), study tutors enable their role as bridges between the newcomer and the society.

Knowledge of the Swedish society and school is mostly based on study tutors´ personal experience and is not strictly defined in any guiding documents or supporting material. This allows relative flexibility on what study tutors understand from the Swedish context, as well as on how they interpret it, a flexibility that serves the diversity among study tutors' perceptions and students' needs. However, the high dependency on individual interpretations combined with the absence of preparation for study tutoring entails as well the risk of communicating a distorted picture of the Swedish context.

Subject knowledge

Subject knowledge refers to having an understanding of the content matter that students work with in their different subjects at school. The informants of this study highlighted this knowledge as important for their work. According to Ariel:

> You have to know a little bit about everything. I mean, we've all been to, hopefully, we've all been to primary school, and we all have graduated [from] high school and have that background. But it's going to require like remembering this stuff and knowing a little bit about it.

The required level of this knowledge is lower when students are in primary education and more demanding for students in higher grades, according to the informants. Supporting students in a variety of subjects, in-depth knowledge of different disciplines is not realistic. "Many, many study tutors, who are also Mother Tongue teachers, strongly emphasize that they are not subject teachers. That they don't necessarily know maths, history, religion, physics, and so on." (Andreas). This requires more time for preparation from their side, which is not always an option due to subject teachers not informing them accordingly and on time. Study tutors seem to prepare only shortly before meeting with students, often improvising during their classes.

> It is also good to be able to improvise as a study tutor, because you never know what will happen and what to do, as I said a few minutes before. It is also important. Because, as I said, study tutoring is not only about Swedish. There can be all sorts of parts of mathematics, chemistry, crafts, subjects that I never had in [the] Country of Origin, for example. (Anna)

Assessment of students' prior knowledge and progress

Another process that study tutors discussed as part of their tasks is the assessment of students´ prior knowledge in the different subjects as well as the assessment of their progress. Study tutors in the present study mentioned that they are not formally included in students' assessment of prior knowledge. This is performed mainly by subject teachers, who, in collaboration with the school principal, reach a decision on the necessity for study tutoring. According to Ariel's description of assessment:

> It is very informal. There's no paper tests or anything. And I've had kids that, like, pass their tests really well. And then you think, well, if they're passing their tests, then they don't need you anymore. But there's no discussion about them not meeting me. So that's it is very informal, and it is a very grey line, if not like just altogether completely blurry and indecipherable. It's just kind of when I feel like it and/or when they feel like it.

Nevertheless, study tutors said that they do their own initial assessment in order to design individualised learning for each student. Furthermore, they also claimed that they follow up on the progress of their students both in Swedish and in their L1. More specifically, study tutors discussed how they report students' progress to teachers and together they decide if there is further need to continue with study tutoring. In the overall assessment process, the study tutor's role is not visible, as their participation in formal assessment is limited.

Qualifications and professional development of study tutors

Qualifications, as a form of formal competence, represent certified education or training that demonstrates an individual's skills and knowledge, and they often serve as a basis for recruitment (Ellström, 1998). In the interviews, study tutors described qualifications and other types of formal competence, such as pedagogical or language-related training, as largely limited to preparation seminars provided by the language centres, often concluding with some form of certification. Such preparation or introduction seminars are offered in some municipalities. Their content may include familiarisation with governing documents, teaching methods, subject content, or discussions on collaboration with school staff. Study tutors who completed preparation seminars, however, mentioned that they are not enough support to perform study tutoring. According to Lena, "I can say that there are many who pass that training. They cannot teach any subject as a study tutor, unfortunately." Moreover, Melissa, who studied communication and some courses in special pedagogy, claimed that without formal education, supporting a student can be unstructured, like helping out one's siblings with coursework. On the other hand, "when one is educated, one leans towards the science thought process that applies to studying and helping (others) to study." Melissa pointed out the importance of being aware of teaching methods and applying them in study tutoring.

Study tutors expressed a need for continued professional development to correspond to the demands and the objectives of their role. In the interviews, actualizing this attitude was addressed as continuing

formal education, including courses and seminars to develop teaching competence, as well as further developing their competence in Swedish. Other content of interest included special education competence.

