Learning outcomes in the A syllabus in English at the beginning of 7th grade in 2018
I like the elephants you have there. Monkeys was funny. Tigers was very big.

I like them lot because I like animals overall. And those birds were strange.

And that kangaroo was awesome.*

*A pupil’s answer to a writing task. The proficiency level in the answer was assessed to be the level of good knowledge and skills, A2.1.
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Objective of the evaluation

The evaluation provided answers to the following questions:

1. To what extent have the objectives of good knowledge and skills in the A syllabus in English been achieved?
2. What background factors affecting the pupils and what features in the learning environment explain the learning outcomes?

There are three key content areas related to the objectives of the A syllabus in English in grades 3–6 (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014). These are:

- Growing into cultural diversity and language awareness (C1)
- Language learning skills (C2)
- Language proficiency (C3)

Language proficiency has been further divided into three content areas, which are:

- **Text interpretation skills** (hereinafter interpretation skills, which are listening and reading comprehension)
- **Text production skills** (hereinafter production skills, which are speaking and writing)
- **Interaction skills** (oral interaction in different situations, use of communication strategies and cultural appropriateness of communication)

When the pupil's skills are assessed, all the areas of language proficiency are considered: reading and listening comprehension, speaking and writing. The level of the good knowledge and skills in these areas, required for the numerical grade 8, has been defined in the National core curriculum as proficiency level A2.1 (See The scale of evolving language proficiency p. 22–23)

In this evaluation, learning outcomes refer above all to the pupil's proficiency in English (C3). In addition, the pupil's language learning skills and language awareness were examined (C2 and C3). The pupil's opinions about learning English, its usefulness and his or her own skills were also included in language learning skills.
**Figure 1.** Learning outcomes in the A syllabus in English and the factors explaining them.
Implementation of the evaluation

In the evaluation, the learning outcomes in the A syllabus in English were examined in relation to the knowledge and skills described in the National core curriculum for basic education 2014 (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014). The evaluation differed from earlier evaluations of learning outcomes in the A syllabus in English in that it focused on the transition stage between primary school and lower secondary school: the target group was pupils who had recently started 7th grade in basic education. The same pupils will be re-assessed in spring 2021 when they are in the 9th grade. This way, longitudinal information will be obtained on pupils’ proficiency in English and its development during lower secondary school.

The evaluation material consists of pupils’ answers in tasks measuring language proficiency. Both interpretation skills (listening and reading comprehension) and production skills (speaking and writing) were required in the tasks. The tasks requiring interpretation skills included multiple choice questions, true/false questions and short open questions. The tasks requiring production skills included 3 speaking tasks and 2 writing tasks. The required lengths of the writing tasks were 30–40 and 50–60 words. More information about the speaking tasks can be found on page 10.

In addition to the tasks measuring language proficiency, surveys to which the pupils, teachers of English and headmasters of the sample schools responded were also used to gather information.

Efforts were made to ensure the participation of different stakeholders in the evaluation project in many ways throughout the evaluation. Teachers of English participated in drawing up the tasks and feedback was collected from teachers, headmasters and pupils at different stages of the evaluation project. In addition, the project had a group of experts consisting of professionals of language proficiency assessment and teacher educators.
Participants:

**132** schools
(116 Finnish-speaking and 16 Swedish-speaking)

**4,633** pupils
(4,076 from Finnish-speaking and 557 from Swedish-speaking schools)

Teachers of English and headmasters of schools

Material:

- Tasks measuring language proficiency:
  - Text interpretation skills (10 listening comprehension tasks and 10 reading comprehension tasks, both had 28 items and different types of tasks)
  - Text production skills (3 speaking tasks and 2 writing tasks)
- A questionnaire to pupils, teachers and headmasters (238 teachers and 61 headmasters responded)

The schools in the sample represented different

- regional state administrative agencies
- municipality types
- language groups
Key results

Language proficiency: Text interpretation skills, Text production skills and Interaction skills

Text interpretation skills

Pupils achieved the objectives of the content areas of Text interpretation skills on average well.

When examined by the skill components, pupils' strongest skill was listening comprehension (70 % reached at least proficiency level A2.1), and the next strongest reading comprehension (59 %).

Text production skills and Interaction skills

Pupils achieved the objectives of the content areas of Text production skills on average well. Their speaking skills were on average slightly stronger than their writing skills. In the speaking tasks, 53 % of the pupils reached at least the level of good knowledge and skills, while 52 % did so in the writing exercises.

