



Introducing an earlier start in language teaching: Language learning to start as early as in kindergarten

Background

In Finland, pupils start their language studies at the beginning of third grade at the latest. In third grade, pupils begin studying either a foreign language or the second national language, Finnish or Swedish. Even though the current decree on the distribution of lesson hours in basic education in no way limits offering language teaching to pupils as early as in first grade, few schools have opted to do so. Before fall 2016, less than 10 % of Finnish second graders had started their language studies – for first graders, the percentage share was even smaller.

However, when the Finnish core curriculum for basic education was renewed in 2014, changes were also made to the distribution of lesson hours¹. Schools² were to move one weekly lesson hour of language teaching from lower secondary school to primary school³. Many schools chose to simply increase the amount of teaching in grades 3–6. Some schools, however, opted to make use of the opportunity handed to them, moved the weekly lesson hour to the second grade, thereby introducing an earlier start in language teaching. The changes came into effect in fall 2016 and immediately show in the statistics of that same year. In fall 2016, over a third of second graders had started their language studies – that is over three times the percentage share of pupils in the previous year. For Finnish-speaking pupils (almost 90 % of all pupils), the first language to be studied is usually English. For Swedish-speaking Finns, the first language is Finnish.

Support for language teaching from the Finnish government

While the statistics for 2016 were not to be published for yet another year, the current Finnish government led by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä formulated its Government Program for the years 2016–2019. The 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 innovative regional experiments. The aims of the project can be simplified to three main points of

¹ See the [Government decree on the distribution of lesson hours in basic education \(422/2012\)](#)

² To be more specific, the decision is usually made by the education provider. In Finland, the core curriculum functions as the norm on which education providers (mostly municipalities) draw up their local curriculum. Individual schools may also choose to draw one up, but adhering to the municipal curriculum is more common.

³ To be more specific, education providers are obligated to offer a minimum of 16 weekly lesson hours of teaching in the A1 language syllabus. Before 2016, half of the teaching was to be offered in primary school. As of fall 2016, education providers are obligated to offer nine hours of weekly lessons in primary school and seven in lower secondary school.

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 foreign language learning⁴.

The project is being carried out by the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI). EDUFI has granted special state subsidies to regional projects run by municipalities and private education providers. The objective of the projects is to find innovative ways of teaching and introducing languages to small children. Teachers have set out to experiment with more action-based and learner-centered pedagogy as well as with an aim to bring joy and motivative tasks to language teaching. Moreover, the projects have also found ways of introducing languages to pupils in pre-primary school⁵ and to very small children of ages 4–6 in kindergarten⁶. This entailed for example language showers, language tastings⁷, and language sessions in which children can play and experiment with bite-sized bits of the new language. The objective of these tastings is to spark their natural curiosity for language learning.

Regional projects: what changed

In spring 2017, EDUFI granted special state subsidies of approximately 3,9 million euros to 95 municipalities and private education providers. In spring 2018, another 4,3 million euros were granted to 118 projects, of which 83 were projects that continued work started in the first round of the key project.

The projects began in fall 2017. According to the data acquired by EDUFI, almost 25 000 first and second graders participated in early language teaching. For nearly half of the pupils the language of choice was English. The other languages were German, French, Russian, Swedish, Spanish, Finnish, and Chinese (in descending order by number of pupils).

In addition to starting language *teaching* earlier than required, the projects aimed at introducing children to different languages before starting the actual language syllabus. That is, children were provided with opportunities to *learn* languages and *experiment* with them in as early as daycare (also not excluding pre-primary or basic education) by way of language showers and language tastings. In addition, projects developed new and innovative ways of integrating language learning into the teaching of other subjects, such as P.E., music, and mathematics.

Schools have also strived to develop a school culture that promotes language awareness by bringing languages to the forefront of regular school days. In a school that is language aware, each language deserves a place in the spotlight, be it a minority or a majority language. Pupils are encouraged to use different languages in schools and to make use of the whole of their language repertoire to support learning of other languages and subjects. In the projects, in addition to integrating language learning into the teaching of other subjects, language learning may also take place outside classes. For example, in some schools even the kitchen staff has started to use different everyday words and greetings in different languages to support the pupils' language learning.