Discussion

Exploring the areas that study tutors perceive as necessary in order to perform study tutoring, this study found that multilingual competence, metalinguistic awareness and pedagogical translanguaging, communication and interpersonal competence, subject knowledge, knowledge of Swedish society and school, assessment of students' prior knowledge and progress, and qualifications and professional development are core for study tutors' work. These competence areas are included in study tutors´ regime of competence. By articulating a regime of competence for study tutors, this study shifts the focus from individual shortcomings to the structural conditions shaping professional participation and identity.

Besides their frequent self-identification as teachers (or performing teaching) (see Munhall et al., 2024), study tutors are not formally teachers, and their role is described as supportive. Teachers, particularly language teachers, and study tutors share several work-related competences (Stockholm University, 2020), which can create confusion for tutors regarding their professional identity and the basis of their decisions (Rosén et al., 2019). The distinction between the roles partly lies in formal qualifications: subject teachers must hold formal teaching credentials (SNAE, 2025), while study tutors lack an equivalent formal description (Statens offentliga utredningar [SOU], 2019). Study tutors are expected to master students' L1, be familiar with multiple subjects, and apply pedagogical translanguaging. Exposure also differs; with study tutoring sessions typically lasting around 60 min per week, students spend considerably more time with classroom teachers, which may suggest a greater importance of teachers (Reath Warren, 2013). However, this underestimates the strategic role of study tutors as cultural and linguistic bridges between newly arrived students and the school community (Lindén, 2024).

Among the competence for study tutoring, this study reports the need for interpersonal competence and communication, facilitating study tutors to provide socio-emotional support to the newly arrived students. Study tutors stressed this need as rooted in being "humane" and wanting to help when one is in need. When study tutors frame the need for this task as part of their own individual values (it is humane to help), they demonstrate that it is not necessarily part of their professional values. Indeed, while the need for such support is not mentioned in the official support materials for study tutoring (Sheikhi, 2019; SNAE, 2019), it is discussed in research and professional literature, including Warren (2021), who highlights the importance of cooperation and management support for effective study supervision. Nevertheless, supporting students' socialization (Baker, 2014) and providing emotional support are implicit tasks of educators in all disciplines and levels (Hargreaves, 2001), especially in relationship to immigrant students (Baker, 2014; Ceballos Vacas & Trujillo-González, 2021; Hedman & Magnusson, 2021). If support is offered by study tutors only on the basis of empathy for others, the actions taken might be subconscious and unstructured. However, before moving to concrete suggestions on how to deal with this task, further research on the topic is needed, addressing the level of awareness of study tutors on providing socio-emotional support, the perception of this task as part of their work, as well as their preparation to offer this type of support.

Study tutors in Communities of Practice

Applying the CoP framework helps to identify the structural and relational needs of study tutors, including the competence and collaboration required for them to move from peripheral to fuller membership in the school community.

Study tutors are positioned at the border of peripheral and active participation, as described in Lave and Wenger (1991) theory of Communities of Practice. They are active members in students' learning and they play a crucial role for students' learning in school, but also for their overall integration in

Sweden. Nevertheless, several elements of their work suggest peripheral membership (also in Dávila, 2018; Reath Warren, 2016). From a CoP perspective, the study tutors interviewed for this study hold limited accountability on the respective regime of competence, meaning that they do not always meet up the competence requirements that a study tutor is expected to meet. Furthermore, study tutors do not formally participate in students' grading, remaining excluded from core tasks related to study tutoring design and delivery. It can be concluded that the study tutors in this study perceive their membership as partial, with an active role in students' learning, which is not formally reflected in their working conditions, formal responsibilities and collegial relationships.

