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Article

The pedagogical potential of arts-based approaches in second language education for adults

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Abstract

As increasing mobility and linguistic diversity challenge traditional language teaching, there is a growing need for pedagogies that also promote agency and participation in adult education. The aim of this article is to contribute knowledge of teachers' and students' experiences of arts-based and multiliteracies-informed approaches, illustrated by music and drama, to second language education for adult migrant students. A comparative case study method was used, in which tracing a phenomenon across different settings allows for a broader and less bounded understanding of both the phenomenon and its contexts. An example from Sweden draws on a research and development project involving teacher workshops on integrating music into Swedish for Immigrants (SFI), with data from recorded workshop sessions. An example from Iceland is based on a qualitative study of a drama club for Ukrainian refugees, using dyadic and group interviews. The joint analysis uses a multiliteracies framework and focuses on teachers' and adult migrant students'

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experiences, tracing learner agency, engagement, and social justice-oriented participation in second language education across the two national and educational settings. The findings show that the arts-based approaches in their respective contexts are perceived as valuable support for language learning as well as agency, engagement, and social justice-oriented participation, from both a teacher and student perspective. The implementation of the approaches is shaped by institutional conditions, teacher preparedness, and learner diversity, with some resistance linked to, for instance, learners' perceptions of being infantilised. The study concludes that arts-based approaches offer significant pedagogical potential for second language education but require contextual adaptation and teacher support. The conclusions contribute to comparative and international research on second language education by providing cross-national insights into inclusive, innovative pedagogies for adult migrants.

Keywords: Arts-based approaches, multiliteracies, comparative case study, music as a pedagogical tool, drama as a pedagogical tool

Introduction

This article focuses on second language education among adult migrants in both the Swedish and the Icelandic context. Language plays a pivotal role in migrants' integration and social inclusion (Colliander et al., 2022; Dahlstedt et al., 2024). There is, therefore, a particular need to develop pedagogical approaches to support broad social inclusion society and its cultural offerings. This is important for all adult migrants, but especially for those with limited or no formal schooling, as this student group frequently exhibits low completion rates. This may reduce their willingness to engage socially with native speakers, increasing the risk of social and cultural exclusion (Bigelow & Watson, 2013; Young-Scholten, 2013). Across the region, the ambition to build socially sustainable societies underscores the importance of including newcomers through effective second-language teaching of the Nordic languages (Pinson et al., 2023). Research suggests that arts-based approaches offer unique possibilities to create not only language learning but also well-being, communication, and belonging (Altweissi & Maaytah, 2022; Bessadet, 2022; Crawford, 2020; Gabrielsson, 2011; Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2023; Valtersson, 2019; Wojtyńska et al., 2022; Wongsa & Son, 2022). For example, using music and drama as tool in language teaching offers opportunities for intercultural meetings between people, can contribute to cultivating confidence, motivation, and cooperative skills that extend beyond language learning (Crooke et al., 2024; Sirisrimangkorn, 2018).

The aim of this article is to contribute knowledge of teachers' and students' experiences of arts-based and multiliteracies-informed approaches, illustrated by music and drama, to second language education for adult migrant students. The analysis is influenced by comparative case analysis (CCS), in which tracing a phenomenon across different settings allows for a broader and less bounded understanding of both the phenomenon and its contexts (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The phenomenon in focus is the ways in which arts-based approaches can support second language learning for adults, across national and educational

contexts. This is studied through analysis of both teachers' and learners' experiences in two different educational second language learning contexts, in Sweden and Iceland respectively. Demonstrating how arts-based approaches can foster learner agency, engagement, and social justice-oriented participation allows us to trace the potential of arts-based approaches beyond the specific language context.
This study illustrates specific pedagogical and institutional conditions under which arts-based approaches empower adult language learners. By comparing formal, school-based music instruction in Sweden with grassroots, community-based drama in Iceland, we demonstrate how low-pressure multimodal entry points can be applied in different institutional settings and national contexts.

Furthermore, we outline actionable lessons for teacher preparation and education policy in adult migrant language learning, showing how institutional scaffolding and pedagogical framing enable sustainable, social justice-oriented language instruction.

Second language education for adult migrants in Sweden and Iceland

In Sweden, adult migrants are offered education in *Swedish as second language education for migrant adults* (SFI). SFI education aims to provide adult migrants with basic knowledge of the Swedish language to enable active participation in everyday life, in society, at work and in pursuing further studies (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). As part of SFI's integration policy, the curriculum for adult education states that SFI should "serve as a social and cultural meeting place" (Skolverket, 2017, p. 1). Students within SFI are a heterogeneous student group with varied prior knowledge, and they often have limited Swedish language networks outside the school environment (Dahlstedt et al., 2024; Rydell, 2018). For many students, SFI teachers are among the few native Swedish speakers they regularly interact with in everyday life (Colliander et al., 2022). SFI students often feel insecure and nervous about expressing themselves in Swedish, fearing making mistakes or being judged (Walldén, 2024). SFI education has been shown to have low status and quality, poor goal attainment, and insufficient adaptation to the diverse needs and circumstances of students (Hyltenstam & Milani, 2012; Rosén, 2013; Wallin et al., 2019).

