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Language education policy and practice in Finland

Abstract

This paper presents the official foreign language education policy in Finland. Furthermore, it observes the situation in practice: what are the languages offered and studied in schools and universities? What recent efforts have been made to strengthen the selection of languages taught at different levels of education? And what types of language oriented schools there are in Finland? Furthermore, very briefly, the paper presents a couple of programmes of language education, such as Svenska Nu (Swedish Now) and Language Amusement Park, which supports the learning of various languages other than English, and the language immersion programme in the Finnish comprehensive school.

Tiivistelmä

Tässä artikkelissa esitellään pääpiirteissään vieraiden kielten opetuksen periaatteita Suomessa. Niin ikään artikkelissa tarkastellaan kielten opetuksen käytäntöä: mitä kieliä tarjotaan ja mitä opiskellaan kouluissa ja yliopistoissa, mitä viime aikoina on tehty kielten valikoiman monipuolistamiseksi koulutuksen kaikilla tasoilla ja mitä kielikouluja Suomessa on tarjolla. Lisäksi esitellään lyhyesti, millaisia ohjelmia eri kielten tukemiseksi ja kielivalikoiman monipuolistamiseksi on tarjolla. Näistä esimerkkinä kuvataan lyhyesti ohjelmia Svenska Nu (Ruotsia Nyt) ja Kielitivolii, jotka tukevat muiden kuin englannin kielen valitsemista kieliohjelmaan, sekä peruskoulussa tarjottavaa kielikylypohjelmaa.

Sammandrag

Artikeln presenterar undervisningen av främmande språk i Finland i huvuddrag. Därtill presenteras praktiken för språkundervisningen: vilka är de språk som erbjuds och studeras i skolor och på universitet; vilka är de åtgärder som under den senaste tiden har genomförts för att göra språkurvalet mångsidigare på alla nivåer inom utbildningen och vilka slags språkorienterade skolor finns det i Finland. Dessutom ger artikeln en kort presentation av programmen Svenska Nu och Språktivoli som stöder studerandet av andra språk än engelska samt en presentation av språkbadsprogrammet i den finländska grundskolan.

There are some basic features that concern language learning in the current Finnish community. Firstly, in a country like Finland, it is self-evident that people learn languages other than just their first language. Finnish people cannot suppose that everybody learns and uses Finnish or Swedish – languages that are not widely used in Europe. Secondly, everyone has the right to learn foreign languages from the basic education to the higher levels of education in Finland. Hence, Finnish pupils and students are really privileged, having good chances to learn other languages.

This paper presents the Finnish language education in general, and gives information about languages that were offered and studied in schools and upper secondary schools in 2010. It also describes some recent efforts to strengthen the diversity of the selection of languages taught at different levels of education. Furthermore, it describes the system of the language instruction in universities and gives some examples of the types of attitudes the students have and the choices they make. Finally, the paper addresses central themes in Finnish public debate and raises questions that are relevant not only to Finland but also to other countries and language societies.

1. Foreign language education in the comprehensive school

The Finnish education system consists of a nine-year basic education for the whole age group (comprehensive school), which is preceded by one year of voluntary pre-primary education; upper secondary education, which consists of vocational and general education (3 years); and higher education, which is provided by universities and polytechnics.

With the two national languages, there are also two main lines in the Finnish school: one for the Finnish-speaking children and another one for the Swedish-speaking children, all the way from the kindergarten to the universities.¹

According to the Basic Education Act (Section 11), the basic education syllabus shall contain the following core subjects: mother tongue and literature, the second national language (Finnish or Swedish), foreign languages, environmental studies, health education, religious education or ethics, history, social studies, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, physical education, music, art, crafts, and home economics.

Instruction in a foreign language or the second national language usually starts in the third grade of comprehensive school, although some students take up a foreign language in the first or second grade already. It has become more common to start foreign language instruction before the third grade. Hence, the pupils are between 7 and 9 as they start studying other languages at school. The first language studied is called the A1 language.

