



Short communication

## Second-language writing development of adult immigrants following three study paths reflecting their varying levels of prior education

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Comparative judgement  
L2 writing development  
Prior schooling  
Swedish as a Second Language  
Swedish for Immigrants

## ABSTRACT

Second-language (L2) research, including L2 writing research, typically recruits college or university students. There is an increasing awareness that this sampling bias entails negative consequences both for the generalizability of emerging L2 theories and for the applicability of research findings in heterogeneous L2 classrooms. However, previous research has not systematically investigated the association between adults' L2 writing development and their prior level of formal education. The present study contributes a concrete portrayal of what that association may look like by investigating a text corpus collected longitudinally from 38 students enrolled in Swedish for Immigrants. The texts were assessed by five experienced L2 teachers using the method of comparative judgement, which ascribes a holistic quality score to each text. The participants follow three study paths that reflect their varying levels of education, and statistical analyses revealed that study path significantly predicted the participants' writing ability and their rate of writing development. Despite the small sample size and other limitations of the study, those results confirm the importance of treating educational background as a crucial factor in L2 writing research. Implications for curriculum design are discussed, and methodological challenges that further L2 research needs to address are highlighted.

### 1. Background

Twenty years has passed since Bigelow and Tarone (2004) pointed out that almost everything we know about second-language (L2) acquisitions comes from studies examining learners with relatively long education, typically recruited at colleges or universities. Despite some attempts to broaden the scope of the field, L2 research involving learners with few experiences of school-based learning, or learners who were denied access to formal education, is still scarce (Godfroid & Andringa, 2023). When it comes to L2 writing research, it has been shown that L2 learners, with increased L2 proficiency, generally compose texts of higher quality, i.e., texts with more sophisticated vocabulary, fewer errors, higher degree of grammatical complexity and better cohesion (see Crossley, 2020, and references therein). L2 writing research has also investigated the efficiency of corrective feedback (see, e.g., Mao et al., 2024, and references therein). However, from the literature reviews cited, it is obvious that a vast majority of studies published, just like L2 studies in general, focuses on higher-education contexts. This is also confirmed by a quick review of all empirical studies published in

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the *Journal of Second Language Writing* in 2023, revealing that most of them involved college or university students; none involved adults with few experiences of formal education, for example immigrant workers or refugees learning their L2 in other places than at colleges and universities. Hence, as noted by Pettitt et al. (2021), little is known about the development of L2 writing skills by adults with few or no prior experiences of formal education.

The sampling bias described above has negative consequences not only for the development of generalizable L2 theories but also for the applicability of research findings in heterogeneous L2 classrooms. Specifically, to be able to align intended learning outcomes and pedagogical practices with learners' individual capacities and needs, curricula designers and teachers need to know how learners' varying backgrounds – such as their levels of prior education – may predict their L2 learning processes. Further research in diverse language-learning contexts is therefore warranted. The present study makes a small contribution to that endeavour.

### 1.1. Research involving adult L2 learners with few experiences of formal education

There have been reactions against the narrow focus on highly-educated populations in L2 research (e.g., Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Godfroid & Andringa, 2023; Gujord et al., 2023; Pettitt et al., 2021). Most importantly, the scholarly network *Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults* (LESLLA), founded in 2005, has contributed substantially to the understanding of the specific challenges facing adult L2 learners with few or no prior experiences of formal education. As shown in a systematic review of the LESLLA proceedings, this has mainly been achieved through qualitative studies focusing on teaching practices and on the social contexts of the learners (Nordanger et al., 2023). An exception to this generalisation is Kurvers and Ketelaars (2011), whose investigation of spelling strategies among 90 immigrants in the Netherland indicated that the writing development of adults with no or few experiences of formal education resembles to some extent that of children learning to write. Specifically, the participants appeared to move from a semi-phonetic, via a phonetic, to a phonemic stage. However, as pointed out by Pettitt et al. (2021) in their research overview, adults with no or few experiences of formal education differ from children in crucial ways. While they have typically developed advanced oral skills in one or several languages and are cognitively more mature than children, they face specific challenges when learning to write. Not only must they establish grapheme–phoneme associations while simultaneously acquiring the vocabulary and grammar of their L2, but they must also appropriate “culturally-embedded practices surrounding how to ‘do school’” (Pettitt et al., 2021, p. 2). In addition, unlike adult L2 learners who have learned to write in their L1, they do not possess higher-order writing skills that can easily be transferred to the L2 as soon as a certain amount of vocabulary and grammar is acquired (Crossley, 2020). Hence it is reasonable to assume that level of prior education may be a crucial factor predicting the L2 writing development of adults. However, previous research has not quantified such an effect, possibly because recruiting participants from the relevant population is typically associated with several challenges (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Gujord et al., 2023). The present study addresses this knowledge gap by exploring a corpus of texts collected longitudinally from adult immigrants in Sweden enrolled in Swedish for Immigrants.

