

National Syllabuses for Foreign Languages in Finland: Tradition and Reform

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide a selective review of the development of (foreign/second) language curricula in Finland. Finland presents an interesting case for a number of reasons. The country is officially bilingual with Finnish and Swedish as the two national languages and with Sami enjoying a status of regionally recognized language in some parts in northern Finland. Finland has also granted the status of minority language to some languages, which provides some (limited) recognition to them according to the provisions of the Council of Europe language Charters.

Another reason why language education in Finland is of comparative interest is the fact that Finland has had a centuries-long history of being part of the Swedish kingdom and a roughly a one hundred years' history as the Grand Duchy of the Russian empire. This can be expected to be reflected in some way in language education.

Since the beginning of formal education, the education and language education provision followed the European and Swedish patterns in the medieval times with Latin enjoying a strong position. With the strengthening of the role of the majority language, Finnish, from the middle of the 1800's and the fact that that was also the period of Russian Grand Duchy, some more country-specific features emerged in the language education provision.

During this early period of language education, there was strong continuity in the syllabuses, usually covering a period of several decades. A good example in more recent times is the 1941 syllabus for junior and senior secondary schools. The next major reform was only in 1971, made in order to harmonize the syllabuses of the receding junior secondary school and the strongly advancing comprehensive school.

It is obvious that international trends were always observed in the development of the syllabuses, and the impact of the Council of Europe's modern language projects has been strong since the mid 1960s.

Språk, lärande och utbildning i sikte

Festskrift tillägnad professor Kaj Sjöholm

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Role of the Curricula in Language Education

I have argued elsewhere (Takala 1979) that, as language teaching serves basic communication needs, and as its importance tends to increase all the time, it is becoming more and more acquiring the characteristics of any institutionalized process. This means, among other things, that language education, that language teaching is becoming and needs to become more and more organized, which means that roles and role relationships are specified in greater detail. Language teaching becomes more systematized, which means that tasks are also specified. Language teaching becomes more systematized, which means that language teaching is no longer dependent on particular individuals.

Language teaching is, consequently, not only the activity of individual teachers but it is a system of activities by several actors/agents. In order to understand it as a system, we need to realize its boundaries, its central purposes and its level in a larger context. We must be aware of its various subsystems and of the

An integral part of the whole system is evaluation and feedback. Evaluation data are mainly collected from the teaching and learning levels and this feedback information is used at all other levels as well. The level of the curriculum is a key utiliser of feedback information. Indeed, curriculum evaluation is an important part of informed educational policy making. This does not mean, however, that evaluation does not need to focus on other levels as well.

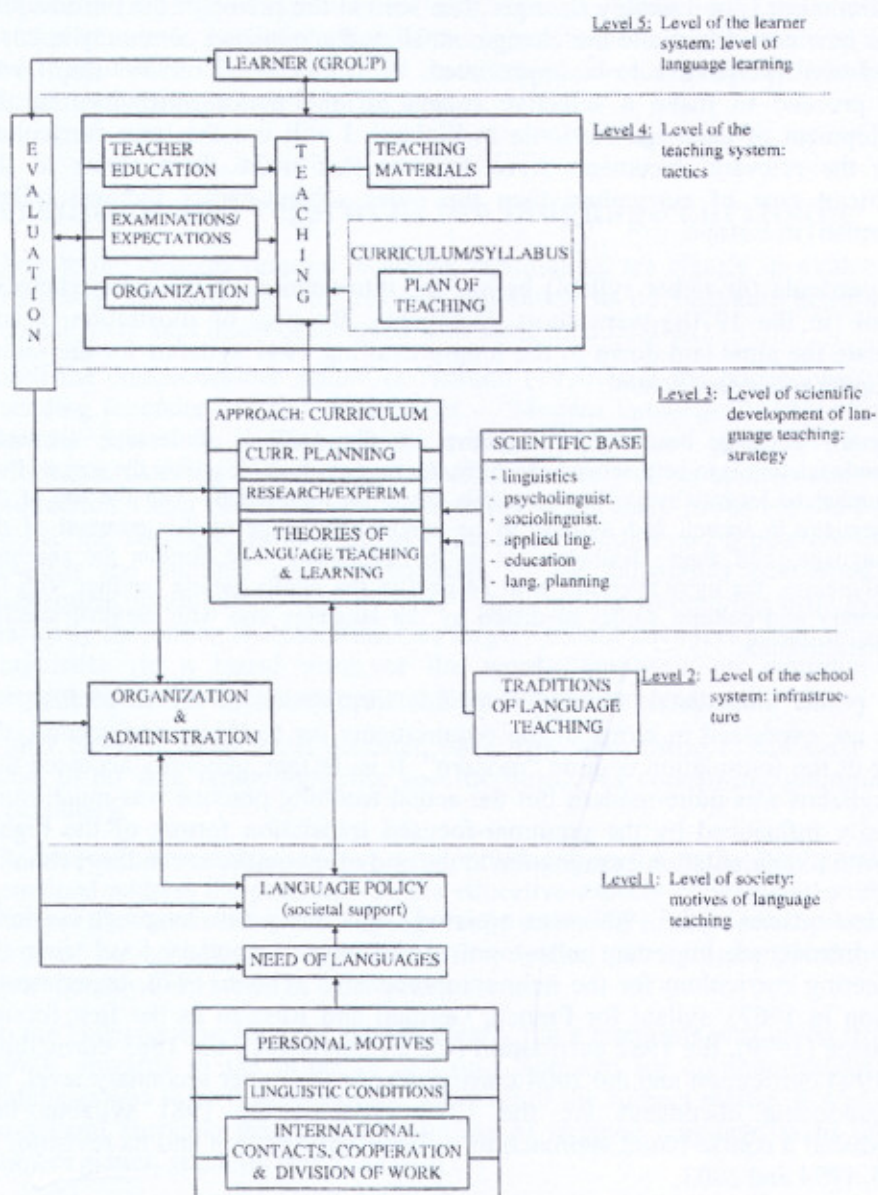


Figure 1. General model of language education (Takala 1979)