A total of 345,615 pupils were attending grades 1 to 6 in 2010. Of the pupils, 177,312 were boys and 168,303 girls. According to Statistics Finland, English was the most commonly studied foreign language in grades 1 to 6 of comprehensive school in the autumn semester of 2010 (Table 1). Sixty-seven percent of the pupils attending grades 1 to 6 studied English either as a compulsory (A1) or optional (A2) foreign language. During the first school years, the percentage of pupils studying other foreign languages remained at 5 percent or below.

Table 1 shows that Finnish-speaking pupils chose Swedish as an optional language, whereas Swedish-speaking pupils chose Finnish as the compulsory language. It means, in general, that Finnish-speaking pupils are less proficient in Swedish than Swedish-speaking pupils are in Finnish after six years of school.

A total of 186,368 pupils were attending grades 7 to 9 of comprehensive school in 2010. Nearly all the pupils attending grades 7 to 9 studied English, and Swedish or Finnish either as a compulsory, optional or elective language (Table 2). German was studied by 11 percent and French by 6 percent of the pupils attending grades 7 to 9, mainly as an optional or elective language.

¹ Children who speak some other language than Finnish or Swedish as their first language choose either the Finnish or the Swedish school. Of course, they can also choose multilingual or international schools, but this is only possible in the capital region or in larger cities.

Studied language	Compulsory language A1	Optional language A2	Compulsory language B1	Elective language B2	Total	Share of pupils in grades 1-6 (%)
English	218,458	13,365	–	–	231,823	67.1
Swedish	2,919	12,625	–	–	15,544	4.5
Finnish	14,016	1,086	–	–	15,102	4.4
French	2,164	4,439	–	–	6,603	1.9
German	3,076	9,042	–	–	12,118	3.5
Russian	843	810	–	–	1,653	0.5
Sami	1	210	–	–	211	0.1
Other	253	626	–	–	879	0.3

Table 1: Language choices of comprehensive school pupils in grades 1-6 in 2010
(www.stat.fi/til/ava/2010/02/ava_2010_02_2011-05-25_tie_001_en.html)

Studied language	Compulsory language A1	Optional language A2	Compulsory language B1	Elective language B2	Total	Share of pupils in grades 7-9 (%)
English	170,345	14,252	310	100	185,007	99.3
Swedish	1,856	12,786	156,747	7	171,396	92.0
Finnish	10,071	1,058	209	2	11,340	6.1
French	1,234	3,689	229	5,896	11,048	5.9
German	1,659	9,038	391	8,513	19,601	10.5
Russian	518	331	–	1,706	2,555	1.4
Sami	3	34	–	6	43	0.0
Other	0	0	–	342	342	0.2

Table 2: Language choices of comprehensive school pupils in grades 7-9 in 2010
(www.stat.fi/til/ava/2010/02/ava_2010_02_2011-05-25_tie_001_en.html)

Girls studied optional languages more often than boys: 68 percent of all students studying B2 languages were girls. French was popular among girls, whereas the choice of Russian or German was not that gender-biased (Source: www.stat.fi/til/ava/2010/02/ava_2010_02_2011-05-25_tie_001_en.html).

2. Foreign language education in the upper secondary general school

The syllabus of upper secondary school shall contain mother tongue and literature (Finnish or Swedish), the other national language (Swedish or Finnish) and foreign languages; studies in mathematics and the natural sciences, studies in the humanities and social

sciences, religion or ethics, physical and health education, as well as arts and practical subjects. In addition, the syllabus may include either partially or entirely optional or elective subjects, such as vocational studies and other studies suitable to the tasks of the upper secondary school in accordance with the provisions of the curriculum. Furthermore, students must also receive student counselling. (Lukiolaki/Gymnasielag [Act on Upper Secondary Schools] 21 Aug 1998/629.) A total of 30,829 students completed the full upper secondary general school syllabus in spring 2010. Of the completers, 12,948 were men and 17,881 were women.

According to Statistics Finland (Table 3), nearly all completers of the full upper secondary general school syllabus had studied English, and Finnish or Swedish during their attendance of upper secondary general school. German had been studied by 26 percent, French by 17 percent, Spanish by 14 percent and Russian by seven percent of the completers of upper secondary general school education. These languages had been mainly studied as an elective language. The proportions of those having studied other foreign languages, like Italian or Latin, remained at four percent or below.