In Iceland, *Icelandic as a second language (ISL)* for adult migrants is offered via lifelong learning centres and higher education institutions. Courses are free of charge for refugees and those receiving unemployment benefits; others can receive partial reimbursement through their labour unions. Recent policy documents have pointed to a need for improvement of "teaching of Icelandic as a second language, ensure access to a variety of instruction for different age groups and equal access throughout the country" (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 2024, p. 8). Iceland has historically been a monoglossic and ethnically homogeneous nation with a conservative linguistic environment, shaping the linguistic environment and influencing learners' experiences and investment in learning the language through formal methods (Innes et al., 2024;

Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). A lack of access to formal courses and the perceived diverse quality of existing courses are challenges identified in prior studies (Hoffmann et al., 2024). One of the biggest challenges for learners are limited opportunities to speak and practice the language (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017).

The Icelandic and Swedish contexts are similar in terms of linguistic proximity of the majority language and high levels of English proficiency among native speakers. However, considerable migration to Sweden started in the mid-20th century, whereas in Iceland it began only in the late 20th century. In contrast to SFI, ISL education has been established more recently. These similarities and differences provide a valuable context for comparing the two contexts.

Previous research on arts-based approaches in second language education

In the following section, we present the growing body of literature on arts-based approaches in second language education. We focus on the methods of music and drama as they compose the empirical examples used in this article.

There is strong scientific support for the connection among music, language development, and inclusion from several different and disparate research fields (DeNora, 2000; Fagius, 2015; Gabrielsson, 2011; Juslin & Sloboda, 2011; Theorell, 2014). Studies indicate that hierarchical course structures can hinder migrants' sense of belonging, particularly for vulnerable groups such as low-literate refugees (Bugge et al., 2025). In educational research it has been shown that music activities are useful tools in teaching for second language development and for promoting the inclusion of students with a migration background in preschool and primary school (Busse et al., 2018; Crawford, 2020; Ehrlin, 2012; Kulset, 2020; Linnavalli et al., 2018). Singing, for example, can help contextualise new words and phrases, thereby bridging gaps between students with different backgrounds, as well as creating a more equal learning environment (Skolverket, 2021). The same has been shown for adult students, especially those with little or no formal education. This student group often faces challenges in processing complex linguistic information, and they tend to develop their second language more slowly than those with longer educational backgrounds (Bigelow & Watson, 2013). Music activities have proven to enhance phonological awareness, memory capacity, and learning of vocabulary and phrases (Ludke et al., 2014; Rose, 2016). A recent overview of research reveals improvements in pronunciation, especially in rhythm and intonation, when using music and choir singing as tools for pronunciation instruction (Sun et al., 2025). Music activities can therefore be useful tools in teaching to support language development (Colliander & Fejes, 2021; Crawford, 2020; Valtersson, 2019) and create opportunities for intercultural meetings between people (Crooke et al., 2024), fostering a sense of community and belonging (Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2023).

Drama-based approaches to language learning consistently emerge as useful tools for developing learners'

communicative competence, confidence, and engagement. Across diverse contexts, researchers highlight how drama-based techniques create learner centred environments that foster authentic communication, collaboration, and creativity (Altweissi & Maaytah, 2022; Bessadet, 2022; Sirisrimangkorn, 2018; Wongsa & Son, 2022). Previous research involving students learning English has shown that drama-based approaches support not only linguistic development but also physical, emotional, social, and cognitive growth, as learners negotiate meaning, manage anxiety, and express themselves through embodied action (Bessadet, 2022). Prior studies show that humorous activities “can enhance language learners' linguistic and cultural competence if introduced at the right time in the teaching sequence” (Deneire, 1995).

Integrating drama with digital platforms can further enhance interaction and motivation by offering flexible spaces for communication beyond the classroom (Wongsa & Son, 2022). Experimental classroom comparisons likewise demonstrate improved speaking performance and more positive attitudes toward language learning, with drama’s action-oriented nature helping students internalise language through meaningful, embodied use (Altweissi & Maaytah, 2022). Project-based drama reinforces these benefits by providing communicative contexts, strengthening autonomy, and cultivating confidence, motivation, and cooperative skills that extend beyond language learning (Sirisrimangkorn, 2018). Furthermore, Piazzoli (2018) notes that sustained engagement with embodied performance can transform learners’ emotional awareness and ways of thinking. Collectively, these studies position drama not merely as an engaging activity but as a holistic pedagogical practice.