Pupils' Interaction skills could be assessed in only one speaking task as the two other speaking tasks were monologues. A dialogue simulating an interactional speaking situation was the most difficult one for the pupils: slightly more than one half of them reached only the level of satisfactory knowledge and skills in the task (A1.3).
Figure 2. Pupils’ proficiency levels in content areas *Text interpretation skills* and *Text production skills*.

*Proficiency levels have been combined in the lower and higher end of the scale.*
All the pupils who participated in the evaluation completed the three speaking tasks.

- **Task 1** was the easiest for the pupils. A total of 64% of the pupils reached at least proficiency level A2.1 in it. In this task measuring pupils’ pronunciation, almost one half of the pupils reached a proficiency level that according to the teachers’ assessment was as high as excellent (B1.1).

- **Task 2** assessed pupils’ interaction skills. This was the most difficult speaking task for the pupils: the proficiency of slightly more than one half of the pupils remained at a satisfactory level (A1.3). However, one quarter of the pupils reached a good or excellent level of proficiency (proficiency levels A2.2 and B1.1). This task had the highest number of pupils whose knowledge and skills remained at the two lowest proficiency levels.

- **In Task 3**, pupils had to describe what they had done in the summer based on picture clues given to them. One half of the pupils reached at least the level of good knowledge and skills in the assignment.
Figure 3. Pupils’ proficiency levels in the speaking tasks.
There were two writing tasks. The easier one for pupils was Task 2, in which they had to write an invitation to a house party.

- **In Task 1**, pupils wrote a text of 30–40 words to a writing competition in which the prize was a mobile phone. A total of 43% of the pupils reached at least the level of good knowledge and skills in the task.
- **In Task 2**, pupils were asked to write an invitation to a house party to their friends. The required length was 50–60 words. Almost one half of the pupils reached at least the level of good knowledge and skills in the task.

![Graph showing pupil proficiency levels in writing tasks](image)

**Figure 4.** Pupils proficiency levels in the writing tasks.
Language learning skills and language awareness

Language learning skills, command of different learning strategies and language awareness were investigated with the help of a survey aimed at pupils. Pupils were asked how often they carried out different activities at school and in their free time. The scale used for their responses concerning language learning skills practiced at school was never–very rarely–sometimes–often–almost always and for responses concerning activities outside school never–sometimes–every week–every day.

Of the assessment and feedback practices used in English lessons in primary school, self-assessment was clearly the most familiar to the pupils. About one third of the pupils used it often or almost always, and 43% used it sometimes. Although the majority of the pupils assessed their skills at least sometimes, pupils were fairly unaccustomed to planning their own work, for example, one week ahead. Seventy-two per cent of the pupils reported that they never planned their work or did it very seldom.

Based on the pupils' responses, the most typical working methods used in English lessons in primary school are very traditional and teacher-led. For example, word tests and oral paired exercises taken from the exercise book were done often or almost always.

**Figure 5.** Language learning skills and language awareness in pupils' responses.
In their free time, pupils used English mainly by listening to music and watching video clips. Boys played computer or console games in English somewhat more than girls.

Language use focusing on understanding the language (Figure 6) was considerably more common among the pupils than participation in situations that required language production (Figure 7). Just under one fifth of the pupils participated in social media discussions every day, wrote different instant messages or spoke English with their friends. They spoke English to people they did not know extremely seldom.

**Figure 6.** Language use focusing on understanding in pupils’ responses.

**Figure 7.** Language use focusing on production in pupil's responses.
Pupil's opinions about learning English, its usefulness and their own skills

Pupils’ opinions about learning English, its usefulness and their own skills were examined with the help of 15 statements to which pupils responded using a five-step scale completely disagree—somewhat disagree—I don’t have a clear opinion about the matter—somewhat agree—completely agree.

Pupils’ opinions about their own skills in English were fairly positive: a total of 67% thought their skills in English were good and the majority found English a fairly easy subject.

Based on the statements examining the usefulness of the English language, it can be concluded that almost all pupils considered it important to know English. They believed they would need English in working life (83%), everyday situations (82%) and in their studies (81%). The topics they had studied in the English language had also mainly been useful for them.