### 1.2. Swedish for Immigrants

Adult immigrants with residence permit in Sweden are eligible for Swedish for Immigrants (SFI), a qualified language programme aimed to provide students with a basic ability to use spoken and written Swedish (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022), corresponding to a proficiency level between the A2 and the B1 levels of the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 2001). The education is organised on a municipal level and offers 15 h of instruction per week. It comprises four courses (A–D) and three study paths (1–3). Students with no or few experiences of formal education follow Path 1, which includes the courses A–D; students with approximately 6–11 years of education follow Path 2, which includes the courses B–D; and students with more than 11 years of education follow Path 3, which includes the courses C–D. Of 154,000 students enrolled in SFI in 2022, 21 % followed Path 1, 42 % followed Path 2 and 37 % followed Path 3 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023). Since SFI applies continuous admission, the time needed to finish a course varies between students. The statistics summarised in Table 1 reveal that Path 1 students generally need a longer time to finish a course than Path 2 students, who in turn need a longer time than Path 3 students. On average, Path 1 students need more than three years to finish SFI while Path 3 students need only one year.

Importantly, the intended learning outcome is the same for each SFI study path. When it comes to writing, students having finished Course D should be able to compose functional albeit simple texts about known topics, in different genres, to some degree adapted to informal and formal contexts (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). However, it is questionable whether the higher number of courses and the higher number of hours per course offered to students with relatively few experiences of formal education compensate for the disadvantage their educational background may entail. Indeed, the statistics in Table 1 do not reveal to what extent the writing ability that Path 1 students develop over three years of SFI study corresponds to the writing ability that Path 3 students

**Table 1**

Average numbers of months needed for students enrolled in the three SFI paths to complete the four SFI courses in 2022 (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023).

Course	Path 1	Path 2	Path 3
D	10.1	8.3	6.0
C	12.7	9.4	7.8
B	13.1	8.5	–
A	10.4	–	–

develop over one year. Previous research carried out in the context of SFI provides no answer to that question (see references in Agebjörn & Walldén, 2024).

### 1.3. The present study

This short communication reports on a small-scale study examining texts collected longitudinally from adult immigrants enrolled in a municipal SFI school in southern Sweden. The material was collected to evaluate an elective course that the municipality offered to their students (see Walldén, 2024). While no effect of that course was found (see Agebjörn & Walldén, 2024), differences between the three study paths were observed. Focusing on those differences, the present study aims to provide a concrete portrayal of the association between adult L2 writing development, assessed using comparative judgment, and educational background, crudely operationalised as study path. The following research questions (RQs) are addressed: To what extent do SFI students enrolled in the three study paths differ from each other with respect to (1) their L2 writing ability and (2) their L2 writing development over three months of Swedish study?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were 38 SFI students enrolled in Course C or Course D, that is, the two courses included in all three study paths. As shown in Table 2, they were unevenly distributed over the three study paths. The low number of Path 1 students in the sample ( $n = 6$ ) reflects the general distribution of SFI students over the three study paths (see 1.2 above). Information is lacking regarding whether Course C students had advanced to Course D on their second completion of the writing task (time point 2); hence, course information pertains to their first completion of the task (time point 1). Information is also lacking regarding how far into the course the students had come when data collection took place; therefore, it is important to recall that, while students enrolled in the same course have been assessed by their teachers to have reached approximately the same level of L2 proficiency, Course C is a beginner's course for Path 1 students but not for Path 2 and Path 3 students. Because participants were recruited by their teachers, who also conducted the data collection, measures were taken to strictly protect the participants' anonymity; for that reason, no indirectly identifiable information regarding for example participants' age, sex, language background, L1 literacy, socio-economic status, length of residence in Sweden and time spent in the SFI programme was collected. Given these limitations, the findings should be interpreted with caution and should not be generalized. All participants were informed about the research project by the second author and gave their consent to participate.