In summation, research indicates that arts-based approaches, such as music and drama, can be meaningful tools both regarding second language education and social inclusion. The comparative analysis presented in this article will contribute to a deeper understanding of how arts-based approaches can be used in second language education for adult migrants beyond specific pedagogical contexts.

Theoretical framework: Multiliteracies

The multiliteracies framework described by the New London Group (1996) provides a conceptual foundation for understanding why arts-based practices are pedagogically powerful. Multiliteracies foreground the diversity of communicative modes and the situated nature of meaning-making. Rather than prioritising one-dimensional alphabetic literacy or standardised language forms, multiliteracies pedagogy recognises that learners draw on visual, gestural, spatial, tactile, and other resources to make sense of the world. This multimodal orientation resonates strongly with the communicative realities of contemporary life and creates learning environments that are more engaging, relevant, and dynamic (Cope & Kalantzis, 2016; New London Group, 1996). In this view, language learning is not merely the acquisition of linguistic forms but a means of engaging with multiple, intersecting social domains. In line with Melo-Pfeifer and

Tavares (2025), multiliteracies call for pedagogies in second language education that cultivate learner agency, engagement and social justice-oriented participation. Without such orientations, second language education risks reproducing the very inequities that emerge from social change, particularly when dominant linguistic and cultural norms remain unchallenged (Lewis et al., 2009; Rizvi & Engel, 2009).

Arts-based approaches to second language education align with educational visions that emphasise democratic participation, imagination, and self-expression. Democratic education depends on learners' capacity to invent, create, and make meaning collaboratively (Lewis et al., 2009; Rizvi & Engel, 2009). Visual, embodied, or performative approaches to research and language teaching invite learners to explore language through multimodal expression, to negotiate meaning with peers, and to position themselves as active contributors to shared knowledge (Wojtyńska et al., 2022). Participatory methods have been shown to be valuable for migrants, as they can support their empowerment and agency (Hoffmann et al., 2023). From a social justice perspective, the recognition of multiliteracies is particularly significant. When learners' diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires are treated as legitimate resources, education becomes more inclusive and equitable (Benediktsson & Tavares 2025). Burke and Hardware (2015) note that multiliteracies pedagogy offers minoritised learners more points of reference by drawing on their cultural and linguistic experiences as powerful learning resources. Hence, multiliteracies approaches to language learning amplify students' potential by enabling them to create identity-rich expressions (visual, performative, or embodied) that reflect their previous and current experiences, values, and aspirations (Ntelioglou, 2011). These identity expressions challenge monolingual and monocultural assumptions in second language education and reposition learners as knowledge producers rather than passive recipients (Danzak, 2011; Rajendram et al., 2022).

Learning within the multiliteracies framework is also inherently social. Cope and Kalantzis (2016) emphasise that learners make meaning through interaction, drawing on shared experiences to co-construct understanding. Arts-based tasks naturally foster such collaboration: learners interpret each other's creative choices, negotiate meaning across modes, and scaffold one another's linguistic and conceptual development (Wojtyńska et al., 2022). In second language educational contexts, collaboration with peers plays a crucial role in making new concepts accessible through shared semiotic resources (Hughes & Morrison, 2014). This process echoes Vygotsky's notion of the 'zone of proximal development', where learning occurs through guided participation in activities that connect the familiar with the unfamiliar (Cope & Kalantzis, 2016).

Taken together, the multiliteracies framework constitutes a pedagogical stance that values diversity, fosters social justice-oriented participation, and embraces the multimodal nature of human communication. By integrating arts-based approaches into second language education, educators can

create spaces where learners can imagine, critique, and reshape their worlds, an endeavour that is both linguistically enriching and socially transformative.

Method and materials

The study conducted in a Swedish context was carried out as a research-and development project carried out in workshop form. A group of seven teachers took part in a professional development endeavour in which they worked with expanding their use of music in teaching Swedish as a second language to adult students. Contact with the teachers was established through the principal of the school, who gave access to a staff meeting focused on different areas for development at the school, where the researchers presented the planned project and asked for participation. The group of teachers who participated in the project had an interest in developing their use of music in teaching and, also consented to the workshops being used as empirical material. Two of the teachers were native Swedish speakers, and five of them had Swedish as an additional language. The school where the teachers work had some music material aimed especially at adults that they used, but the teachers wanted to develop their methods and become more comfortable in using music in their teaching. A music pedagogue was contracted for the training. During the workshops with the music pedagogue, the teachers had the opportunity to try different music activities, such as songs and rhymes, and reflect on how they could be used in teaching. Between the workshops, the teachers tested some of the music activities, and then the group reflected on them together. The focus was on how the activities were received by the students, as well as the teachers' own experiences. There were seven workshops in total, four with the music pedagogue and three where the teachers reflected together. The workshops were recorded in full, and in the analysis, the researchers listened to all the recordings and took notes with time stamps. The sections selected for more thorough analysis were then transcribed in detail.

