

## 12TH OECD-JAPAN SEMINAR:

### “GLOBALISATION AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCIES: RESPONDING TO DIVERSITY IN LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENTS”

#### FINLAND COUNTRY NOTE:

#### GLOBALISATION AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCIES IN THE FINNISH EDUCATION SYSTEM

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#### Background information about language education in Finland

All children receive a 9-year basic education. After basic education about a half of the pupils continue in general upper secondary education and a little less than a half in vocational upper secondary education.

Pupils in basic and general upper secondary education study the minimum of two compulsory languages, and one of them must be Swedish (or Finnish for Swedish-speaking pupils). The other one could be any language, but today it is English in nine cases out of ten. Besides, pupils can be offered several opportunities to start new languages. The language program of Finnish basic and general upper secondary schools could be described in the following way:

		<b>Compulsory/optional language</b>	<b>Starts at the latest</b>	<b>Most popular language</b>
Basic education	A1	compulsory	3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	English
	A2	optional	5 <sup>th</sup> grade	German
	B1	compulsory	7 <sup>th</sup> grade	Swedish
	B2	optional	8 <sup>th</sup> grade	German
Upper secondary education	B3	optional	beginning of upper secondary	German

All basic schools must offer their pupils the compulsory languages A1 and B1. Besides, most basic schools offer at least one B2-language. A2 is provided mainly in big schools and in towns. Upper secondary schools must offer the compulsory languages A1 and B1 and the minimum of two optional languages, mainly B3. Both the compulsory and optional languages should be studied until the end of basic

education and continued in secondary education. In practice, pupils sometimes drop an optional language before the end of basic or upper secondary education.

In vocational secondary education all students have compulsory language studies in two languages: one credit in the second national language (usually Swedish) and two credits in a foreign language (usually English).

Some schools provide early language learning, CLIL or immersion. Early language learning and CLIL are almost exclusively provided in English. An exception are some schools specialized in foreign language education, e.g. the French-Finnish School, the German school and two Finnish-Russian schools. Early total immersion is provided in about two dozen schools mainly in Swedish.

### **Core curriculum**

The national core curriculum is given by the Finnish National Board of Education. It is prepared during several years in large cooperation with municipalities, schools, teachers, researchers and other interested parties. The core curriculum can be divided into general sections and subject-specific sections. The subject-specific sections contain the core contents and objectives for each subject and also descriptions of good performance and criteria for final assessment.

Schools and municipalities write their own, more detailed curricula on the basis of the core curriculum. For each subject they should write the contents and objectives for each school year and also some principles of methodology and pupil assessment.

All teachers are supposed to take into consideration the general ideas and principles, e.g. general education objectives, socio-constructivist learning conception, cross-curricular themes and principles of pupil assessment. Teachers are, however, free to choose their concrete methods.

The valid core curriculum for languages is largely based on the ideas expressed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Finland has made an application of the CEFR-scale for schools.

### **Current trends in Finnish language education**

Common basic education for all was introduced in Finland more than thirty years ago (before this Finland had a parallel school system). Basic education kept up the tradition of former comprehensive schools in many respects. Among other things, knowledge of several languages used to be considered part of good all-round education. As basic education has encompassed more and more age groups, more and more people have studied – besides their mother tongues – at least the two compulsory languages during their school years, and many have studied more than two. In general upper secondary education more than a half of the students study at least three different languages, but today the number is slowly decreasing, although we know that we would need quite the opposite. The Finnish labour market, public services and our need to communicate in a successful way with the rest of the world need people who are capable of communicating in European languages – German, French, Russian – and we also need people who are able to speak e.g. Japanese, Chinese or Arabic. Out of these languages only German is still rather widely studied at schools, French to some extent and Russian far less than necessary.

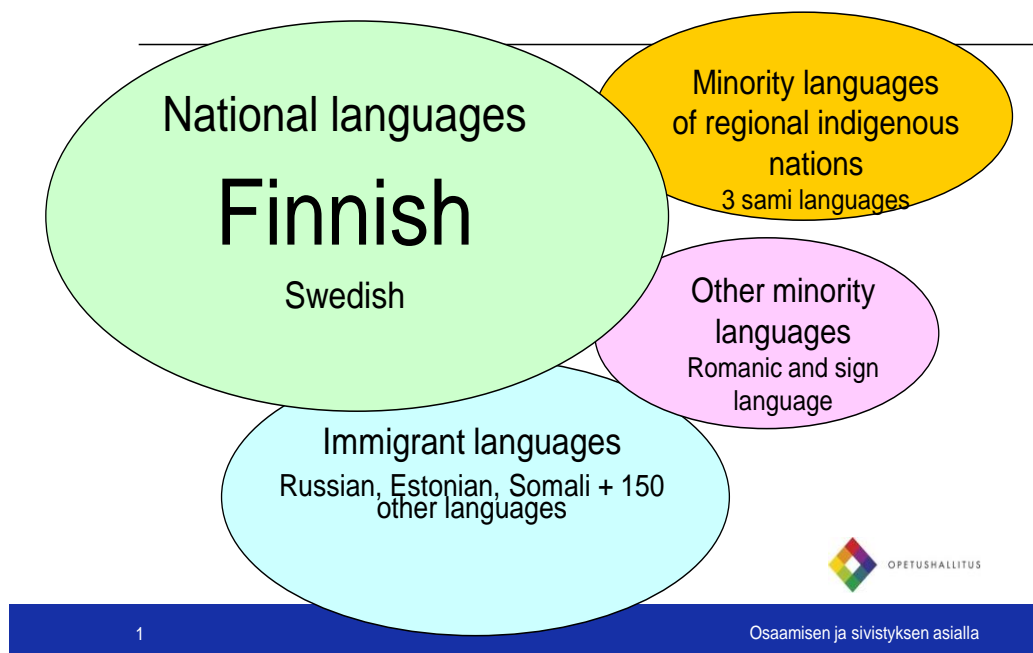
It is a very typical feature of Finnish society today that knowledge of English is no more considered as something extra: even though English is not compulsory at school (it is possible to choose another language instead of English), in practice good skills in English are necessary for anyone who wishes to continue their studies in higher education institutes, i.e. universities or polytechnics. English is studied by practically everyone, and the learning results in English are better than in other languages.