### 2.2. Data collection

The documented writing assignment was planned by the students' teachers, in consultation with the two researchers, and carried out during regular teaching hours. The participants got a short prompt, instructing them to answer a personal letter from a fictive friend. Specifically, they had to answer three questions: What job would you like to have in Sweden? Why do you want that job? What education and skills would you need to get that job? They were reminded to begin and conclude the text like a letter. The texts were composed with pencil and paper during a 60-min class, without additional resources such as dictionaries.

Most participants completed the writing task on two occasions (time points 1 and 2), separated by three months. Six participants completed the task two more times (time points 3 and 4), and one participant completed the task at time points 1, 3 and 4. Thus, the material comprises 89 texts, but the present paper focuses on time points 1 and 2 only. The task instruction and other conditions were the same on each occasion.

To avoid the risk of participants' handwriting affecting the assessment of the texts, they were transcribed in a word processor by the researchers. Names of people and geographical locations were pseudonymised, and other potential identifiers were masked. In addition, information about participants' course and study path was masked when possible. Grammar, spelling and punctuation were unaltered.

### 2.3. Scoring

Five trained teachers of L2 Swedish, with 12–31 years' experience of teaching adults, assessed the 89 texts using the method of comparative judgement (see Jones & Davies, 2023) on the platform *No More Marking* ([www.nomoremarking.com](http://www.nomoremarking.com)). Repeatedly, two texts were selected from the corpus by an algorithm and presented to the assessor who decided which was the better one. Three assessors performed 352 such comparisons each, reaching an excellent single-score reliability ( $SSR = .94$ ). Thereafter, the remaining two assessors performed 176 pairwise comparisons each. At that point, the reliability had levelled at  $SSR = .95$ , and the assessment process

**Table 2**  
Number of participants by course and SFI path.

Course (at time point 1)	Path 1	Path 2	Path 3
D	3	6	6
C	3	5	15

was stopped. Each text was compared against another one 31–36 times ( $M = 31.6$ ). Based on the 1408 comparisons, a holistic quality score ranging from 1 to 100 on a discrete scale was calculated for each text. The scores, which are a measure of the relative quality of the texts in the corpus, were normally distributed, as shown with a Shapiro-Wilk test ( $W = 1$ ;  $p = .85$ ).

## 2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out in the R environment (R Core Team, 2022). To answer RQ 1, addressing the association between study path and L2 writing ability, a linear model was built using course and study path to predict text-quality score. Since information is lacking regarding whether Course C students had advanced to Course D at later time points, this analysis included only texts composed at time point 1 ( $n = 38$ ).

To answer RQ 2, addressing the association between study path and L2 writing development, a linear model was built using study path to predict the individual gain between time points 1 and 2 (i.e., text-quality score at time point 1 subtracted from text-quality score at time point 2). Note that this analysis corresponds to a mixed-effects model testing the interaction between time point and study path while controlling for random variation between the participants. This analysis included only participants who completed the writing task on both those occasions ( $n = 37$ ) and only texts composed on those occasions ( $n = 74$ ). The data file and the R code are available on the database *Instruments and data for research in language studies* ([www.iris-database.org](http://www.iris-database.org)).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics

Fig. 1 shows the text-quality scores and the individual gains between time points 1 and 2 for the 38 participants by course and study path. Table 3, which summarises those data, reveals three patterns. First, for each path, Course D students generally composed texts of higher quality than Course C students. Second, for both courses, Path 3 students generally composed texts of higher quality than Path 2 students, who in turn composed texts of higher quality than Path 1 students. Third, for both courses, the gain over time was generally larger in Path 3 than in Path 2 and remarkably larger in Path 2 than in Path 1.

### 3.2. Inferential statistics

RQ 1 is answered by the linear model presented in Table 4, which accounts for 36 percent of the variation in the data ( $R^2 = .36$ ).