Participants in Iceland were recruited through a multistep process designed to ensure voluntary and informed participation. The research team first contacted a representative of the Red Cross, who acted as an intermediary and reached out to the drama club instructor and host. After receiving information about the study, the instructor introduced the research aims to the drama club members and explained what participation would involve. The participants then decided entirely on their own whether they wished to take part. The Icelandic study used a qualitative case study design to examine the subjective, context-specific experiences of five Ukrainian refugees involved in an Icelandic drama club established to support language learning and cultural integration. The participant group consisted of one Ukrainian actress, herself a refugee, who founded the drama club, actively participates in it in the role of a drama instructor, and like the other members is also learning Icelandic; and four additional drama club members, all Ukrainian refugees. Data were collected through two interviews: (1) one dyadic interview with the instructor and one club member, and (2) one group interview with the three other club members.

Together, these interviews represent the experiences of five participants in total: one instructor and four drama club members, all Ukrainian refugees. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 45 at the time of the study and shared broadly similar linguistic profiles. All were L1 speakers of Ukrainian and Russian, and each had at least some knowledge of English, with one participant additionally speaking Spanish. Their educational backgrounds varied from upper secondary qualifications to completed master's degrees, reflecting a diverse set of academic and professional trajectories prior to arriving in Iceland. All interviews were audio recorded with permission, lasted on average 50 minutes, and used a dyadic or small group format to reduce power imbalances and encourage open dialogue, and then transcribed.

Analysis

The joint analysis of the phenomenon is influenced by comparative case analysis (CCS). Bartlett and Vavrus state that: "The approach engages two logics of comparison: first, the more common compare and contrast logic; and second, a "tracing across" sites or scales. We consider the comparative case study approach to be a heuristic" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 6.). Heuristic here refers to a process of discovery through experiences. CCS takes a critical approach to analysis that aims to trace across different settings and allows for a broader and less bounded understanding by tracing a phenomenon across contexts: "By phenomenon, we mean the central issue or idea of concern to us as re-searchers. The term phenomenon directs us, first, toward something like a policy or a program and then, as it comes into focus, it leads us to ask what is unexpected about it, and why and to whom does it matter" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 6). The phenomenon in this article is the ways in which arts-based approaches can support second language learning for adults, across national and educational contexts. We trace these approaches in the two different national settings, not as bounded places but as processes, and the analysis is carried out with the concepts of learner agency, engagement, and social justice-oriented participation as analytical tools. The analysis work has been carried out by each researcher separately in relation to the theoretical framework, and in joint writing meetings where interpretations and conclusions were discussed and further developed. The data collection in Sweden was done in Swedish, and the data collection in Iceland was done in Russian, and all quotations included in this article have been translated into English by the authors.

Table 1. Overview of data collection and analysis

Context	Data Collection	Participants	Arts Approach	Analytical Concepts	Comparative Focus
Sweden	7 workshops (recorded, 2 hrs each)	7 teachers within adult second language education	Music	Agency, engagement, social justice	Tracing possibilities and challenges in arts-based approaches across national and educational contexts and from different actors' perspectives
Iceland	1 dyadic & 1 group interviews (50 min each)	1 instructor & 4 drama club members	Drama		

To ensure a comparative structure across the Swedish and Icelandic examples, our analysis traces the implementation of music and drama along several primary analytical axes. These comparative dimensions allow us to systematically compare findings across both national and institutional settings.

- Multimodal practices used: Examining the specific semiotic and sensory modes prioritised in each example, contrasting auditory-vocal rhythm and prosody in Swedish music instruction with embodied movement, gestural role-play, voice, and spatial composition in Icelandic drama.
- How participation starts and anxiety is reduced: Analysing the low-stakes entry points used to initiate student involvement, comparing rhythmic speech/rhyme exercises in formal SFI classrooms with informal social drama games and team building in the Icelandic community club.
- Links to learners' everyday lives: Tracing how learning content is grounded in their lifeworld, contrasting the adaptation of song lyrics using concrete daily objects with the theatrical enactment of personal stories and real-world social navigation.
- Agency and identity: Evaluating how adult migrants transition from passive learners to active meaning-makers, observing increases in communicative confidence, self-expression, and recognition as competent, identity-rich adults.
- Teacher skills and institutional support: Contrasting the structural conditions of implementation, comparing formal school-based teacher professional development and curriculum constraints in Sweden with grassroots leadership, peer facilitation, and Red Cross organisational support in Iceland.

Research ethical considerations

All data used in this article has been handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation

(2016) on sensitive personal information. This concerns racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation is considered sensitive information. The data in this article does not contain sensitive personal information.

