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A total of 4,633 pupils from 132 schools participated in the evaluation of learning outcomes in the A syllabus of English in autumn 2018. Of these pupils, 2,132 were girls and 2,101 boys<sup>3</sup>, while 4,076 of them attended a Finnish-speaking school and 557 a Swedish-speaking school.

The evaluation focused on pupils who had just started grade 7 of comprehensive school and it assessed their proficiency in the English language at the transition phase between primary and lower secondary school. The proficiency of the same pupils and the development of their skills will be re-assessed in 2021 when they are in the final stage of basic education in grade 9.

In this evaluation, learning outcomes refer to three things: pupils' language proficiency, language-learning skills, and pupils' opinions on their own skills, the usefulness of English and liking English.

In the evaluation, pupil's proficiency in English was measured in the content areas Text interpretation skills (listening and reading comprehension) and Text production skills (speaking and writing), described in the National core curriculum for basic education (EDUFI 2014). The content area of Interaction skills could only be measured to a limited extent. Based on the results, pupils' strongest skill component was listening comprehension, in which 70% of pupils achieved at least the proficiency level A2.1. The next strongest skill component was reading comprehension (59%), then speaking (53%) and writing (52%). Pupils' interpretation skills were on average slightly stronger than their productive skills.

The proficiency level A2.1, which corresponds to a **good level of performance** and the school grade 8 on a scale of 4–10, was achieved in interpretation skills by 70% of the pupils. The corresponding proportion in language production skills was 61%.

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3 37 pupils: other gender; 73 did not want to say, 290 did not respond

An **excellent level of performance** was achieved in the interpretation assignments by 44% and in the language production assignments by 36% of the pupils. The interpretations skills of about one in three pupils and the language production skills of four in ten pupils remained at a **satisfactory** level.

The most typical proficiency level attained by pupils in the listening comprehension, speaking and writing assignments was A2.1, which corresponds to the first stage of basic proficiency described in the National core curriculum for basic education (2014). In the reading comprehension assignments, the most typical proficiency level was one level lower, and thus remained at the level of functional elementary proficiency.

The **background factor** most strongly connected 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 that most depended on the mother's educational background was reading comprehensions skills. On the other hand, there were few differences in the proficiency in English between girls and boys. The only, minor differences between the sexes were seen in the reading comprehension assignments, in which the proportion of boys was slightly larger at the highest proficiency levels than that of girls. Similarly, girls accounted for a slightly larger proportion of pupils at lower competence levels.

The school's language of instruction was the feature of the **learning environment** that had the strongest connection with proficiency. The better proficiency of pupils of Swedish-speaking schools was visible in all of the skill components because their results were almost half a proficiency level higher than the results of pupils of Finnish-speaking schools.

There were small differences in pupils' results when examined by **region or type of municipality**: pupils from southern Finland performed slightly better in all of the skill components. In the comparisons by type of municipality, pupils from schools in urban municipalities performed slightly better than pupils living in densely populated municipalities and rural municipalities.

Of the **language-learning skills**, an interest in the English language outside school was the skill most strongly connected with pupils' results. The use of English focusing on understanding the language (e.g. listening to music, watching video clips) explained a difference of about half a proficiency level in the differences in performance between pupils.

The **opinions** expressed by pupils regarding their own skills, the usefulness of the English language and English studies were on average positive. English was above all regarded as a useful school subject. Pupils' opinion on their own proficiency was the factor that was most strongly connected with the results they achieved in the different skill components; in speaking skills the perceived usefulness of the English language was also connected. Sixty-seven per cent of the pupils considered their skills in English to be good.

Part of the variation in pupils' performance was explained by differences between schools, which were considerable especially in the speaking assignments (18.5%). However, the differences in pupils' performance could not be explained in this evaluation by any individual variable at the

school level, such as the influence of the teacher, as some of the seventh-graders participating in the evaluation had just changed schools and their English teacher had changed when moving from primary school to lower secondary school.

In the light of the results, the development needs in the teaching of the English language are above all related to practicing speaking skills in situations that are meaningful to pupils while also taking advantage of the opportunities provided by modern technology. The results showed that seventh-graders are aware of the importance of knowing English and use English a lot in their free time, especially in situations in which the focus is on understanding the language, but less often to speak to their friends. Therefore, more diverse ways of making use of pupils' independent interest in the English language as a part of teaching and assessment of competence should be considered.

It is worth noting that although the majority of the sample pupils achieved the proficiency corresponding to school grade 8, one in five pupils did not achieve proficiency level A2.1 in any of the skill components. It should therefore be considered how weaker pupils could be supported so that proficiency in English would not be polarised in lower secondary school for example on the basis of pupil's plans for further studies (Härmälä, Huhtanen and Puukko 2014).

**Key words** A syllabus of English, evaluation of learning outcomes, grade 7, educational equity