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Finnish as a second language syllabus learning outcomes in the 9th grade of basic education in 2015

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In April 2015, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) carried out an assessment of the learning outcomes in the mother tongue and literature subject of Finnish as a second language (S2) syllabus at the end of basic education. The purpose of the assessment was to produce reliable information on the achievement of the objectives of the S2 syllabus included in the national core curriculum (FNBE 2004), as well as on educational equality and the pupils' eligibility for further studies. Teachers' assessment practices were also explored.

The criteria for receiving the grade 8 in the final assessment of the S2 syllabus have been defined for the pupil's language proficiency, cultural skills and language learning skills. The main priority in this assessment was the pupils' language proficiency. In the scale for language proficiency levels (hereinafter: proficiency scale), good proficiency means attaining levels B1.1–B1.2. B is the reference level for the language skills of an independent user. B1.1 refers to functional basic proficiency, and B1.2 refers to fluent basic proficiency, based on which the language user copes in various everyday communication situations.

The proficiency scale is divided into four skill components, which were used to assess the pupils' language proficiency in reading comprehension, listening comprehension, writing and speaking. Information on other assessment objectives was gathered through assignments for measuring language skills and background surveys.

The information gathered from the pupils included their time in school in Finland, their linguistic background and use of linguistic resources, their socioeconomic background, and studying under the S2 syllabus. The survey for teachers was aimed at examining the practical implementation of the S2 syllabus and identifying the factors affecting the assessment, and the final assessment and grade in particular. The background survey for principals focused on examining the school's ability to act as a learning environment that promotes diversity.

Nationwide census type of data was collected for the assessment because it was known that the number of pupils was small in relation to the total number of 9th grade pupils. The assessment included 1 530 pupils from 242 schools. The assessment also included pupils who had been granted intensified or special support. Also participating in the assessment were pupils of the S2 syllabus from schools in which the language of instruction is other than Finnish. All the pupils completed the comprehension tests and writing tests, and a comprehensive internal sampling was carried out at the schools in order to assess the participants' learning outcomes in speaking.

Half of the pupils participating in the assessment had completed all grades of basic education in Finland. More than 14 per cent of the participating pupils had studied in a Finnish comprehensive school for 6–8 years, nearly one quarter for 3–5 years, and slightly over nine per cent for 1–2 years only. Nearly 40 per cent of the pupils were born in Finland.

Almost one fifth of the pupils were Russian speaking. The other large language groups were Somali, Estonian and Arabic. More than 40 per cent of the pupils felt that the language in which their proficiency was the strongest was Finnish, while an equal percentage share felt it was their mother tongue. Finnish was the strongest language especially for pupils who had completed all grades of basic education in Finland.

Based on the assessment, the language proficiency of the participating pupils was fairly good. In the assessment, 87 per cent of the pupils attained levels B1.1–B1.2, meaning a good proficiency level or higher. On average, the pupils' learning outcomes ranked in the proficiency level B2.1. Only 13 per cent of the pupils ranked in proficiency level A which, according to the proficiency scale, means that they are able to engage in limited communication in the most familiar situations (A1.3 or lower) or in immediate social interaction and brief narration (level A2). With respect to the different areas of language, the pupils' comprehension skills were stronger than their production skills. In reading comprehension, slightly over 90 per cent of the pupils attained the good proficiency level or higher, while the corresponding number for listening comprehension was 84 per cent. The proportion of pupils who attained the good proficiency level or higher was 73 per cent in writing and 74 per cent in speaking.

The learning outcomes of boys and girls were on average almost equally good, with no significant differences in their proficiency. The good proficiency level or higher was attained by 87 per cent of the girls and 86 per cent of the boys. However, from the total number of boys and girls, the proportion of boys who attained proficiency level A was slightly higher than the corresponding share among the girls. Statistically, there was a significant difference between the learning outcomes of boys and girls in each category. The biggest difference was in writing, in which the average proficiency level was B1.1 for boys and B1.2 for girls.

By AVI area (i.e. the operating areas of Regional State Administrative Agencies), the average learning outcomes of the pupils fell between proficiency levels B1.1 and B1.2. In all the AVI areas, the girls outperformed the boys, but only by a small margin. In the AVI area of Northern Finland, the average proficiency level of girls and boys was B1.1, while in the rest of Finland it was B1.2. The difference between the learning outcomes of girls and boys was the greatest in the AVI area of Eastern Finland, where the average proficiency level was B2.1 for girls and B1.2 for boys. From

among the pupils studying in the Helsinki capital region, 85 per cent attained or exceeded the good proficiency level. On average, the pupils' learning outcomes ranked in the proficiency level B1.2. In other parts of Finland, the good proficiency level was attained or exceeded by 78 per cent of the pupils, and the average proficiency level was also B1.2.

From among the pupils participating in the assessment, 66 per cent received some degree of support during the 9th grade. Of such pupils, 61 per cent received general support for their studies, 23 per cent received intensified support, and 15 per cent were given special support. Among these groups, the most typical proficiency levels were B2.1 for pupils receiving general support, B1.2 for pupils receiving intensified support, and B1.1 for pupils receiving special support. 2.5 per cent of the pupils had an individualised S2 syllabus. Their average proficiency level was A2.2. 53 per cent of the pupils only attained level A proficiency, but 47 per cent attained level B1.1 or higher.

The learning outcomes of the pupils were best explained by the number of years they had attended school. The average proficiency level of pupils who had completed all the grades of basic education in Finland was B2.1. The proficiency level of pupils who had attended school for 6–8 years or 3–5 years was B1.2. The proficiency level of pupils who had started school during the final years of basic education was B1.1. The learning outcomes of pupils who were only able to attain proficiency level A were best explained by the low number of years they had attended school. From among the pupils who had attended school in Finland for 1–2 years, 46 per cent were only able to attain proficiency level A, as did 25 per cent of the pupils who had only studied for 3–5 years.