Gender differences are just as obvious in the upper secondary general school as in the comprehensive school. There is also considerable variation between genders in the choice of several languages: women study languages more than men, especially French is studied by women (Source: www.stat.fi/til/ava/2010/01/ava_2010_01_2010-12-14_tie_001_en.html).

Studied language	Compulsory A languages	Compulsory language B1	Elective language B2, at least six courses	Elective language B3, at least six courses	Elective language, fewer than six courses	Total	Share of completers of full upper secondary general school syllabus (%)
English	30,497	29	12	4	0	30,542	99.1
Swedish	2,524	25,475	3	5	48	28,055	91.0
Finnish	2,045	50	16	21	1	2,133	6.9
French	634	35	915	1,334	2,445	5,363	17.4
German	1,804	7	1,485	1,608	3,032	7,936	25.7
Russian	171	5	46	613	1,191	2,026	6.6
Sami	3	–	4	3	15	25	0.1
Latin	0	–	23	86	440	549	1.8
Spanish	11	–	56	1,510	2,671	4,248	13.8
Italian	0	–	15	246	826	1,087	3.5
Other	0	–	1	18	310	329	1.1

Table 3: Language choices of completers of full upper secondary general school syllabus 2010 (www.stat.fi/til/ava/2010/01/ava_2010_01_2010-12-14_tie_001_en.html)

All in all, language education is an essential part of the Finnish comprehensive school syllabus and the upper secondary general school syllabus. However, there is ongoing public debate in Finland on how to increase and improve pupils' language skills. The debate concerns especially how their Swedish skills and skills in foreign languages other than English could be improved. Various efforts have also been made to support studies in these languages.

3. Language immersion and language schools

Following the Canadian model of language immersion, Swedish language immersion for Finnish-speaking children was introduced in Vaasa in 1987 and, later on, in certain other bilingual regions, for instance the capital region in 1991. Presently, there are 17 municipalities offering language immersion in Swedish in the kindergarten, pre-school and comprehensive school, in addition to which three municipalities offer immersion in Sami. Further, one school in Eastern Finland offers Karelian immersion (Kangasvieri et al. 2011, 47-49.).

Early total immersion is the most usual immersion programme in Finland, but many municipalities also offer partial immersion. Hence, the umbrella title of language immersion can cover many different types of language instruction. Early total immersion is usually begun between the ages 3 and 6 and continues from the kindergarten/preschool to grade 9 of the comprehensive school. Further, new opportunities have been made available recently by a couple of schools that offer partial language immersion in Chinese.

In the autumn of 2009 there were 958 immersion children in day care or preschools, 2,184 immersion pupils in grades 1 to 6 of the comprehensive school, and 838 immersion pupils in grades 7 to 9 of the comprehensive school in Finland, more than half of them in the capital region (www.uwasa.fi/kielikylypy/lyhyesti/suomessa/; Kangasvieri et al. 2011, 23). It is just a small part of all the Finnish-speaking pupils in Finland, but there is a growing interest in language immersion in many parts of Finland. However, it is not so easy to increase the number of Swedish immersion classes, because of the small number of competent Swedish-speaking teachers.

Research into immersion in Finland has been practically shouldered by the University of Vaasa, but there are currently immersion researchers even in other universities. According to many studies, the results have been really good, not only in the immersion language, but also with the mother tongue and other core subjects. The method, language studying in action, also seems to work well in other classes.

Old bilingual schools offer effective support for learning various languages. These schools are Ranskalais-suomalainen koulu (Lycée franco-finlandais d'Helsinki), Suomalais-venäläinen koulu (Финско-русская школа), Saksalainen koulu (Deutsche Schule Helsinki), Helsingin eurooppalainen koulu (European Schooling Helsinki) and Kansainvälinen koulu (International School of Helsinki; instruction in English). The schools are situated mostly in the Helsinki region, but some of them are found in other towns, like Itä-Suomen suomalais-venäläinen koulu (Финско-русская школа Восточной Финляндии) in Lappeenranta, Imatra and Joensuu in Eastern Finland, near the Russian border where Russian is used extensively in the everyday lives of migrant families and with Russian tourists.