In Sweden, the research was conducted in full compliance with national ethical laws and principles. Ethical review in Sweden is carried out solely by the Swedish Review Authority, a government agency, and concerns research that collects sensitive personal information or information about past criminal convictions (Lag om etikprövning som avser människor, 2003). The project followed the law regarding good research practice as codified in the Swedish Act on Responsibility for Good Research Practice and Investigation of Research Misconduct (Lag om ansvar för god forskningssed och prövning av oredlighet i forskning, 2019), as well as principles outlined in Good Research Practice (The Swedish Research Council, 2024). The participants were informed, in writing and verbally, about the aim and methods of the project, about their right to withdraw participation at any time and promised confidentiality. Written consent was given by all the participants at the beginning of the project, and verbal consent was given at each individual workshop. The researchers took care to ensure that the participants could exercise their rights, and no issues were raised regarding the research part of the project. On a few occasions, one participant chose not to carry some of the music activities, which was also their right and was encouraged.

In Iceland the research was conducted in full compliance with the ethical standards and data protection requirements outlined in the Icelandic Personal Information Protection Act (Lög um persónuvernd og vinnslu persónuupplýsinga, 2018), ensuring that personal data used for research purposes was handled lawfully, securely, and with strict respect for participant privacy. This included safeguarding identifiable information, limiting data access to authorised researchers, and applying appropriate measures to maintain confidentiality throughout the study. The participants received written information sheets in Ukrainian and were encouraged to ask questions about the study. Those who chose to participate provided written consent to be audio-recorded during the interviews and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to give a reason and without any consequences for their involvement in the drama club.

Results

In the following section, we present the results of our joint analysis of teachers' and learners' experiences of arts-based approaches in second language learning in Sweden and Iceland. Across both contexts, arts-based activities functioned as multimodal, socially grounded spaces for language learning, facilitating

participation, identity development, and inclusion, while also presenting certain challenges.

Social justice-oriented participation

In both contexts, arts-based activities created conditions for participation that extended beyond linguistic competence and enabled learners to engage meaningfully in the learning process from the outset and social connection and community formation emerged as central conditions for language learning.

In the Swedish context, music-based activities were described not simply as instructional techniques but as multimodal literacy events that enabled learners to participate, experience, and co-construct meaning. The teachers described music, particularly singing, rhythm exercises, and collaborative song-making, as a pedagogical space where language learning became intertwined with emotional expression, and social connection. A central theme in the teachers' accounts was that music activities allowed beginners to participate meaningfully even before they possessed extensive linguistic resources. One teacher explained: "*You can sing whole phrases; you can sing without knowing the language. Remembering sounds and rhythms as a part of the whole. You can break down the prosody".* Rhythm, melody, and prosody thus operated as multimodal scaffolds that supported students in accessing linguistic structures that would otherwise be inaccessible through speech alone.

Similarly, in the Icelandic context, participants repeatedly emphasised that community formation preceded and enabled language learning. One participant explained that *"before we started working with drama plays, we learned the language through various games and interactions. This helped us to become a group"*. These social games, collaborative tasks, and playful interactions functioned as multimodal literacy events in which learners negotiated meaning through gesture, movement and laughter. The instructor described how such activities fostered participation: "*At first, they [the members] were very modest and shy, but we just started playing social games in Icelandic and people began to unite.* She further noted that ...*we laugh and while laughing, some barriers are removed"*. Group trust and active participation were thus scaffolded incrementally through social play, mutual support, and informal interactions before moving into stage performances.

In terms of similarities, both contexts utilised low-stakes, multimodal practices, such as rhythmic phrases in Sweden and social drama games in Iceland to lower affective barriers and enable immediate participation before learners mastered the target language. The key difference lies in the initiation and institutional framing: in Sweden, participation was introduced by teachers within formal classrooms where initial adult hesitation toward singing had to be managed, whereas in the Icelandic drama club, participation evolved through a gradual process of building group trust, overcoming initial shyness through social games in a non-formal community space.

Engagement and connection to everyday life

A second shared theme concerns the capacity of arts-based activities to foster engagement, enjoyment, and meaningful connections to learners' everyday lives.

In Sweden, teachers described how music activities have the potential to enable teachers to connect to students' life worlds. One teacher adapted a workshop activity based on the song *Nothing.* The song repeats the words "What would life be without you" with ensuing rhyming sentences[1]. She stated: *"I wanted to make the exercise more concrete, so we sang 'What would a kitchen be without a stove' or 'What would coffee be without milk', to make it more relevant for their everyday life".* Students then invented their own phrases based on everyday experiences, turning the exercise into a creative activity characterised by participation and laughter.

Similarly, participants in Iceland consistently described drama-based language learning as playful, enjoyable, and engaging. One participant recounted:

> … we played a game 'What is this called in Icelandic?' We learned the names of fruits on one day, animals on the second day, and colours on the third. It was fun because we were running around like children. And then they [the instructors] made it more complicated, added declensions and plurals. And we learned masculine, feminine and neuter declensions playing the games.

