



Finland invests in early language learning

The current Finnish Government Program entails 26 key projects, of which one is 'New Learning Environments and Digital Materials to Comprehensive Schools'. The project's objectives include, for example, modernizing Finnish education in terms of pedagogy and the learning environment, improving learning results, and providing pupils with skills that respond to future needs. In order to accomplish this, the project divides into three themes. One of these is the Government Key Project for Languages, which focuses on increasing and diversifying language teaching by way of regional experiments. The aims of the project can be simplified to three main points of focus: integrating early language learning into Finnish education with a much wider scope than before, providing pupils with a wider language repertoire, and creating a welcoming and encouraging attitude towards language learning.

Background

The primary aim of the Government Key Project for Languages is promoting wide-spread early language teaching and learning in the Finnish education system. This aim is supported by research and positive findings on the benefits of early language learning. For example, research indicates that a sensitivity period, or possibly various sensitivity periods¹, exist for language learning, and that these period(s) occur in early childhood to adolescence. While sensitivity periods do not mark stages at which new languages *should* be learned, nor determine the outcome of learning, research suggests that these periods present *the most opportune* ages for specific linguistic features to be learned². Sensitivity periods are also strongly related to brain plasticity, which, simply put, refers to how susceptible the brain is to neural structural changes i.e. learning. Brain plasticity is at its peak in early childhood, which offers strong support for early language learning.

On a more general level, young children are more open to new experiences and other people, more curious about their environment, and do not hesitate to perform. It is believed that by introducing languages to children at a young age, they will have the courage to communicate even with limited knowledge and

¹ For example for phonological and syntactical development.

² Sensitivity periods are also in no way a new concept in for example psycholinguistic research, but their recognition in Finnish education planning has been lacking.

competence in the target language, and that they will be more motivated to study languages in later life. While efforts have been made to encourage and support the development of pupils' oral skills in foreign languages, pupils may have felt that their oral skills are lacking. Together with new curricular elements in Finnish education, introducing languages at an early age is envisioned to be a solution to the issue. As to the general benefits of learning languages, knowledge of several languages has been shown to improve memory, strengthen multitasking skills, as well as prevent or delay Alzheimer's and dementia, to name but a few.

The second and third points of focus are the diversification of language teaching and the promotion of the value of language learning. Diversification refers to offering teaching in various languages to ensure that pupils acquire a wide language repertoire in school. It is also closely related to providing pupils with an enhanced understanding of the value of language learning. That is, these two points of focus are dependent of each other: By encouraging pupils to study multiple languages, one can make sure that there will also be pupils willing to take the classes. This in turn should encourage the schools to offer teaching in different languages, thus answer to the demands set by the pupils, thus providing pupils with wider language repertoires. It is hoped that by motivating pupils to learn many languages, as well as by providing municipalities with the funding to teach such languages, language learning will regain the status it once had in Finland.

Language teaching in Finnish education

To offer a brief review of language teaching in Finnish basic education, there are four different syllabi, of which two are mandatory, and the other two optional. The A1 syllabus is mandatory, usually begins in the 3rd grade, and the language of choice is usually English (Finnish for Swedish-speaking Finns). The A2 syllabus is an optional language beginning most often in grades 3–6, and usually refers to French, German or Russian (English for Swedish-speaking Finns). The B1 syllabus is the other mandatory language syllabus and begins in the 6th grade. It is usually the second national language, Swedish or Finnish, unless the pupil has studied the second national language in an A1 or A2 syllabus. B2 is an optional foreign language beginning in grades 7–9. There is some variation in how, when, and to what extent foreign languages are introduced and taught to pupils in Finnish basic education in different schools.

To summarize, the Finnish education system provides its pupils with a language repertoire of at least three languages: the mother tongue, the second national language, and one other foreign language, which is usually English. Almost 80 % of Finns keep to these three languages. Statistics show that language learning is becoming ever more centered around the three aforementioned languages, and a common belief is that learning a foreign language other than English is no longer as advantageous as it might have been before, far be it a necessity. The dominance of English as the only foreign language that pupils learn is one of the key

issues that these regional experiments try to tackle. On a more general note, the projects strive to create a more positive, motivating, and encouraging attitude towards language learning.