Instruction in bilingual schools takes place in Finnish and in the language each particular school is specialised in. In the International School of Helsinki, instruction is given in English, whereas in the European Schooling Helsinki, it is given in three language sections, English, Finnish and French.

The Basic Education Act also allows education to be carried out, wholly or in part, in the native language of the immigrant pupil or pupils with other backgrounds than Finnish or Swedish. Some local authorities have offered either bilingual or native-language education in Arabic, Somali, Russian, Vietnamese, and Estonian.

4. Other efforts to support language education in Finland

There are also other programmes that aim at strengthening language learning (other than English) in comprehensive school in different parts of Finland. The project *Kielitivoli* (Language Amusement Park) supports especially choices of German, French or Russian. *Svenska Nu* (Swedish Now) encourages pupils to choose the Swedish language earlier than pupils do today.

The Finnish State granted special economic subsidies to municipalities that were engaged in diversifying the language education programme in their schools from 2009 to 2011 by strengthening the co-operation and division of labour between municipalities and schools and by increasing the awareness of providers and pupils of the importance of many-sided language skills. Studying the optional languages Swedish, French and Russian as an A2 language increased during the first autumn 2009 already. The most popular A2 language in these schools was Swedish. Furthermore, English was studied more often as an A2 language than earlier; this shows that other languages were studied as the A1 language more often than earlier, and English came only after them (Tuokko et al. 2011).

As mentioned above, the programme Language Amusement Park was an attempt to build more diverse language programmes in the comprehensive schools of the participating municipalities. There were many factors, not only the state subsidy, that helped to reach the goals: engaged participants at every level, good local plans, good information, distance education with technical support, further education for language teachers, peer group support, and the chance to form a network. Of course, in certain areas, it was difficult to reach the goals: difficulties arose from weak engagement in schools, lack of time, technical problems in distance education, problems of school transport, different kinds of negative attitudes, and sometimes even a small number of optional classes (Tuokko et al. 2011).

Another popular language programme is *Svenska Nu* (Swedish Now) (www.svenskanu.fi/). Its goal is to strengthen the Swedish language skills among Finnish-speaking pupils by bringing Swedish youth culture into Finnish classrooms and offering an alternative to Anglo-Saxon culture; showing how easy and nice Swedish is in practice; and offering new education material for pupils and teachers. Furthermore, further education for teachers is arranged during the project.

Svenska Nu is funded by the Finnish and Swedish States, a variety of foundations, the Swedish-Finnish cultural centre Hanasaari – Hanaholmen, and certain private sponsors. The project works in cooperation with all the Finnish schools in Finland.

As has been seen above, there are a number of public and private activities in Finland that seek for sound and good alternative ways of teaching and learning several languages at school in a modern and attractive manner.

5. Language learning at university level

Language studies are also an important part of higher education. According to the Government Decree on University Degrees 794/2004, a student must demonstrate in studies included in education for a lower or higher university degree or otherwise that he/she has attained:

- proficiency in Finnish and Swedish which is required of civil servants in bilingual public agencies and organizations under Section 6(1) of the Act on the Knowledge of Languages Required of Personnel in Public Bodies (424/2003) and which is necessary for their field; and
- skills in at least one foreign language needed to follow developments in the field and to operate in an international environment.

In general, students learn more languages than the Decree demands, and universities offer a number of language courses. For instance, the Language Centre of the University of Helsinki provides language teaching in accordance with the degree requirements of all faculties at the university. In 2011 there were elementary, intermediate, and specialized courses in 17 languages. The selection of language courses available to every student was rich even in the minor universities.

It seems natural that especially business students understand the importance of language learning. According to the study by Sabine Grasz und Joachim Schlabach from Turku School of Economics (2011), business students' choices have been as follows.

Language	% (n = 2663)	
English	92.5	
Swedish	79.9	
German	48.0	
Spanish	28.9	(W 31%, M 26%)
French	25.1	(W 33%, M 15%)
Russian	13.9	
Italian	3.9	(W 5%, M 3%)
Japanese	3.1	
Other	3.7	

Table 4: Languages taken at schools of economics in Finland (Grasz/Schlabach 2011, 37)

The line started in the comprehensive school seems to persist at the university level. Students continue studying English and Swedish, and concentrate on language learning for special purposes, in this case economics. Furthermore, German, Spanish and French are quite popular among business students. However, French and Spanish are chosen more often by women than men.