The reasons for this situation are rather obvious. Children have high motivation to learn English, because they hear it on children's programs on TV. And when they grow up, they get surrounded by youth culture not only on TV, but also in the Internet. Parents understand that whatever the child chooses to do after basic education it is necessary to be able to speak and understand English. They also realize that anyone who is interested in good position in society must have good skills in English. English seems to be the language of globalisation, international and intercultural communication, and most people understand this.

The media – TV and Internet – plays a decisive role in the popularity of English in two ways. Through media we get the idea – and illusion – that all the rest of the world speaks English, and therefore we must also be able to communicate in English, if we want to communicate with people from other cultures. And through the media we learn English by hearing and reading it on a daily basis.

On the other hand, other languages are studied less and less despite promotion campaigns and programs for the diversification of language studies. Other languages do not play the same role in our mind and daily life. They are perceived as something extra, probably something for the future. The reward they promise in our mental picture is smaller. There are less opportunities to hear other languages, and probably therefore learning them is a bigger effort. We may feel that we are working hard but do not get the same reward we get with English. We might occasionally hear the language spoken on TV, but get frustrated, because we do not understand. If we could hear the language as often as we hear English, we would have a different experience.

### Languages of other than the Finnish-speaking population



### Languages spoken as L1 in Finland

Finland has been rather homogenous from the linguistic point of view compared to many other countries. Now this situation is slowly changing. About 5 % of the population are Swedish-speaking, and approximately 2,5 % are immigrants. The number of immigrant languages is about 150. Besides there are other small minority populations: speakers of three different Sami languages, a small Romanic population and a number of sign language users.

## *1. Swedish*

There are two national languages in the country, Finnish and Swedish, and the speakers of both languages are guaranteed by law governmental services in their mother tongue. This is why both languages are compulsory for all pupils.

Most of the Swedish-speaking pupils go to Swedish-language schools, if they live in a municipality which has a Swedish-language school. Quite a large number of the Swedish-speaking population live in very Finnish-speaking surroundings and in fact grow up to be bilingual. If one of the parents is Swedish-speaking and the other one is Finnish-speaking, the parents usually use their own mother tongue when communicating with the child. If a family who are bilingual in Finnish and Swedish live in a small town or in the country-side, they may have difficulties in finding a Swedish-language school or Swedish taught as the mother tongue for their child. On the other hand, there are regions in Finland, particularly a number of small municipalities on the west coast, where most of the population are Swedish-speakers, and the Finnish skills of the pupils may be rather scanty. A bigger problem, however, are the Swedish skills of Finnish-speaking pupils. Part of the pupils, boys in particular, have not enough motivation for Swedish studies, and the learning results are lower than expected.

## *2. Languages of immigrants*

Although the immigrant population in Finland is very small compared to many other countries – about 2,5 % - it is growing fast. In ten years it has doubled. When an immigrant pupil enters a Finnish school, he or she may start in preparatory instruction, which is intended for immigrant pupils and helps in getting integrated in a Finnish school and Finnish society. Not all schools offer preparatory instruction for immigrants, but those who do, get a state subsidy to cover the costs. The duration of preparatory instruction varies from half a year to two years. An individual learning plan is formulated for each pupil. Preparatory instruction consists of Finnish as a second language and other school subjects. Immigrant pupils are integrated into Finnish (or Swedish) classes whenever possible in order to make them feel part of the school community, to offer them opportunities to get acquainted with their Finnish schoolmates and learn the language by using it.

Municipalities are also entitled to state subsidy, if they offer lessons in immigrant pupils' mother tongues, and the teaching of the mother tongue can start during preparatory instruction or after it. In order to get the state subsidy a minimum of four pupils is required. About 50 mother tongues are taught in Finnish schools. The most widely taught and studied immigrant languages are Russian, Somali, Albanian, Arabic and Vietnamese. Roughly two thirds of immigrant pupils attend mother tongue lessons in basic education.

Along with the growth of immigrant population the Finnish school has encountered new challenges. There is a long tradition of teaching Finnish as a second language to Swedish-speaking pupils, of course, but teaching Finnish to immigrant pupils is very different. The pupils in the class often have mixed linguistic backgrounds and many of them speak languages that have quite a different spelling system. But children often pick up spoken language very quickly, and therefore their skills in Finnish may be overestimated and they may not get enough support in improving their skills in written Finnish. Also teaching so many mother tongues is a big challenge, and often it is difficult to find a teacher. It is also a new phenomenon that today we have new bilinguals: bilinguals in Finnish (Swedish) and an immigrant language.