⁴ See the [article](#) on the Government Key Project for Languages on the EDUFI website.

⁵ Pre-primary school is mandatory for all pupils in Finland.

⁶ 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.

⁷ *Language tastings* refer to sessions or classes held in school in which children are introduced to different languages. Language tastings support children's growth into language awareness and may motivate them to learn languages of which they have little previous knowledge.

Tackling the pedagogy of early language teaching

One of the most notable objectives of the key project is to develop the pedagogy of language teaching. The renewed national core curriculum calls for pedagogy that promotes learner-centeredness, creativity, and interaction in language teaching, and according to what we have heard, the teachers have truly taken this to heart. Teachers have employed action-based teaching that puts the pupil in the place of an active learner. Learning takes place through language *use*, not by memorizing word lists or doing grammar exercises. In fact, in the projects most teachers have completely abandoned the use of textbooks when it comes to teaching first and second graders. Instead, they have strived to create as many opportunities as possible for the pupils to receive input as well as to practice spoken language, starting with greetings and everyday vocabulary, such as terms for family members. Especially the smaller children are introduced to languages through songs and riddles, though making use of role-play, games, and singing is encouraged also in basic education.

In the following section Topias Kähärä, a Jyväskylä-based English teacher, describes his experiences with early language teaching. During the school year 2017–2018, Kähärä taught an afternoon English class for first graders with motivation to develop their language skills before their curriculum-based education. The school he taught in, the Jyväskylä Teacher Trainee School, has decided to start teaching language teaching in the second year of instruction, with one lesson hour per week.

Teacher talk – reflections on teaching young learners

Topias Kähärä

In my afternoon English classes, I wanted to base the instruction on themes and concepts drawn from the lives of the learners. We shifted from one theme to another, returning to some later as they came up in another setting. The themes included mundane, everyday items such as family, hobbies, friends, school, animals and nature. I regularly asked the pupils about their preferences of learning; *“what would you like to learn during this year?”*. The learners often highlighted the will to learn to use the language in various settings. While most learners had less ambitious objectives (or none) for their English classes, some could already see use for the language when travelling abroad and, more interestingly, for using the language in their free time. Anecdotal examples include buying ice cream on vacation and being able to communicate with fellow players in the multiplayer sandbox game Minecraft.

Generally speaking, the learners were highly motivated, engaged and eager to learn new things about the language. This could be because taking the afternoon class was voluntary, and there were no repercussions in the event of dismissal of class. Naturally, the club-like nature of the class and the fact that the class took place in the late afternoon took a toll on some of the learners’ ability to concentrate. Thus, instruction took place through themes that fit the learner’s age, motivation and interests. Pedagogical methods to approach these themes included various discussion exercises, planning and carrying out co-operative exercises, drawing, colouring, social games and physical activities.

The impact of the English language could be seen from past experiences and language skills the learners had already acquired before attending the afternoon English class. This could be seen in two ways: when practicing new words and phrases verbally, the learners would often associate them with something they had encountered in media. Quite surprisingly (considering the learners’ level of literacy in their first year at school), these words or phrases could be both in written and spoken form. I encountered a marvelous example when introducing colours to the group: when talking about the colour “red”, an avid player of Minecraft exclaimed: *“That’s from Minecraft! There’s redstone, which makes electricity”*. In this example, the learner had not only recognized the word from their past experiences, but also separated it from a longer

word and connected the dots: the three-letter word ‘red’ means the colour red, and *redstone*, a type of ore in the game, has a reddish tint to it.

As mentioned above, my approach did not aim for the pupils to learn *about* the language, but to *use the language*. By making use of verbal feedback and instruction as well as speaking exercises as my pedagogical tools, I attempted to highlight the functional elements of language as well as the importance of multilingual language awareness. Embarrassingly surprised, I listened to the learners’ insights on similarities between English and Spanish and their independent realizations of connections between different words and phrases in their vocabulary. As a result of these experiences, one thing remains clear: seven-year-olds are capable of learning a foreign language without becoming overly confused – they just require a facilitator, a helping hand, a guide to enhance their own development.