The study showed that business students' attitudes towards plurilingualism are highly positive. Of course, there are also problems with integrating language studies into the timetables and study plans. (Grasz/Schlabach 2011, 61-67.) The problem of teaching is that languages have been taken up less in schools. Hence, universities must have more elementary courses in, e.g., German, French and Russian or in many other languages instead of simply offering special courses for professional and special purposes.

6. How to show the language proficiency

At the end of the upper secondary general education and IB-education students take the national matriculation examination (*ylioppilastutkinto/studentexamen*) or the IB examination. These include tests on many subjects but, naturally, various tests the students can take to prove their language proficiency after school are also offered.

The matriculation examination and school tests are, of course, just one way to show one's language skills. Another type of proficiency tests is the National Certificate of Language Proficiency, which is intended for adults in Finland. The tests are available in the following languages: English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Russian, Sami, Spanish and Swedish (http://www.oph.fi/english/mobility/testing_language_skills/).

In the National Certificate of Language Proficiency tests, language proficiency is assessed on a six-level scale in line with the proficiency scale used in the Common European Framework of Reference for language learning, teaching, and assessment. Language proficiency is divided into six skill levels, from the elementary stages to the more advanced stages. The test system became operational in November 1994, first with nine levels and, from 2002, with six levels.

In fact, there are presently three main levels: the basic level test (1-2), the intermediate level test (3-4) and the advanced level test (5-6).

The basic level test is suitable for adults who are in the early stages of learning a language. Basic level skills can constitute a target level for those who need the language for everyday purposes only.

In order to acquire Finnish citizenship, one is required to complete the National Certificate of Language Proficiency test in Finnish or Swedish at the intermediate level (skill level 3) (www.oph.fi/english/mobility/testing_language_skills). This is the test for adults who use the language they are learning both in everyday life and in work situations.

The advanced level test is suited for adults whose language skills match challenging tasks such as representing the workplace in specialist matters.

7. Some issues in current public language debate in Finland

The European goal that everybody in Europe should have skills in 1+2 languages is good, but this goal is not enough for Finnish people. We have to learn more languages than just our mother tongue, the other national language and one foreign language, often English, which is, of course, an important lingua franca and necessary to learn. But this is just the minimum. We also need to know other languages, and therefore the Finnish model could be 1+2+2, e.g., Finnish + Swedish and English + German and Spanish, or Swedish + Finnish and French + English and Chinese etc. Of course, our command of all these languages might not be at the same level; however, some proficiency in several languages encourages learning new languages and, in general, makes language learning easier.

A number of issues have come up in the current public debate on language education in Finland and many questions remain to be answered. As claimed above, it is very important to increase people's language skills in languages other than just English. Various ongoing language programmes and projects have shown that this is possible.

Finnish companies and workplaces are worried about young people's language proficiency. They are worried that students may not know languages other than English in the future. Companies have also stressed how important it is to know and use well one's own language and to produce professional and fluent texts.

The heated topic of the day in Finland is how bilingual education and, especially, bilingual education in Finnish and Swedish should be supported and increased. In general, there seems to be a clear difference between the attitudes of Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking people. Many Finnish-speaking families and individuals are very interested in the bilingual model. They stress that it is important to have better skills in Swedish and to know more about the Swedish culture in Finland. Swedish-speaking people, however, are more cautious or directly against bilingual schools. They are afraid that the Swedish domain might grow smaller and smaller in Finland if Finnish as the stronger majority language was spoken in the same schools as the minority language Swedish. However, there are many people, the author of this paper among them, who see many advantages in bilingual schools and would like to suggest that this alternative could be adopted in bilingual cities. Another theme concerning the learning of Swedish is how we could strengthen the language immersion programmes in Finland and how we could benefit from this method in classes of other languages, too.

This paper has concentrated on the learning of the established European languages. However, yet another central question is how we could better support the Asian, African and other migrant languages at school and how we could make the most of the increasing multilingualism in our society as a whole and in the workplaces in particular.

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