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WHAT LANGUAGES DO PUPILS STUDY IN BASIC EDUCATION?

Statistics on language learning and teaching in Finland

BACKGROUND

In Finnish basic education, all pupils are required to study at least two languages: the second national language, Finnish or Swedish, and one foreign language. Only one in five pupils study additional languages. Furthermore, for 90% of pupils the first and only foreign language is English. English is a popular choice because of its status in global communication, and many pupils seem to find it unnecessary to learn any other languages. While many Finnish pupils attain good proficiency in English, studying optional languages has been on the decline for the past twenty years.

The narrowing language repertoire of Finns has become a matter of concern and has for a long time been a challenge also for language teaching professionals. How can we help pupils and their guardians understand the value of diverse language skills? How can we motivate pupils to learn more languages? How can we inspire them to start their language studies with a language other than English?

On the other hand, it is not just a question of what pupils choose to study, but also of what they are offered. In Finland, the local education provider – in most cases, the municipality – determines which languages pupils are offered as school subjects. For example, the size and population density of the municipality as well as the municipality's general economic situation for their part determine which and to what extent different languages are offered to pupils. Furthermore, it is also question of which skills (language or other) pupils themselves value, as well as of the availability of language teachers. Statistics show that regional differences in studying optional

languages have increased. The range of languages that schools offer should therefore be regarded as an issue of equality and be taken into account at both the local and national level.

From the 1990s onwards, different national language projects have been launched in order to tackle this challenge. The impact of the projects turns up as rising trends in the statistics regarding the number and variety of optional languages pupils have chosen to study. In the long term, however, the impact has remained minor. As a result, the Government Key Project for Languages launched in 2017 strives for long-term impacts. The project has primarily aimed at starting language learning at an earlier age. Other aims include developing and diversifying language learning as well as committing the entire educator community – the school, guardians and third sector – to supporting early language learning.

This report is an overview of the languages pupils study in basic education. Which languages in which syllabi do pupils study in Finnish basic education? How have their language choices changed over the years?

In Finnish schools, the language of instruction can be either Finnish or Swedish. In the following text, the data include both Finnish- and Swedish-speaking schools unless stated otherwise. The data presented in this publication are based on Vipunen (Education Statistics Finland). In addition, reports on language teaching from the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre FINEEC and the European Commission have been used as background material.



PUPILS MAY STUDY UP TO FOUR LANGUAGES IN BASIC EDUCATION

Currently language teaching begins with the compulsory A1 language in grade 3 at the latest. The other compulsory language syllabus is the B1 language, which begins in grade 6 at the latest. In addition, primary school pupils may also begin studies in an optional A2 language. In Finnish-speaking schools, pupils usually study the second national language Swedish as their B1 language, unless the pupil has already started Swedish as an A1 or A2 language. In Swedish-speaking schools, the second national language is in most cases started as an A1 language and English as an A2 language. In grades 7–9, pupils may start yet another new optional language, the B2 language, which usually begins in grade 8.

In 2018, the decree on basic education and distribution of lesson hours was amended by adding two annual weekly lessons to the number of lesson hours in the instruction of the A1 language in grades 1 and 2. Instruction of the A1 language is to begin in the spring term of grade 1 at the latest, during which at least half an annual weekly lesson should be provided. This change will be implemented in schools from the beginning of 2020.

Starting language teaching in grades 1 and 2 increased considerably in 2016 when the new core curriculum for basic education as well as an updated distribution of lesson hours were introduced. One weekly lesson hour of teaching in the A1 language was moved from lower secondary school to primary school, and many education providers decided to bring the start of the A1 language forward to year 2. Statistics show that while in 2015 a mere 12% of all grade 2 studied the A1 language, by 2017, the proportion had risen to 38%.

All pupils will start learning a foreign language or the second national language by the spring term of grade 1.

ENGLISH IS THE MOST COMMON CHOICE FOR THE A1 LANGUAGE, SWEDISH FOR B1

More than 90% of Finnish pupils study English as their A1 language. In Swedish-speaking schools, however, the most common A1 language is Finnish.

A mere 1% of pupils study French or German as their first foreign language. The number of pupils studying Russian or Spanish is increasing but is still very small.