Although the arts-based approaches differed, both music and drama were described as creating low-stress environments in which increasingly complex language could be explored through creative and enjoyable participation. Rather than positioning enjoyment as separate from learning, participants and teachers portrayed it as an important condition for learning itself.

Comparing the two examples, both approaches successfully grounded creative activities in adult learners' everyday lifeworld, making complex linguistic forms (such as rhyming structures in Swedish or noun declensions in Icelandic) accessible and enjoyable. However, they differed in scope and application: Swedish music focused on modifying familiar everyday items within structured classroom templates, whereas Icelandic drama allowed learners to directly enact, process, and navigate real-world social situations and personal migration narratives.

Agency and identity

Across both datasets, arts-based approaches were experienced as supporting learners' agency development by creating opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and active participation.

The Swedish teachers stressed the emotional impact of music activities on both students and on

[1] In Swedish, these sentences have a specific rhythm, and the original lyrics also rhyme.

themselves as teachers. They described students as happier and more social, and one teacher stated: "*It makes SFI more of a social space that's meaningful and joyful for language learning instead of a boring one. A place to feel good".* The teachers' accounts suggest that music activities created spaces where students could express emotions, experiment with voice, and position themselves as active contributors in the classroom community, in which student's agency development can be supported. Another teacher underscored this experience by saying: "*Some beautiful things can be created; things can happen when you sing together with the students".*

Similarly, the Icelandic participants emphasised the transformative role of the drama club in enabling learners to develop agency and support identity formation. One participant stated: *"I did not realise that I could become an actress. They [the instructors] opened me. I am sparkling now".* She directly linked this transformation to language learning, explaining that "*this language barrier is also removed, because I have already started saying something in Icelandic"*. Another participant described the drama activities as a space where she could "*show my inner world, my emotions. It is an energetic way to express yourself"*.

In summary, both examples demonstrate that arts-based methods foster agency by transforming passive students into active co-creators. However, a key difference lies in the degree of identity transformation: in Sweden, agency manifested primarily through collaborative song adaptation and increased social confidence within the classroom, whereas in Iceland, drama facilitated a profound reconstruction of identity, enabling refugees to see themselves as competent actors, storytellers, and active members of the host society.

Multiliteracies and multimodal meaning-making

The findings from both countries illustrate how arts-based approaches expanded language learning beyond spoken and written language by mobilising a range of multimodal resources.

In the Swedish context, the teachers described how the use of music activities, though sometimes challenging at first, opened up for more open and other forms of being together. One of the teachers describes a situation in which an activity centred around "saying the names" – a rhyme with a speech pattern and movements – was at first met with apprehension but then evolved into something else: "*it led to us practicing pronouns and other things, there was so much talk and laughter and a good atmosphere, but it took a while to get there"*. The teachers described music, particularly singing, rhythm exercises, and collaborative song-making as a pedagogical space where language learning became intertwined with agency development, emotional expression, and social connection. Their reflections reveal how music activities function as multiliteracies practices that open diverse semiotic pathways for adult second language learners.

In Iceland, drama activities similarly mobilised multiple semiotic resources. Participants collaborated in theatrical productions, drawing on movement, gesture, voice, costume-making, and sensory exploration. One participant highlighted the collective nature of the work, noting that "*everyone is doing a great job"*. She described how a seamstress in the club "*just created costumes, went to second-hand shops, and picked up various things, and then sew everything"*. The instructor also emphasised sensory learning: *"We do many exercises to develop various senses because we rely too much on our sight. When you close your eyes, all other senses awaken".*

Across both contexts, learners were invited to engage with language through a broader repertoire of meaning-making practices, demonstrating how multiliteracies approaches recognise and value diverse modes of communication and participation. The arts-based activities emerged not simply as instructional techniques but as multimodal literacy events that enabled learners to participate, experiment, and co-construct meaning.

Both cases illustrate how multiliteracies expand learning beyond conventional print-based instruction by activating diverse semiotic resources. The main difference lies in modalities: Music as a tool relied predominantly on auditory-vocal synchronisation and prosodic rhythm as the core scaffold, whereas drama mobilised a constellation of spatial, tactile, gestural, and visual modalities through stage design, costume creation, and full-body performance.

Inclusion and community

Both examples highlight how arts-based approaches fostered the potential of inclusive communities where learners could develop linguistic, social, and intercultural competencies.

In Sweden, the teachers expressed repeatedly that the music activities contributed to a more socially connected classroom environment and creating opportunities for collaboration and shared experiences. It did not happen right away, there was some resistance, and one teacher stressed that *"you have to adjust the activities to the group. Sometimes you must start with something very simple*. After a while, a teacher states, *… you must get past it, they [the students] might find it childish to begin with, but once they get past it, they can let go and almost forget that they're playing"*.