The Government Key Project for Languages – Regional Experiments

In March 2017, 95 municipalities and private education providers were granted special subsidies for organizing regional experiments involving

- introducing pupils to an A1 or A2 language syllabus in their first or second year
- other methods of introducing different languages to children in early childhood education³ (< 6 years old), pre-primary education⁴ (at the age of 6), and basic education (7–15-year-olds). Methods may include for example language showers and enriched language programs
- implementing measures that encourage pupils to make open-minded language choices and that encourage them to follow through with studies in optional language syllabi to the end of basic education
- collaboration between all teachers to encourage pupils to make use of language skills that are versatile and of different proficiency levels. Pupils should be encouraged to communicate in a language even if their skills are limited. They should also be encouraged to use language of for example different styles and registers.
- increasing learner participation and learner-centered methods, as well as methods that promote active learning and are motivating for different learners
- finding links between language learning and pupils' everyday lives, as well as lifelong learning
- convincing the whole education community (e.g. guardians, school and daycare personnel, the third sector) to commit to the cause of early language learning
- finding and modelling new pedagogical or administrative practices that help convey to different actors in the education community the importance and benefits of having versatile language skills. New practices can be developed on both a local and regional level.
- establishing a *language path*, in which pupils are introduced to a new language in early childhood education or pre-primary education and are exposed to the language, through learning or enriched language programs, all through to the end of basic education. The language path may continue also in upper secondary education.

To our current knowledge, 46 out of 95 projects in approximately 40 different municipalities will be introducing an A1 or A2 foreign language syllabus to their 1st and 2nd graders in fall 2017. For the majority of

³ Early childhood education and care (ECEC) entails care, education, and teaching, and is offered to all children under the age of 6. It takes place in kindergartens or in smaller family daycare groups. The Finnish National Curriculum Guidelines on ECEC (2016) provides a basis for local curricula.

⁴ Note that pre-primary education is mandatory in Finland.

pupils, the first foreign language is English, which pupils usually begin in the 3rd grade. Some pupils will begin their studies in French, German and Russian, which are usually studied as optional A2 languages from the 5th grade on⁵.

70 out of 95 projects have committed to increasing and introducing, either as complementary to an A1 or A2 syllabus or otherwise, early language learning in early childhood education, pre-primary education, and basic education. In reference to the B1 syllabus in Swedish beginning in 6th grade, some schools have opted to begin teaching B1 Swedish in the 5th grade. Some municipalities have implemented enriched language programs in their schools. Most schools make use of language showering or language tastings, which are both forms of bringing new languages in small amounts to school lessons⁶. In this case, new languages may refer to not only the most common ones, such as German and French, but also to languages such as Arabic, Polish, Italian, Chinese, and Estonian, to name but a few.

Languages at the heart of learning

Pupils' motivation to study and value languages is lifted by bringing languages to each school lesson, regardless of the subject in question, as well as to pupils' everyday lives. Schools will make use of for example parallel study⁷ and multidisciplinary learning modules. For younger children in early childhood education and pre-primary education, lessons will include songs, games, and music to bring active agency into teaching.

Another important goal for many of these projects is having the whole education community, especially the guardians, involved in the process, and to convince them of the value of language learning. Schools will be working closely with parents by informing them of the changes the projects will result in, as well as of the benefits of language learning, and will also encourage them to support their children's language learning at home – briefly put, to have an active role in their children's schooling.

Perhaps the most important goal, which in effect is also the envisioned outcome of the key project for languages, is creating a language path that begins in early childhood education, lasts to end of basic and upper secondary education, and which continues all throughout a person's life. The steps taken in these projects are rudimentary and lay the foundations for creating such a path. In addition to the projects discussed above, the Finnish National Agency for Education has also granted special subsidies for in-service teacher training that will be essential for providing the daycare personnel and school teachers with the skills to support language learning. Additionally, together with the projects and in-service teacher training,

⁵ In some schools, 1st and 2nd graders will not be introduced to a foreign language but the second national language, Finnish or Swedish, in order to motivate pupils to study the second national language.

⁶ For specific definitions, see the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 (FNCC): 93–97.

⁷ Parallel study i.e. studying a single theme in two or more subjects simultaneously (FNCC 2016: 33).

universities will conduct research on early language learning pedagogy to further develop an already strong foundation for teaching and learning languages.

For more information on Finnish education, click [here](#). (Finnish Education in a Nutshell, FNAE)

For more information on the current Finnish Government program, click [here](#).

There is also a [website](#) (in Finnish) for the project.

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