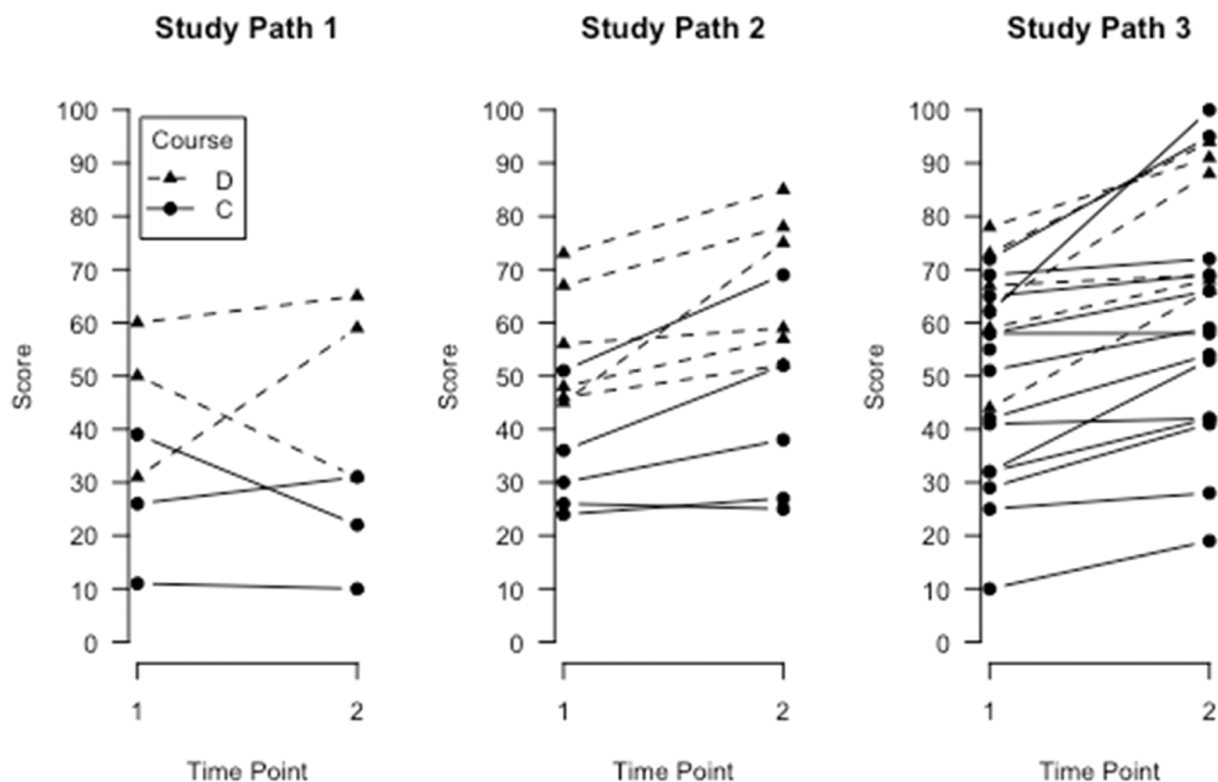


Fig. 1. Text-quality scores for the 75 texts included in the analyses.

**Table 3**  
Text-quality scores at time point 1 and gain between time points 1 and 2.

Course	Score at time point 1						Gain between time points 1 and 2					
	Path 1		Path 2		Path 3		Path 1		Path 2		Path 3	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
D	47.0	14.7	55.8	11.8	64.0	11.9	4.7	23.5	11.8	9.5	15.3	8.9
C	25.3	14.0	33.4	10.9	46.7	18.3	-4.3	11.4	8.8	8.2	10.9	10.4

The model confirms that, in the present sample, both course and study path are significant predictors of text-quality score. The estimated score for a text written at time point 1 by a Course C student enrolled in Path 1 (the model's intercept) is 15.6. The effects of course and study path are 19.5 and 10.1 points, respectively. It follows that Course D students enrolled in Path 1 are predicted to compose texts of comparable quality ( $15.6 + 19.5 = 35.1$ ) to Course C students enrolled in Path 3 ( $15.6 + 10.1 + 10.1 = 35.8$ ; note that the effect of path is added twice since there are two steps from Path 1 to Path 3).