The learning outcomes of pupils who had completed all the grades of basic education in Finland were best in comprehension skills and speaking (B2.1), but they also attained the good proficiency level in writing. The learning outcomes of pupils who had attended school in Finland for 6–8 years were similarly stronger in comprehension skills (B2.1) than in production skills (B1.2). The reading comprehension skills of pupils who had attended school in Finland for 3–5 years was at proficiency level B1.2, while their listening comprehension and production skills were at level B1.1. The production skills of pupils who started school in Finland during the final years of basic education ranked at proficiency level A2.2, while their listening comprehension (B1.1) was at a lower level compared to their reading comprehension (B1.2).

The pupils who performed best in the assessment were the Estonian, Russian, Chinese and English-speaking pupils, regardless of how many years they had attended school in Finland. The factors explaining the low-ranking learning outcomes of pupils from different language groups were the differences in their socioeconomic background and how well they succeeded in school in general. The differences between the learning outcomes of different language groups were meaningful but not significant.

37 per cent of the pupils had applied for general upper secondary school and 37 per cent for vocational education and training through the joint application system. Four per cent of the pupils had applied for voluntary additional basic education and three per cent in total for preparatory education for general upper secondary school or preparatory training for vocational upper secondary education and training. The average proficiency level of pupils who applied for general upper secondary school was B2.1, while the level of those who applied for vocational education and

training was B1.2. The average proficiency level of pupils who applied for preparatory education for general upper secondary school was B1.1, while the level of those who applied for preparatory training for vocational upper secondary education and training was A2.2. The average proficiency level of pupils who applied for voluntary additional basic education was B1.2. This information was not available for nearly 10 per cent of the pupils and a total of 9.5 per cent of the pupils did not apply for or were not admitted to any type of upper secondary education through the joint application system.

The pupils' socioeconomic background was also one of the factors explaining their learning outcomes. Pupils with the highest socioeconomic background attained, on average, the proficiency level B2.1. Pupils with a lower socioeconomic background attained, on average, the proficiency level B1.1. The connection between the socioeconomic background of the pupils and their learning outcomes was significant, regardless of how many years they had attended school in Finland. An exception to this was pupils who had attended school in Finland for 9–10 years.

From among pupils who studied the S2 syllabus in Finnish as a mother tongue lessons without differentiation, no less than 98 per cent attained a good proficiency level or higher. Most of these pupils had completed all the grades of basic education in Finland. The average proficiency level of such pupils was significantly better (B2.1) compared to pupils studying in separate groups (B1.2) or pupils studying in Finnish as a mother tongue lessons by way of differentiation (B1.2).

The learning outcomes of the pupils corresponded well with their S2 final grades; this was especially true of level B2 pupils. 87 per cent of the pupils who received the grade 10 ranked in the proficiency level B2.2 or higher, and 80 per cent of the pupils who received the grade 9 ranked in the proficiency levels B2.1 and B2.2. 74 per cent of the pupils who received the grade 8 ranked in the proficiency levels B1.2 and B2.1, and, therefore, according to this assessment, would have been eligible for receiving a higher grade on the basis of their learning outcomes.

The factors affecting the final assessments of teachers the most from among the learning objectives set for comprehension skills in the S2 syllabus were the ability to comprehend various texts on general topics and face-to-face discussions. With respect to production skills, the teachers put emphasis on the ability to write texts related to the topic of instruction and coping in various speech situations in school context. The final assessment was also affected by the continuous observation of the pupils' progress, the criteria of the proficiency scale, and summative and formative tests. In addition, the pupil's motivation to learn Finnish was also given a lot of weight in the assessment. The teacher's approach proved to be gentle specifically in the final assessment of pupils who performed the weakest in this assessment. The socioeconomic background of a pupil or the number of years they had attended school in Finland did not provide any explanation to the formation of the grade given by the teacher.

The schools participating in the assessment appeared to have the ability to act as learning environments that support ethnic and cultural diversity; the majority of them had clear anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies in place, as well as an atmosphere favourable to cultural and linguistic diversity. The challenges and benefits related to multiculturalism at school as such did not have an effect on which proficiency level the pupils attained. On the other hand, at the schools

in which pupils with an immigrant background had high or very high challenges for learning, the average proficiency level was statistically significantly lower compared to schools in which there was less of such challenges for learning.

The results of the assessment showed that, based on the criteria of the proficiency scale, the pupils' Finnish language skills were good. However, already in the upper grades of comprehensive school, the concepts and text skills of various subjects require more from the pupils than is required by the criteria of the proficiency scale, and language proficiency in various disciplines is emphasised in upper secondary education. The final assessment criteria included in the new S2 national core curriculum have been derived directly from the objectives of instruction and, in light of the results of the S2 assessment, a final assessment based on the criteria enables forming a more realistic view of a pupil's learning outcomes at the end of basic education.

Based on the assessment results, the school's focus must be on selecting the mother tongue and literature subject syllabus that best meets the pupil's needs, and allocating the S2 resource specifically to those pupils who do not have sufficient linguistic capabilities to study in Finnish as a mother tongue and literature syllabus. Support must be directed especially to ensuring the continuation of studies of pupils who started in basic education at a later stage in their life. In addition, co-operation among the teachers of different syllabuses of the mother tongue and literature subject and subject teachers must be standardised in order to achieve the objective of language awareness in education as a whole and within the schools' operating culture.