LANGUAGE SYLLABUSES

A1-language

begins in grade 3 at the latest, compulsory. As of 2020, instruction of the A1 language will begin in the spring term of grade 1 at the latest

A2-language

begins in grade 4 or 5, optional

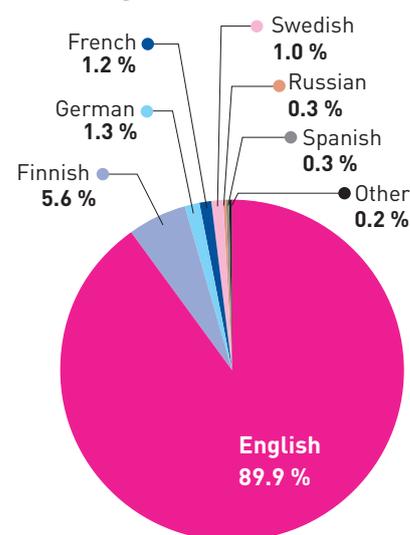
B1-language

begins in grade 6 at the latest, compulsory

B2-language

begins in grades 7–9, optional

CHOSEN A1 LANGUAGES 2017 (grade 3)



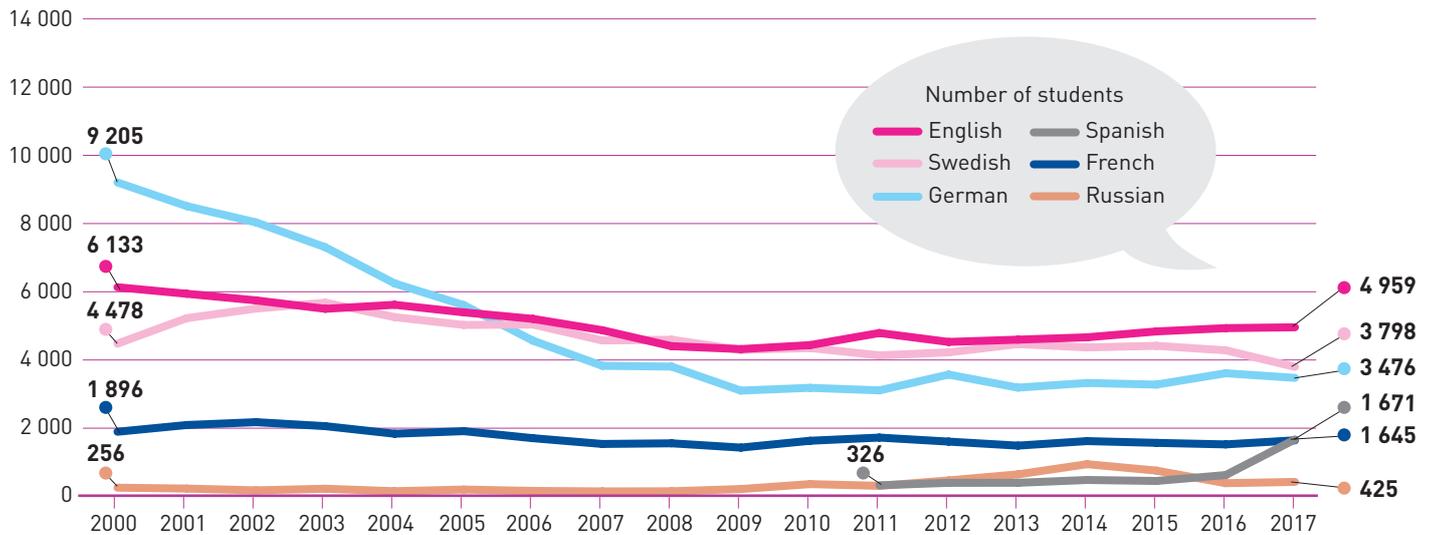
increased. The number of third-graders studying Russian has doubled and the number of those studying Spanish has grown more than fourfold. These languages are studied particularly in the Helsinki metropolitan area and its vicinity, though Russian is also rather popular near the eastern border of Finland. Nevertheless, the number of pupils studying Spanish and Russian remains small.

The B1 language is most commonly studied in Finnish-speaking schools, in which case it is the second national language, Swedish. Fewer than one percent of pupils in Finnish-speaking schools study some other language, such as English or German, as their B1 language.