RQ 2 is answered by the linear model presented in Table 5. Although the model accounts for only 11 percent of the data ( $R^2 = .11$ ), it confirms that, in the present sample, study path is a significant predictor of gain over time. The model's intercept, which represents Path 1 students' predicted gain over three months of Swedish study, is not significantly different from zero. However, the gain by Path 2 and Path 3 student is significantly larger. Hence the participants with relatively many experiences of formal education developed their L2 writing at a higher rate than participants with fewer such experiences. Indeed, among the six participants following study path 1, there appears to have been no general writing development over three months of Swedish study.

#### 4. Discussion

This short communication has reported on a small-scale study investigating the L2 writing development of adult learners of Swedish following three study paths. The analyses reveal that study path, reflecting the students' varying levels of prior education, significantly predicts both L2 writing ability (RQ 1) and the students' rate of L2 writing development over three months of Swedish study (RQ 2). However, given the small sample size and limited participant background information, these results should be interpreted cautiously.

Comparative judgement provides relative scores that are meaningful for comparisons within the corpus only, which may compromise the validity of the study. However, given that Course D students, as expected, outperformed Course C students, the text-quality scores appear indeed to be a valid measure of L2 writing development. When it comes to RQ 1, it can thus be concluded that study background, crudely operationalised as study path, predicts the L2 writing ability of the adult learners in the present sample. Indeed, L2 writing ability varied between the three study paths to the extent that the Path 3 students enrolled in course C (their first course) composed texts of approximately the same quality as the Path 1 students enrolled in course D (their fourth course). If that finding is valid, it implies either (i) that Path 1 students are promoted to the next course before they have developed the writing skills specified in the course plan or (ii) that Path 3 students are more skilled writers than the course plan requires. As for the former explanation, it might be that teachers on the three study paths have developed different interpretations of the intended learning outcomes specified for each course. It may also be that they find the intended learning outcomes for writing unrealistic when it comes to learners with few or no experiences of formal education and therefore promote those learners to the next course when they fulfil criteria for other skills. As for the alternative explanation, learners with longer education may capitalise on their higher-order writing skills developed in previously acquired languages to compose high-quality texts in their L2 (see Crossley, 2020). The former suggestion assumes that learners with relatively *short* education exhibit uneven proficiency profiles: Their general L2 proficiency level may exceed their L2 writing ability. In contrast, the alternative explanation assumes that learners with relatively *long* education exhibit uneven profiles: Their L2 writing ability may exceed their general L2 proficiency level due to transfer of higher-order writing skills. Independently of which explanation is true – indeed, both may be true – the result raises the question whether aligning intended learning outcomes for writing and other communicative skills across the three study paths is realistic.

Turning to RQ 2, addressing the rate of L2 writing development among students following the three study paths, one first needs to question whether the general text-quality increase observed between time points represents writing development or whether this increase was merely an effect of test familiarity (i.e., an effect of the students becoming acquainted with the specific writing task). This issue can be investigated by comparing the observed increase over time with the official statistics presented in Section 1.2 above. Given that time points 1 and 2 were separated by three months, the average gain per month was 2.9 points (8.8/3) for Path 2 students and 3.6 points (10.9/3) for Path 3 students (see Table 3). Since the estimated effect of course was 19.5 points (see Table 4), it would take Path 2

**Table 4**  
Linear model using course and study path to predict score at time point 1.

	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	CI	<i>p</i>
Intercept	15.6	8.7	1.8	[-2.1, 33.3]	.083
Path	10.1	3.3	3.1	[3.5, 16.7]	.004
Course	19.5	5.0	4.0	[9.5, 29.6]	<.001

Note: The intercept represents the estimated text-quality score for a text written by Path 1 students enrolled in Course C.