According to study tutors themselves, they often feel disposable and like outsiders (also in Avery, 2017). In this study, study tutors are viewed as partial members who intend to move towards a fuller membership because they perceive their role as important for the practice. From a CoP lens, this represents a learning process through familiarization with the teaching and learning practice and a desire to collaborate more closely with subject teachers. Thus, they assume a learner's role. Within the school community, however, a lack of mechanisms that would support study tutors transition from peripheral to active members is reported. This can result in study tutors not having shared goals (joint enterprise) with the rest of the teaching community, leading to limited shared repertoire and low mutual engagement. With low participation in the CoP, study tutors' competence development is entirely left to their initiative and interest.

To this end, it is important to discuss the collaboration between subject teachers and study tutors with reference to CoP as well. Subject teachers, as full members in the teaching community, often stand in the center of the teaching practice, since their competence is legitimized. In that sense, they are "old-timers" of the community who can support the development of membership for newcomers or peripheral members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this study, however, it has been shown that the support that subject teachers could offer to study tutors with the aim of expanding their membership in the CoP is challenged by the practical working conditions for both roles. For example, the limited time for collaboration between teachers and study tutors seems not to be sufficient for supporting study tutors' mutual engagement in the practice, referring to shared knowledge, joint reflection, or collective decision-making with the teachers (Wenger, 1998). This, in turn, impedes the transition from partial to full members in the teaching practice. Instead of the teacher-study tutor collaboration serving as an enabler of study tutors expanding their membership in the CoP, it currently seems to serve more as a hindrance, exposing structural gaps in the practice.

While study tutoring places a strong emphasis on language development, particularly in Swedish, it also provides opportunities that go beyond language learning. Through study tutoring, students form their impressions and experiences of Swedish culture, the Swedish school system, and Swedish society more broadly. Using a CoP lens, these interactions reveal the significant role of study tutors in shaping students' understanding of the Swedish context and their social positioning. These interactions provide opportunities for language learning, while also serving as spaces where students negotiate their identities within the new society (Kakos, 2022) and explore power relationships (Souto-Manning & Lanza, 2019). In this way, study tutors play a role in shaping how students understand the Swedish context and how they position themselves within it.

The analysis shows that study tutors' ability to support students effectively is constrained by their peripheral position in the school's CoP. To become full members and integrate into the CoP, study tutors require structural support, recognition of their role (legitimized position in the community), clear role definitions, access to shared knowledge and school practices, regular collaboration and communication with teachers (support from old-timers), opportunities for professional development, and involvement in decision-making processes (increased participation) (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Conclusion

This study explored the competences study tutors perceive as necessary for supporting newly arrived students in Sweden and how these relate to their everyday work. Through interviews with 10 study tutors,

the study identified a regime of competence for study tutors, encompassing interconnected areas that span language and pedagogical skills, interpersonal and communicative abilities, contextual knowledge of Swedish society and schools, subject expertise, assessment practices, and ongoing professional development.

The main contribution of this study is the articulation of a regime of competence for study tutors, conceptualizing study tutoring as an ill-defined professional practice whose demands are negotiated through everyday participation in school communities of practice. By foregrounding tutors' own perspectives, the study gives voice to the often hidden and unofficial dimensions of their work, including tasks related to students' socio-emotional support and socialization. Applying the regime of competence framework recognizes these previously implicit aspects, also identified in previous research (e.g., Baker, 2014; Reath Warren, 2013), as essential components of professional practice.

The findings also clarify how study tutors' marginal position in schools shapes both their competence development and professional identity, highlighting the mismatch between responsibility and legitimacy. By outlining a coherent competence profile, this study provides practical insights for pre-service and in-service training. It supports the recognition of study tutors as key educational actors bridging language, subject learning, and social integration.

Finally, this study contributes to broader discussions on multilingual education and inclusion by showing how competence, participation, and professional identity are intertwined. Strengthening study tutors' access to collaboration and professional development can enhance both their professional participation and the quality of educational provision. Future research could build on this framework to examine how organizational models and training pathways influence study tutors' professional trajectories and students' learning outcomes.

Note

1. The language center coordinates first language instruction and study support for students who speak languages other than Swedish. It collaborates with schools arranging teachers and resources to help students develop their first language and provides guidance to support learning in other subjects.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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