As most of the learners in the group were just beginning to learn to read and write, the possibility to use written materials was limited. In my experience, this is a widely shared challenge in early language education. However, the use of written materials itself is not the problem. Instead I believe that focusing on spoken language in instruction while using written materials alongside as an additional support for input is thought to be somewhat arduous amongst language teachers. What needs to be done is to support these teachers with in-depth materials designed for the task at hand. Based on my experience, a considerable chunk of materials which are presented as “action-based” provided by individual teachers, global language education companies and various organisations often rely on written materials to introduce certain words, phrases or grammatical rules to be learned, and include the use of games and physical activities to “drill” elements learned in the previous lesson. In my opinion, in earlier language learning, the focus should be on learning verbally, social interaction and use of physical space – and teaching materials should reflect that.

Considering the future of Finnish second language learning, we should find and study ways of harnessing the energy and competence that young learners have in recognizing words and phrases as well as find connections between formal instruction and informal language acquisition outside school. As mentioned above, learners in this group already showed prowess in the area. In addition to this, giving feedback to learners on their development proved to be difficult during the school year – partly due to the lack of teacher support and context-appropriate materials, partly because of the club-like nature of the class. In my opinion, to ensure future early language teaching to be meaningful, teachers should be provided with materials for instruction, learner feedback and support.

From regional to national

From the very start, the Government Key Project for Languages has been seen to have had a positive impact on Finnish education. We have received exhilarated and enthusiastic feedback from pupils, teachers, and parents that have taken part in the project. New and innovative—and a tad experimental—pedagogy has been employed in schools all around Finland to find the best ways of teaching languages to young children. Partly as a result of this, in spring 2018 the Finnish government decided that as of January 2020 all pupils will start their language studies⁸ in the first grade. In addition to starting language teaching earlier, the government decided to add two weekly lesson hours to language teaching. That is, pupils will now receive a minimum of 18 weekly lesson hours of teaching in the A1 language syllabus⁹ in contrast to the previous 16 hours. As all Finnish children will now have the opportunity to start their language studies already in the first grade,

⁸ Either the second national language, Finnish or Swedish, or a foreign language.

⁹ See the [article](#) on the Government Key Project for Languages on the EDUFI website for a rough outline of the language syllabi offered to Finnish pupils.

Finland takes yet another step to ensure all Finnish children equal opportunities to receive high-quality education.

At present, the Finnish national core curriculum contains but a short passage on teaching languages in the first and second grade. The nationwide reform requires updating the core curriculum by specifying the content, objectives, and evaluation of language teaching in grades 1 and 2 – a task the Finnish National Agency for Education is responsible for. The work will begin come fall 2018, and although nothing certain can be said of the curriculum as of yet, the knowledge gained from the regional projects will certainly be taken into consideration.

It can, however, be concluded that certain themes will inevitably be present in, if not the foundation for, the core curriculum to come. The values and subsequent attitudes promoted in Finnish education will play a major role in teaching, in this case especially language and cultural awareness. Teaching in grades 1 and 2 will also lay the foundation for future language studies, in which case supporting pupils' developing language learning skills is of utmost importance, as well as developing a general positive attitude towards language learning. The curriculum will encourage teachers to employ action-based pedagogy as well as pedagogy that supports different learning styles and makes use of different senses. As to the learning environment, teaching should leave space for joy and creativity in language classes. The content of language classes will stem from the pupils' everyday life at school, home, and hobbies – this means that vocabulary will, to some extent, be also based on what is taught in other subjects, such as numbers in math, animals in environmental studies, and action verbs such as jumping in P.E.

Most importantly, the language learning that takes place in grades 1 and 2 will play an essential role in developing pupils' readiness and willingness to communicate in different languages. The goal of language teaching is that pupils gain confidence in themselves as language learners and language users, as well as understand the benefits of plurilingualism and the value of language in all learning.

Text

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