The Icelandic drama club was similarly described as an inclusive community built around openness and belonging. The instructor emphasised: "*We will accept everyone. People begin to get acquainted and cease to be shy".* She also noted that the club teaches "*tolerance, acceptance, loyalty, and many other things"*. The club has expanded beyond its original Ukrainian cohort and now includes participants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds: "*The club is expanding even further through Venezuelans, Syrians and*

other refugees. New people are constantly coming in. We have already a strong group of Ukrainians, but still, from time to time I give advertisements to recruit more people".

Taken together, the findings demonstrate how arts-based approaches can support social inclusion by creating spaces where learners connect across linguistic, cultural, and social differences while engaging in language learning, encouraging meaningful interactions regardless of learners' linguistic level. Both arts-based approaches built supportive micro-communities that alleviated social isolation and fostered peer solidarity.

Challenges and conditions for implementation

Both contexts also revealed conditions that shaped the implementation and effectiveness of arts-based approaches.

In Sweden, the teachers described feeling challenged when leading music activities. Some felt uncomfortable or embarrassed performing singing or rhythm exercises, and one teacher joked: *"I can't sing and clap my hands at the same time".* The teachers also observed resistance among some adult learners. One teacher stated: *"Many adults are afraid to try, or they think singing and clapping is nonsense".* Another noted: *"Students with an academic background can be more reluctant to working on pronunciation at all, they feel more comfortable focusing on grammar and writing".* A further reflection captures how attitudes could change over time: *"At first, they [the students] reacted like 'are we in kindergarten?' but I explained that we were practicing pronouns like 'she' and 'him', and after a while they started having fun and became more active".*

The teachers also emphasised the importance of collegial and institutional support. One teacher stated: "*It would be good to work with our closest colleagues, otherwise there won't be any development".* Another added: *"The whole school should be using these methods, 'this is how we do things here'".* In this aspect, the Icelandic data reveals a contrast between the contexts. Because the drama club emerged as a community initiative rather than a formal educational program, participants had greater freedom to engage in creative and embodied forms of learning from the outset. Nevertheless, the success of the activities still depended on the commitment of instructors and participants to create a supportive and inclusive environment.

Across both contexts, the comparative analysis suggests that the implementation and impact of arts-based approaches depend heavily on teachers' and facilitators' interests, motivations, competencies, and willingness to explore alternative pedagogical practices, as well as on the composition and needs of the learner group.

Despite structural differences between the Swedish school-based implementation and the Icelandic community-based initiative, both examples demonstrate the pedagogical potential of arts-based approaches in second language learning for adults. Across both contexts, the approaches created conditions for participation, connected learning to learners lived experiences, reduced pressure on language use, and fostered playful and enjoyable learning environments. In doing so, they can be seen as supporting agency, engagement, social justice and multimodal meaning-making.

Discussion: The pedagogical potential of arts-based approaches for second language education

The aim of this article is to contribute knowledge of teachers' and students' experiences of arts-based and multiliteracies-informed approaches, exemplified by music and drama, to second language education for adult migrant students.

In tracing the phenomenon of arts-based approaches in second language learning across different settings and actors, the analysis has pointed to some important similarities. But there are also some distinctive differences. While in the Swedish setting, the use of arts-based approaches was embedded in the institutional context of a language school and implemented as professional development for teachers, in the Icelandic example, the drama club emerged as a grassroots initiative with the aim of community and social inclusion. The drama group in Iceland started with a group of learners from the same linguistic background, whereas in the Swedish context, the group of learners was heterogenous. The positionality of the language instructors was also different. In Iceland, the language instructor was of foreign origin and had learned Icelandic herself whereas in Sweden some of the language teachers spoke Swedish as their first language while others were of foreign origin and had learned Swedish as a second language. These differences have not been in focus in the analysis; rather, these differences help to identify the similarities that persist across national and educational settings regarding the use of arts-based and multiliteracies informed approaches in second language education for adults.

Using arts-based approaches enabled adult students to express themselves through diverse forms of communication (New London Group, 1996). Instead of emphasising grammatical and lexical correctness or L1-like ways of speaking, music and drama exercises encouraged students to use different forms of expression and approach language learning in a playful and humorous way. Applying this approach can support agency and critical awareness, challenge persistent linguistic and cultural norms (e.g. Lewis et al., 2009; Rizvi & Engel, 2009), and support the students as knowledge producers rather than passive recipients (e.g. Danzak, 2011; Rajendram et al., 2022). We therefore identified multimodality as a key element of arts-based second- language education, not least because it allows for the use of students diverse lived

experiences and embodied expressions. This aspect was true for both settings, where in both examples students were encouraged to engage playful with the target language.

