

# SWEDEN

## *“Mother Tongue Theme Site”*

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### **Introduction**

This System note from Sweden highlights the project *Mother Tongue Theme* as an example of an innovative initiative to build, maintain and inspire networks of mother tongue teachers\* and school leaders. The Mother tongue theme has been running since 2001 and consists of several activities that all aim to achieve more effective learning and to increase the quality in teaching and the status of mother tongue education in Swedish schools. A key part of this project has been, and is, the Mother Tongue Theme website which serves as a knowledge platform for mother tongue teachers in Sweden, Norway and beyond.

In 2003 the Mother Tongue theme site was awarded the Best Global Website Award, for “the most innovative multilingual and multicultural site in Europe”. Since then the project and the website has been developed and today, 100 teachers and school leaders contribute to the site with unique content in 45 different languages.

*\*Note: Mother tongue tuition in the Swedish context refers to tuition for foreign background students in their native languages.*

### **1. Aims**

The overall aim of the Mother Tongue Theme is to achieve higher quality in teaching and to raise the status of mother tongue education. The primary target groups are educators in childcare and schools and school leaders working with issues related to native language support and mother tongue tuition. The targeted learners are children and pupils who have a first language other than Swedish.

## 2. Leadership and Partners

The Mother Tongue Theme project is coordinated, managed and maintained by the National Agency for Education on behalf of the government. The main partners consist of a network comprising 100 teachers and school leaders.

The mother tongue theme site has been spread to Norway, spearheading a close cooperation between mother tongue teachers in Sweden and Norway and they are now linking resources together.

## 3. Strategies and activities

The specific design behind Mother tongue theme is that it is both a collaborative website in combination with physical meetings in conferences and seminars.

The website is the hub of the Mother Tongue Theme has its own unique content made by active mother tongue teachers and school leaders in 45 different languages. 100 teachers and school leaders are publishing on the site content in the context of language, culture and education. The website consists of different activities that can be summed up in three parts; *general information*, *online resources* and *language rooms*.

The *general information* is from both national and local levels. It can be about recent developments, current research, conferences, or articles.

The *online resources* part consists of different language tools for teaching and learning. Some of the language tools that are commonly used are; **Image themes**, an interactive image- and audio dictionary with verbs and definition of everyday terms in 17 languages. **Animation theme**, an animated dictionary with about 400 Swedish words and concepts. The animated dictionary means that the user gets the word written out, and pronounced the same time as a video is shown to describe to word. **Preschool**, a section with music and children's books that been translated and read by mother tongue teachers.

The *language rooms* are different mother tongue rooms on the website which present information and tools for communicating in different languages. These rooms are run by active mother tongue teachers at both pre-school and school level to highlight useful educational resources.

An important part of the Mother Tongue Theme activities have been to give teachers and school leaders the opportunity for skills development in the field of language teaching. This has mainly been done by meetings in conferences, seminars and training courses arranged by the project every year. The conferences share the same aims to promote exchange of experiences, networking and professional development among teachers and school leaders and could be divided into three parts:

- *a number of language-specific annual conferences*
- *conferences for school leaders*
- *a annual joint conference for partners involved in Mother tongue theme*

#### 4. Context

Over the past decades Sweden has gradually developed into a country characterized by an ever increasing diversity of people from varying cultural backgrounds. Many of those are students who are eligible for mother tongue education. In order to meet this need, approximately 3,000 language teachers in Sweden work with native language training in preschool and mother tongue tuition at primary and secondary school.

There is a political consensus based on linguistic research that says children and students develop both their knowledge and identity in a good way when they continue to develop their first language. It is also regulated by the Education Act which states that preschool and school will be involved so that students with mother tongue other than Swedish have the opportunity to develop both the Swedish language and their native language.

The municipality is responsible for mother tongue tuition for foreign background students and the tuition normally occurs on the school premises. The municipality most often employs the mother tongue teachers, and the teachers are not, in this sense, a part of the teacher collective at the school in which the tuition occurs.

The need for mother tongue teachers also varies geographically in Sweden. This can range from municipalities with students with a mother tongue language other than Swedish forming the majority of pupils, to other municipalities where it could be a matter of a few individual students.