Between 2011 and 2017, the proportion of third-graders studying A1 French and A1 German has remained firmly in the region of one percent, which is approximately 750 pupils per language. These languages are most popular in the Helsinki metropolitan area and its vicinity, where about 80% of pupils studying French and 50% of pupils studying German live.

Within the same time period, the number of pupils studying Russian or Spanish as their A1 language has slightly

A2 LANGUAGES CHOSEN BY FIFTH-GRADERS IN BASIC EDUCATION 2000–2017



NUMBER OF PUPILS STUDYING A2 LANGUAGES DECLINED BY ABOUT ONE THIRD IN 20 YEARS

Interest in studying more than just the compulsory languages was at its highest level in the mid-1990s. For example, in 1997 41% of fifth-graders studied an A2 language. As of then, the number of pupils studying A2 languages has gradually declined and was at its lowest in 2009, when only 24% of fifth-graders studied an A2 language. Especially Finnish-speaking pupils seem to have lost interest. However, as of 2010, the proportion of pupils studying A2 languages

has gradually increased. In 2017, 27% of fifth-graders studied an A2 language.

In spite of the slight recovery in numbers, regional differences in studying optional languages have increased from the beginning of the 21st century. A2 languages are studied in only half of Finland's municipalities. Some municipalities no longer even offer A2 languages. Furthermore, in many municipalities the minimum number of pupils required to form a teaching group in an optional language is relatively high and may not be reached every year.

English is the most popular A2 language. In 2017, 8% of fifth-graders studied English. Almost two thirds of them study in Swedish-speaking schools. A2 Swedish and A2 German were studied by 6% of fifth-graders and French by 3%. Especially A2 German has faced a significant decline in popularity over the years, as at the beginning of the

Optional A2 languages are studied in only half of Finland's municipalities and some municipalities no longer offer this option at all.

21st century 14% of fifth-graders studied German. On the other hand, studying Spanish as an A2 language has become more and more popular since 2016.

MORE LANGUAGES STUDIED IN PRIVATE AND STATE-OWNED SCHOOLS

In Finland, basic education is provided by either private schools or municipalities. In 2017, there were 85 private or state-owned schools and 2,269 schools owned by a municipality or joint municipal authority. Finnish private schools are government-dependent and receive public funding. There is a significant difference in the number of languages studied by pupils in private and state-owned educational institutions compared to other educational institutions: in 2017, 41% of pupils in private or state-owned schools stud-

ied more than two languages, while not even 20% of pupils in schools owned by municipalities studied an equally diverse range of languages.

Pupils' socio-economic background may also have an effect on which languages pupils choose to study. Research evidence indicates that pupils from residential areas with a high socio-economic status study an A language other than English more often than pupils do on average.

B2 SPANISH BECOMING MORE POPULAR, POPULARITY OF FRENCH AND RUSSIAN DECLINING

Optional B2 languages were studied most in 1996, when the proportion of 8th and 9th graders studying a B2 language was as high as 43%. The same proportion has fallen to less than half of this over the past twenty years, reaching barely 17% in 2017.

8% of lower secondary school pupils study German or French.

The most popular B2 languages are German and French, although Spanish has become almost as popular as French over the past 10 years. In 2017, 5% of all lower secondary school pupils studied German, 2.5% French and 2% Spanish. The number of pupils studying German has declined by 2.1 percentage points from the beginning of the 21st century, and that of French by 1.7 per-

centage points. However, German has slightly increased its popularity in the past few years.

The popularity of B2 Russian continued to increase until 2014, when it

was studied by just over 2% of lower secondary school pupils. In 2017, the numbers have fallen to half of this.