The majority of the pupils had liked learning English: they found English a nice subject and had liked English lessons in primary school. The exercises done in English lessons had usually been interesting. Pupils’ views were divided most when they were asked whether English had been their favourite subject in primary school. For one in two pupils, English had been one of their favourite subjects at school, while one in five thought the opposite.
There were some differences in the opinions of girls and boys about learning English, their own skills and the usefulness of English. Girls found English slightly more useful than boys, but boys believed in their own skills in English slightly more than girls. In Figure 8, values 1 and 2 on the horizontal axis refer to opinions that are on average negative, value 3 to neutral opinions and values 4 and 5 to positive opinions.

**Figure 8.** Opinions about studying English, the usefulness of the English language and one’s own skills by gender.
Factors explaining the learning outcomes

Pupils’ background factors

The learning outcomes in English were most explained by the guardians’ educational background. The background factor most strongly linked with pupils’ proficiency was the mother’s educational background. Children whose mothers had a degree in higher education performed slightly better than other children in all of the skill components. The skills most depending on the mother’s educational background were the listening and reading comprehension skills.

There were only very small differences in the learning outcomes between girls and boys. Boys were slightly better in comprehension skills, girls in production skills.

The link between the time used for homework and the pupil’s proficiency in English was weak and not systematic. Pupils spent on average less than half an hour on English homework, girls slightly longer than boys.

The link between the grade in English and the pupil’s proficiency varied by skill. In speaking and writing, a slightly higher level of proficiency was required of pupils for the numerical grade 8 than in listening and reading comprehension. In Swedish-speaking schools, on average a somewhat higher level of proficiency was required for good and excellent grades than in Finnish-speaking schools.

Pupils’ background as speakers of Finnish/Swedish as a second language was not visible in their proficiency: those who had learned Finnish or Swedish as their second language performed on average equally well in the tasks as the others.
Features of the learning environment

The feature of the learning environment that most explained the learning outcomes was the school’s language of instruction.

In interpretation skills (listening and reading comprehension), the level of performance of almost one third of the pupils of Finnish-speaking schools remained lower than good proficiency, in production skills the proportion was about one fifth. The results of Swedish-speaking schools were almost half a proficiency level higher in all the skill components. Proportionally more pupils of Swedish-speaking schools reached the highest proficiency levels.

Pupils from Southern Finland performed slightly better that pupils from the other areas of regional state administrative agencies in all skill components.

When examined by the type of municipality, the proficiency in English of pupils of schools in urban municipalities was slightly better that of pupils living in densely populated municipalities and countryside.
Development recommendations

Different conclusions can be drawn and recommendations made for the development of teaching, studying and learning English on the basis of the key learning outcomes in the A syllabus in English. The most important ones have been compiled below.

The majority of the projects on starting language learning at an earlier age focus on the English language (www.oph.fi/kehittamishankkeet/kieltenkarkihanke, link in Finnish) and the consequences of this should be considered.

- The majority of the pupils who participated in the evaluation in autumn 2018 reached the good level of knowledge and skills corresponding to grade 8 at school (proficiency level A2.1) after only four years of studying. We should therefore reflect on how the current good level of proficiency is proportioned to the increased number or lesson hours. Should the level required for good proficiency at the end of 6th grade be raised?

- Information on the effects that starting language learning at an earlier age has on the learning outcomes should therefore be gathered when the first age groups that started at an earlier age reach the final stage of 6th grade. The effects of the increased number of lesson hours could then be assessed.

In the instruction of English, attention should be paid especially to supporting pupils who have difficulties in learning and studying English at the end of primary school.

- Because it is not possible to influence pupil's background factors (e.g. parents' educational background), pupils who perform weakly must be supported in their studies at the earliest possible stage.

- A division into pupils with good and weak skills in English can already be seen at the beginning of lower secondary school and it may affect pupils' plans for further education. One in five pupils who completed all the skill components did not reach a good level of knowledge and skills in any of them.

- Using English in their free time significantly improved pupils' skills. Pupils should therefore be encouraged to take advantage of the versatile material available in English also in the future, as digital technology enables diverse places for language learning regardless of where the pupil lives.
Practice in working skills that support learning English must be increased at school and assessment practices must be diversified.

- Setting objectives for one's own learning was rare in primary school, although the National core curriculum emphasises the importance of pupil's participation. Learning languages requires perseverance and diverse, continuous and encouraging feedback on one's strengths and weaknesses. Only some of pupils’ skills can be captured by written tests.
- Based on feedback received from teachers and pupils especially on the oral test, more efforts must be made to improve oral proficiency and confidence to speak. Oral skills are currently an integral part of language proficiency.
- Pupils’ positive attitude to the English language must be made use of as a valuable resource in learning. One way to do this is to give pupil's interest in the English language in their free time a visible part in the school's assessment practices and also otherwise in studying at school.