**Table 5**  
Linear model using study path to predict gain between time points 1 and 2.

	Estimate	SE	t	CI	p
Intercept	-2.5	6.0	-0.4	[-14.8, 9.7]	.676
Path	5.2	2.4	2.2	[0.26, 10.1]	.040

Note: The intercept represents the estimated gain in text-quality score by a Path 1 student.

students 6.7 months (19.5/2.9) to finish Course C and Path 3 students 5.4 months (19.5/3.6) to finish the same course. These estimations suggest that the development among the students participating in the present study is indeed somewhat quicker compared to the national average, according to which Path 2 and Path 3 students need 9.4 and 7.8 months, respectively, to finish Course C (see Table 1). Nevertheless, whereas there might be an effect of test familiarity, it can be argued that the estimations based on the present data correspond relatively well with the official statistics. That correspondence suggests that the method employed do indeed tap into L2 writing development to some extent.

As for the Path 1 students, no general longitudinal development was observed. Naturally, this result does not correspond to the statistics in Table 1, as also those students do indeed finish SFI courses. Given that there were only six participants in this group, these results in particular must be interpreted cautiously. Fig. 1 shows that two of those six participants exhibited a gain between time points 1 and 2 comparable with the gains observed among students following the other paths; one exhibited a remarkably larger gain; one scored slightly lower at time point 2 and two scored remarkably lower. Corresponding decreases over time were not observed among Path 2 and Path 3 students. In other words, the small group of Path 1 students displays large within- and between-individual variation.

Since it would be unreasonable to conclude that adult L2 learners with few experiences of formal education are prone to attrit their L2 writing skill during three months of SFI study, an explanation for the decrease of text-quality scores observed in three of six Path 1 students must be sought elsewhere. Because L2 learners with no or few experiences of formal education have been denied the opportunity to appropriate practices associated with doing school (see Pettitt et al., 2021), Path 1 students may have found difficulties in completing the writing task, which was an unauthentic task typical of language-learning classrooms, especially at time point 2, when they had already completed it once before. They may also lack stable writing strategies needed to perform to the best of their ability. As discussed by Bigelow and Tarone (2004) and others (e.g., Godfroid & Andringa, 2023; Gujord et al., 2023), conducting research involving adult L2 learners who were denied access to formal education is typically associated with methodological challenges like the one discussed here. In fact, this may explain why empirical studies focusing on that population – in particular quantitative ones – are scarce. Hence, while the present results suggest that L2 writing development may be relatively slow in adult learner with few experiences of formal education, the study also highlights methodological issues that further research needs to address.

The statistical analysis carried out employed linear modelling. However, the data presented in Table 3 suggest that the difference in gain over time is considerable larger between study paths 1 and 2 than between study paths 2 and 3. It may be that a potentially positive effect of previous education on the rate of L2 writing development diminishes after a certain amount of education. This is an empirical question that further research needs to address by applying non-linear modelling on larger data sets including more fine-grained information about participants' educational backgrounds.

The present study makes no claims about causal effects of educational background. There is a plethora of potentially-confounding factors that might have affected the participants' L2 writing development. For example, although information about their language background and socio-economic status is unavailable, it can be assumed that SFI students with relatively few experiences of formal education, in contrast to highly-educated students, are rarely L1 speakers of Indo-European languages, that their proficiency of English (a language closely related to Swedish) is low (see Bokander & Agebjörn, accepted), and that they are more likely to suffer from, *inter alia*, post-traumatic-stress syndrome and financial hardship (Bigelow & Tarone, 2004; Pettitt et al., 2021). Examining such factors to evaluate where the predictive power of educational background lies is an important task for further research. In addition, while the present study focuses on the holistic quality of texts, further research also needs to examine what specific linguistic and textual features are characteristic of high- and low-quality texts written by learners with varying educational backgrounds (see Crossley, 2020).

As mentioned, the sample size of the present study is small, and the results are not generalizable. Nevertheless, the study has sketched a concrete portrayal of what the association between educational background and L2 writing development might be in adult immigrants learning L2 Swedish. It is shown that SFI teachers encounter a diverse range of students whose L2 writing skills align to some extent with their varying experiences of formal education. Hence the study confirms that educational background may be a crucial factor that must not be neglected by researchers and curricula designers aiming to develop valid L2 theories and inclusive L2 teaching practices adapted for learners' individual capacities and needs.

## Funding

This research was supported by the Crafoord Foundation (20240533).

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Robert Walldén:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Anders Agebjörn:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.



## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data Availability

The data and the R code are available at the database *Instruments and data for research in language studies* ([www.IRIS-database.org](http://www.IRIS-database.org)).

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