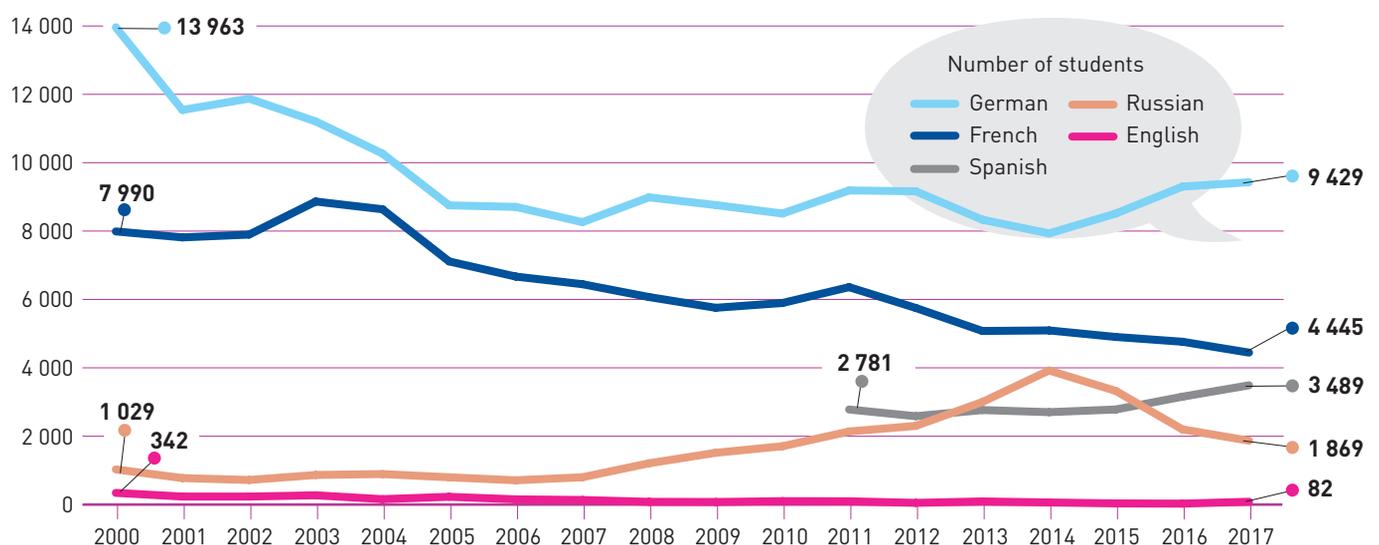
MULTILINGUALISM AS A RESOURCE IN ALL LEARNING

The National core curriculum for basic education (2014) states that the basic principle of language instruction at school is using language in different situations. The aim is to promote using and reflecting on language in order to strengthen pupils' language awareness as well as to promote the parallel use of different languages.

Language awareness plays a key role in the school culture. School is where pupils get to know the language of schooling, the languages of different fields of knowledge and the languages they see in their daily life. Language awareness refers to understanding the key role of language in all learning, interaction, cooperation, building of identities and socialisation. Language awareness and language education are an important part of teaching as schools are increasingly diverse in terms of culture and languages. Language education promotes the parallel use of different languages as a natural part of the school day. In language-aware communities, people discuss attitudes towards languages and language communities and appreciate languages and diverse knowledge of them.

Children are already plurilingual when they start school: their language skills comprise competence of different levels in mother tongues, other languages and their dialects. Schools guide pupils in becoming aware of the multi-layered linguistic and cultural identities they and others have. Teaching and learning support pupils' plurilingual competence through the utilisation of all languages, also the ones pupils use in their free time. Teaching and learning also strengthen pupils' trust in their ability to learn languages and encourage them to use their language skills confidently, even when they are limited.