Teachers must be given the opportunity to develop their assessment literacy.

- Criterion-referenced assessment has already been used in the learning and teaching of languages for almost two decades. However, this evaluation showed that interpreting the criteria and using them in teaching is still not a natural part of the competence of all teachers of (the English) language. Considerably more attention should therefore be paid to this competence need in teacher education and in-service training of language teachers.
- The development of teachers' assessment literacy must be goal-oriented and continuous activity, in which good practices are disseminated to teachers in an easily available form. To support teachers in their assessment work, for instance, test performances in speaking and writing from learners of different ages should be gathered to be used as typical examples of different proficiency levels. In Finland, such material is not available especially as regards young learners’ knowledge and skills in English (aged between 12 and 13).
# The evolving language proficiency scale: proficiency levels A1.3, A2.1 and A2.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>proficiency level</th>
<th>interaction in different situations</th>
<th>using communication strategies</th>
<th>cultural appropriateness of communication</th>
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<th>text production skills</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1.3</td>
<td>The student is able to cope with many routine communication situations, occasionally relying on the support of his or her communication partner.</td>
<td>The student participates in communication but continues to need communication aids frequently. The student is able to react by using short verbal expressions, small gestures (such as nodding), sounds, or other kinds of minimal feedback. The student needs to ask for clarification or repetition very frequently.</td>
<td>The student is able to use the most common expressions that are part of respectful language use in many routine social contacts.</td>
<td>The student understands written texts and slow speech that include simple, familiar vocabulary and expressions with the support of the context. The student is able to find the simple information he or she needs in a short text.</td>
<td>The student knows a limited amount of memorised short expressions, key vocabulary, and basic level sentence structures. The student is able to discuss everyday issues important for him or her using a limited resource of expressions, to write simple messages, and to pronounce expressions that have been practised in a comprehensible way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A2.1</td>
<td>The student is able to exchange thoughts or information in familiar, everyday situations and can occasionally maintain a communication situation.</td>
<td>The student increasingly participates increasingly in communication, resorting to non-verbal expressions less often. The student needs to ask for clarification or repetition quite frequently and is somewhat able to apply the expressions used by the communication partner in his or her own communication.</td>
<td>The student can manage short social situations. The student is able to use the most common polite greetings and terms of address as well as to politely express requests, invitations, proposals, apologies etc. and to respond to these.</td>
<td>The student understands written texts and clear speech that include simple, familiar vocabulary and expressions. The student understands the core contents of short and simple messages that are of interest to him or her and the main points of a predictable text containing familiar vocabulary. The student is capable of very simple reasoning supported by the context.</td>
<td>The student is able to describe everyday and concrete topics and those important to him or her using simple sentences and concrete vocabulary. The student masters an easily predictable basic vocabulary and many key structures. The student knows how to apply some basic rules of pronunciation, also in expressions that have been practised.</td>
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Table 1. The evolving language proficiency scale: proficiency levels A1.3, A2.1 and A2.2.

*Proficiency level A2.1 corresponds to good knowledge and skills at the end of 6th grade.

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<td>A2.2</td>
<td>The student is able to cope with many types of everyday communication situations reasonably well and is increasingly capable of taking initiative in communication situations.</td>
<td>The student increasingly participates in communication, using set phrases when asking for clarifications of key words. The student needs to ask for clarification or repetition from time to time. The student uses, for instance, a close concept or a more general concept when he or she does not know a more specific one (dog/animal or house/cottage).</td>
<td>The student is able to use simple language for the most central purposes, such as the exchange of information and appropriate expression of opinions and attitudes. The student is able to have a polite conversation using common expressions and basic-level communication routines.</td>
<td>The student is able to follow the main points of a clear-cut, non-fiction spoken text very roughly, frequently recognises the topic of the conversation around him or her, and understands the main ideas in a standard language text or slow speech including familiar vocabulary. The student is able to deduce the meanings of unfamiliar words based on the context.</td>
<td>The student is able to list and describe things that are typical for his or her age group and related to daily life using ordinary vocabulary and some idiomatic expressions as well as basic and sometimes slightly more demanding structures. The student knows how to apply some basic rules of pronunciation, also in expressions that have not been practised.</td>
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The report (in Finnish) can be downloaded from FINEEC’s website.