Mother tongue teachers in Sweden are therefore geographically dispersed and often work at multiple schools within a municipality without colleagues in their subject. In most cases, mother tongue teachers have limited access to teaching resources in their subject.

To address this issue, in 2001 the Swedish National Agency for Education initiated the Mother Tongue Theme site (*Tema Modersmål*) to build up and sustain a network for mother tongue teachers with the aim of achieving higher quality in teaching and raising the status of mother tongue education. The Mother Tongue theme supports and develops mother tongue education by increasing knowledge exchange, method development and contact (both national and international) between mother tongue teachers. The Mother Tongue Theme project is a combination of a website and physical meetings in conferences, seminars and training courses arranged by the project.

#### 5. Resources

Funding for the Mother Tongue Theme is financed by the government. For the last 10 years the project has had a budget of 200.000 euro/year. At the National Agency for Education one person is employed fulltime with the project. Pedagogical experts contribute with content to the site and technical expertise has been brought in to solve specific problems. One major challenge has been to publish text on the website in many different languages, for example Arabic. The website software is an open source solution that is freely available to everyone.

## 6. Development over Time

The initiative has been running for the past ten years. It took three months to get started with four languages. This site has been developed and now contains 45 languages with over 10,000 web pages (language rooms). The website had 850 000 unique visitors in 2011. The most frequently used services were the "visual and audio dictionary" and "animated themes".

## 7. Evidence of effectiveness and efficiency

During the last ten years of the project, two evaluations have been carried out. The first one conducted by Ramboll Management Consulting in 2007, consisted of two parts, a mapping of the activity in the project and an evaluation of how the target group has experienced the effect of the project. Based on school leaders and language teachers' own assessment of the achieved effects, the conclusion is that both results and effects of the project been high. Primary results and outcomes is the networking and knowledge building and increased access to teaching materials which in turn is perceived to have contributed to increased quality in teaching.

The second evaluation made by Södertörn University in 2012 aims to investigate the mother tongue teacher's perception of the website relevance. Here, the focus is on how the resources on the website been used for teaching or professional development. The investigation has shown that the Mother Tongue Theme website is well visited and well-used by the target group. The numbers shows that 91% of the respondents are using *language rooms* in their teaching. The online resources been used in teaching by 83% of the respondents and 88% are using them for their own professional development.

## 8. Success Factors

The following section presents the three success factors in project implementation process:

- **A decentralized organization**  
The Mother Tongue Theme organization is a largely decentralized project, with a significant proportion of the work carried out by locally placed teams.
- **Centralised support function**  
A condition for such a decentralized organization as Mother Tongue Theme is having a center-support function that are able to assist the working groups with advice and support.
- **The combination of site and physical meetings**  
To physical meet the other teachers working with Mother Tongue theme has been described as "the engine" with working with the site.

## 9. Sources

### Documents

Ramböll (2007). När kunskap ger resultat. Kartläggning och uppföljning av Tema Modersmål.

Skolverket A (2011). Tema Modersmåls årsredovisning.

Skolverket B (2008). Rapport 321. Med annat modersmål – elever i grundskolan och skolans verksamhet.

Åsa Karlberg (2012) En utvärdering av modersmålslärares användning av Tema Modersmål.

### Electronic sources

Skolverket C, Tema Modersmål; Mötesplats för modersmål i förskolor och skolor (Elektronisk).

Available: <http://modersmal.skolverket.se/> (2012-06-25)

Wennerholm, Mats (2012). About Tema Modersmål (Elektronisk).

Available: <http://modersmal.skolverket.se/index.php/om-tema-modersmal> (2012-05-25).

### Examples of online resources for language training

Image themes in Arabic <http://lexin.nada.kth.se/lang/trio/ar/index.htm>

Animations theme in Swedish

[http://lexin.nada.kth.se/lang/lexinanim/kommunikation\\_bil\\_cykel\\_meny1.html](http://lexin.nada.kth.se/lang/lexinanim/kommunikation_bil_cykel_meny1.html)

Preschool – Listen to a book in Swahili and Swedish

<http://modersmal.skolverket.se/index.php/component/content/article/49-talbok/1227-foertrollad-frukt?directory=100013>