Using music and drama enabled students to draw on resources beyond knowledge of the target language alone and to shape the lessons and activities, thereby becoming active agents in their language learning rather than passive recipients of instruction, a factor recognised as important in previous studies (Lewis et al., 2009; Rizvi & Engel, 2009). This is in line with previous research on arts-based approaches for children and teenagers, where both music (Busse et al., 2018; Crawford, 2020; Kulset, 2020) and drama (Altweissi & Maaytah, 2022; Wongsa & Son, 2022) have been found to create space for more active participation from learners. Joy, shared humour, relating, and shared bonding experiences were identified by research participants as crucial outcomes of the language learning process, in line with previous studies indicating the benefits of joy in learning for both children and adults (Ehrlin, 2012; Gabrielsson, 2011).

Community and social connections were mentioned by teachers participating in both settings as reasons for implementing arts-based approaches and as outcomes of the same. Previous research has shown that shared social creative activities can lead to long-term social bonds and community-building (Crooke et.al., 2024; Lehtinen-Schnabel, 2023). Our analysis indicates that these social elements, which create a community, are also likely outcomes of the approaches used.

An important outcome of our comparative case study analysis is how the implementation, and thus also the potential benefits and effects, of arts-based approaches is shaped by institutional structures, educators' preparedness and approaches to teaching, and the composition of the group of students. This reflects prior studies on the diversity of arts-based approaches and the different ways in which teachers can position their students in arts-based education settings (e.g. Sun et al., 2025). Experiences from the Swedish example show that some adult students can feel infantilised by arts-based approaches, an aspect which is understudied in the Nordic countries. The potential of infantilisation has implications for the demands placed on teachers to establish a frame in which students are addressed as competent adults. The drama club can serve as a learning example, in which the teachers seem to have succeeded in creating a space where adult learners could make use of their own bodily, emotional, and aesthetic resources without the activities being seen as childish or infantilising. Another barrier to the successful use of arts-based approaches in second language education is their effective use across diverse groups of learners and in mixed group compositions, for example, students with diverse educational backgrounds. Our analysis indicates that navigating diverse classroom compositions requires sensitive approaches and skills from teachers who, if they wish to apply arts-based approaches successfully, need to familiarise themselves with various artistic and creative multimodal expressions (New London Group, 1996).

Developing competencies in using arts-based approaches in adult language learning is hindered by the fact that arts-based approaches are not a part of education policy in either Sweden or Iceland and constitute a very small part of teacher education especially for later years and adult education. As this comparative case analysis has shown, there is considerable pedagogical potential in using arts-based approaches as they have been shown to be beneficial for language learning, e.g. by encouraging learners' to playfully and joyfully engage with the target language and participate in the language community. This underscores the importance and value training opportunities for teachers to further their knowledge about arts-based approaches in teaching, regardless of national or educational settings. A key contribution of this analysis to the research on adult migrant language education is, therefore, to show how different ways of implementing arts-based and multiliteracies-informed approaches can influence the language-learning context and enhance students' participation in class and in speaking communities.

Conclusion

In this article we illustrated that while both music and drama share an emphasis on embodied, multimodal communication, they exhibit distinct pedagogical strengths and implementation challenges in adult language education. Rather than evaluating which modality is superior, it is essential to understand how their distinct mechanisms support learning in complementary ways.

The primary strength of music lies in its rhythmic, melodic, and prosodic structures, which allow adult learners to join in and produce full phrases before mastering complex vocabulary or syntax. Melodic repetition scaffolds phonological memory and pronunciation, reducing speech anxiety through collective vocalisation. However, music can introduce specific challenges: some adult educators feel musically unequipped or hesitant to lead singing (Ehrlin, 2012), while adult learners may initially perceive singing or rhymes as childish or infantilising unless the pedagogical purpose is explicitly framed around adult language acquisition.

The key strength of drama resides in its holistic integration of movement, voice, spatial awareness, and collaborative role-play. By embodying fictional or authentic social roles, learners can step into low-stakes identity spaces that build community, foster empathy, and reduce communicative anxiety. In a community or grassroots setting, drama has the potential to be experienced as natural from the start as a collaborative, social endeavour. Conversely, drama presents challenges regarding emotional vulnerability and facilitator expertise: without skilled scaffolding, role-play can trigger performance anxiety or discomfort, particularly if personal boundaries are not carefully protected.

Overall, our findings suggest that low-pressure multimodal entry points offer valuable pedagogical insights that can inform practice across distinct educational frameworks and institutional settings. Rather than

providing standardised blueprints, these qualitative cases illustrate how core principles of multimodal scaffolding can be flexibly adapted to suit diverse learning environments, whether within formal school settings or non-formal community initiatives. For teacher education and educational policy, these insights highlight the importance of incorporating arts-based multiliteracies into language teacher preparation. Equipping future educators with versatile multimodal strategies and scaffolding techniques is key to building socially sustainable, inclusive language programmes across the Nordic region and beyond.

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