B2 LANGUAGES CHOSEN BY 7-9-GRADERS IN BASIC EDUCATION



GIRLS STUDY MORE LANGUAGES AND MORE DIVERSELY THAN BOYS

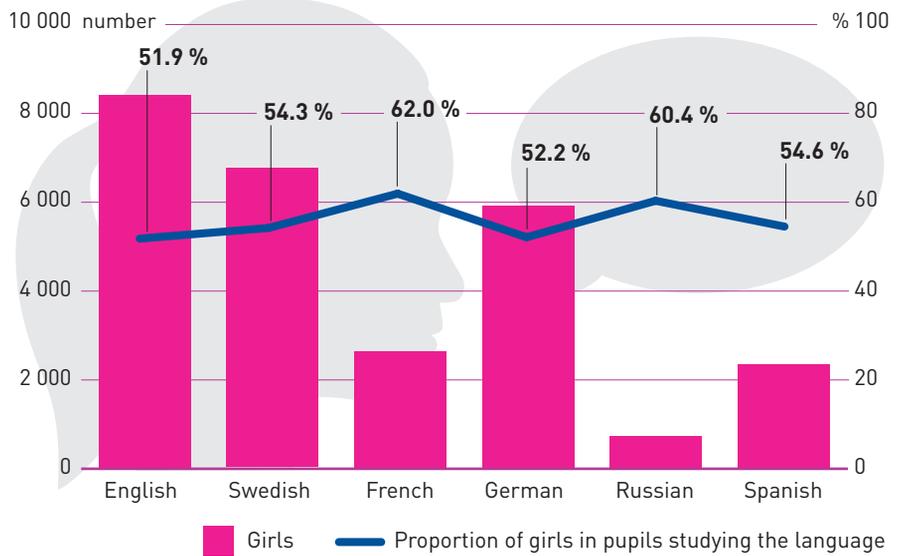
Girls study a wider range of languages than boys. This diversity is evident already in primary school when pupils choose their first compulsory A1 language: boys tend to choose English, whereas girls may instead choose Swedish, French, German, Russian or Spanish as their A1 language.

Almost two thirds of pupils choosing a B2 language are girls.

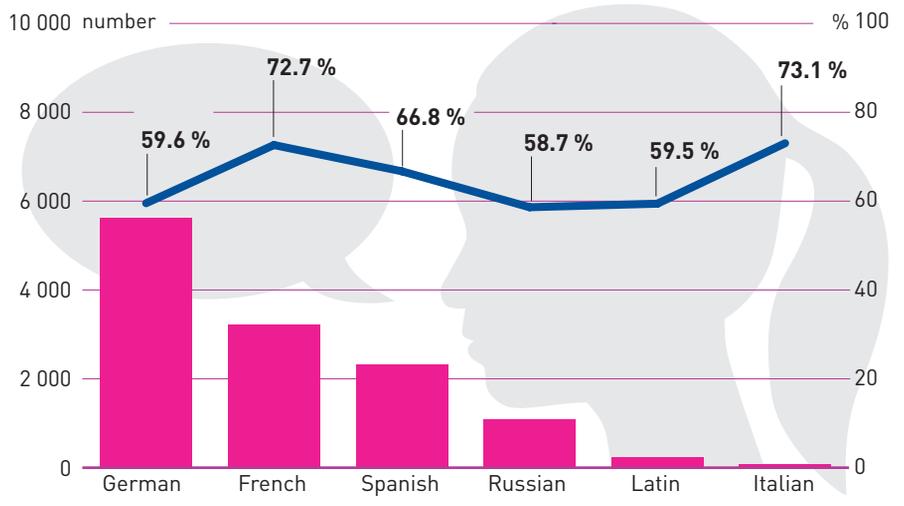
Girls also make up a larger share of pupils studying A2 languages. The proportion of girls is especially large among those who study A2 French and Russian, as girls account for more than 60% of the pupils.

Girls also accounted for approximately 64% of those pupils in grades 7–9 who chose a B2 language in 2017. A whopping 75% of pupils studying French and Italian and 70% of those studying Spanish were girls.

PROPORTION AND NUMBER OF GIRLS IN PUPILS STUDYING AN A2 LANGUAGE IN 2017 (grades 1–6)



PROPORTION AND NUMBER OF GIRLS IN PUPILS STUDYING A B2 LANGUAGE IN 2017 (grades 7–9)



MAJORITY OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS ARE WOMEN

In 2016, 77% of teachers in Finnish basic education were women. As regards language teachers, the proportion of women was even larger as more than 90% of teachers of English, French, German, Russian, Spanish and Swedish were women.

Almost all language teachers were also formally qualified to teach their subject. The situation has improved over the past few years as in 2016–2017 all Spanish teachers and 93% Russian teachers were now qualified for their job, while the rate of qualification in both groups was only 75% in 2013.

THE NATIONAL CORE CURRICULUM RESPONDS TO CURRENT CHALLENGES

The renewed national core curriculum for basic education entered into force in autumn 2016. As a response to today's challenges, the new curriculum entails a fresh description of the task and objectives of language instruction. A separate national core curriculum was drawn up for English. A core curriculum was also drawn up for teaching Asian and African languages, such as Chinese, Japanese and Arabic in upper secondary school, as studying them in basic education has become increasingly popular since the beginning of the 21st century.

ALMOST ALL PUPILS IN SWEDISH-SPEAKING SCHOOLS STUDY TWO A LANGUAGES

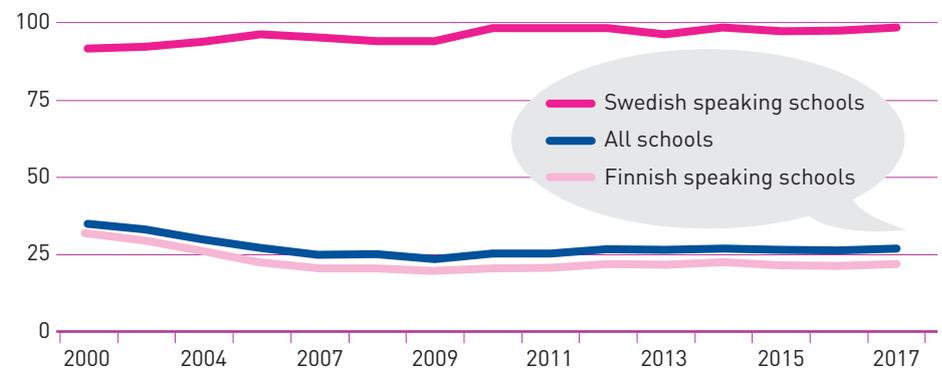
Almost 90% of pupils in Swedish-speaking schools study Finnish as their A1 language. An increasing number of pupils have started learning Finnish in 1st or 2nd grade. In 2017, about half of 1st graders had started to learn Finnish, while only one in five did so a few years earlier. Correspondingly, in 2017 the A1 language was studied by almost 80% of pupils in grade 2, while the proportion was one quarter in 2015.

Some of the pupils in Swedish-speaking schools study English as their A1 language. For example in 2017, 13% of third-graders studied English as their A1 language. A1 English is studied especially in the Åland Islands and in areas where pupils' knowledge of Finnish is already strong for other reasons.

According to a report drawn up in 2013, about a half of the pupils in Swedish-speaking schools come from Swedish-speaking families and 40% from bilingual families that speak both Swedish and Finnish. The home language of the remaining 10% is a language other than Swedish or Finnish. Bilingual pupils study Finnish or Swedish in the so-called

FIFTH-GRADERS STUDYING AN A2 LANGUAGE IN SWEDISH- AND IN FINNISH-SPEAKING SCHOOLS 2000–2017

Proportion in pupils, %



In Swedish-speaking schools, the A1 language is usually the second national language, Finnish. Almost 99% of pupils also learn an A2 language, which is usually English.

native-level A syllabus, in which the objectives are set at a higher level than in the regular A1 syllabus.

Pupils in Swedish-speaking schools usually start an A2 language already in 4th grade. In 2017, almost 99% of fifth-graders studied an A2 language. The most popular A2 language is English, which was studied by 85% of 5th

graders. Almost all pupils in Swedish-speaking schools study two A languages, while in Finnish-speaking schools only just over 20% of pupils do the same.

In 2017, almost 30% of pupils in Swedish-speaking lower secondary schools studied a B2 language. Half of them studied German and a quarter studied French.

A greater proportion of pupils in Swedish-speaking schools study more than the two compulsory languages than pupils in Finnish-speaking schools. In 2017, 32% of pupils in Swedish-speaking lower secondary schools studied three or four languages, while in Finnish-speaking schools the corresponding proportion was only one in five pupils. That is, 65% of Swedish-speaking pupils kept to the two compulsory languages, while 79% of pupils in Finnish-speaking schools did the same.

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY STRENGTHENING FINLAND'S LANGUAGE RESERVE

Speakers with diverse language backgrounds are a valuable part of Finland language reserve. 6.8% of the Finnish population speak a language other than Finnish or Swedish as their mother tongue. The proportion has been increasing especially in the past 10 years.

Pupils in Finnish basic education may participate in the instruction of their mother tongue. In 2017, a total of 60 different mother tongues were taught to more than 18,000 pupils in basic education. The three most studied languages were Russian, Somali and Arabic.

The Finnish National Agency for Education is an agency operating in the administrative branch of the Ministry of Education and Culture. It is responsible for the development of education, early childhood education and care, and lifelong learning as well as for the promotion of internationalisation.