Some general trends

New curricula are not produced in a vacuum: they are always built on the basis of the previous curricula. Thus they represent both tradition (continuity) and reform (change). It is likely that especially the teaching profession, which implements the curricula, tends to overestimate the scope of every reform, i.e. the continuities are probably stronger than seen at the period of the introduction of the new curriculum and the changes smaller. Recognizing continuity needs a longer-term perspective to be appreciated. With this initial observation, I will now proceed to make a selective review of the major milestones in the development of language curricula in Finland. I will use the term curriculum since the relevant documents have features that make them closer to the American type of curriculum than the older subject-matter focused syllabi (Lehrplan) in Europe.

The curricula (or rather syllabi) before the introduction of the comprehensive school (in the 1970s) were short documents. By way of illustration, I will translate the aims laid down in the long-prevailing 1941 syllabus for the junior and upper secondary school.

In all language teaching, irrespective of the number of lessons available, pronunciation is to be practiced carefully. As far as is feasible within the scope of the number of lessons available, the pupils are to be familiarized with the use of the language in speech and writing, to be taught knowledge of the grammar of the language, and their vocabulary is to be expanded. The further the teaching progresses, the more attention is to be paid to the pupils getting familiar with the literary and cultural values mediated by the language and with national specific characteristics.

Two points immediately emerge from this formulation of the aims: first, the aims are expressed in terms of the requirements for teaching, and second, the tenor of the formulation is quite "modern". It is, in fact, generally accepted that the syllabus was quite modern but the actual teaching practice was much more strongly influenced by the grammar-focused translation format of the highly influential matriculation examination at the end of the senior secondary school.

The last quarter of the 1900s was a period when many new language curricula were introduced. Important milestones at the lower secondary level were the pioneering curriculum for the new comprehensive school (1970, experimental version in 1967), syllabi for French, German and Russian as the first foreign language (1979), the 1982 curriculum (for all languages), the 1985 curriculum, the 1994 curriculum and the 2004 curriculum. At the upper secondary level, the corresponding documents are the 1971 syllabus, the 1981 syllabus that introduced a course-based approach to syllabus construction and its revisions in 1985, 1994 and 2003.

The 1979 curricula drew on (experimental, unofficial) curricula drafted in the middle of the decade (VIKKE 1976) and they incorporated the functional-notional principles of Council of Europe. Similarly, the thematically defined course-based curriculum of 1981 drew on development work, which drafted a more situationally/(task)-based syllabus (LULU, 1974/1975, unpublished).

LULU also explicitly and systematically utilized ideas developed in the "performance objectives" movement.

Language curricula have reflected not only international developments (especially the Council of Europe programmes, the EU Lingua programme) but also more general educational policy decisions. Such policy decisions were, among other items, the decision to discontinue the streaming system, which was applied in language education in the comprehensive school until the mid 1980s. A similar case is the introduction of the course-based curriculum model also in the mid 1980s. This meant the breaking down of language study into thematically defined courses of 38 lessons.

Tradition and reform in the language curricula

Despite the changes referred to above, continuities are clearly in evidence. In reforming the curricula, features that continued to be relevant, important or topical, were kept intact or included with some modification.

Both the comprehensive school curriculum (1970) and the curriculum for the receding secondary school (Nykykielet – "Modern languages", 1971) defined, for the first time in Finland, the commonly accepted goals of language education: listening and reading comprehension as well as spoken and written production. Other persisting goals introduced in the early 1970s are the courage to use the language, acquisition of cultural knowledge and a positive attitude towards the cultures and the speakers of the languages concerned. The subsequent formulations vary to some extent but the underlying principles are basically the same. The modifications largely reflect advances made in applied linguistics (in a broad sense of the word): emphasis on communicative competence, cultural competence and inter-cultural competence.

Other changes which have persisted once they were made in the early 1980s have to do with removing rather specific objectives concerning grammar and vocabulary.

By contrast, new emphases that were introduced in the early 1980s and have remained address the emphasis on the educative aspects of language study, i.e. the specific contribution that language study can make to the overall educational aims of the school. This aspect was first spelled out in some detail but has subsequently been stated in more general terms.

In the language-specific goal setting, clearly more emphasis was given from the 1980s onwards to the principle of using language for communication. This emphasis was to be reflected in the selection of the subject matter. It was stated in several curricula that, in the definition of targeted language skills and the subject matter, attention was to be paid to:

- Communicative tasks: for what purposes the pupils/students had to be able to use the language and what they were able to do with the language
- Language use situations: in which situations (roles, contexts) the pupils/students were to be able to use the language

- Topics and notions: what meanings, concepts and topics the pupils/students were to be able to understand and express
- Vocabulary: how many and what kind of words and phrases the pupils/students were to be able to understand and use (target vocabulary size was specified until the early 1980s)
- Grammar: what structures the pupils/students were to be able to understand and use (principles for selection were presented but detailed grammar lists have been left out since the early 1980s)

The 1994 curriculum introduced, as largely new goals, the development of study skills and self-evaluation skills as well as assuming responsibility for one's own learning. A new aspect was also the goal of pupils/students being able to experience language study as providing meaningful and rewarding experiences and intellectual stimulus.

The courses of the senior secondary school were defined in fairly general terms. All compulsory courses had identical names.

New curricula

The new curricula (taking effect in 2004 and 2005) have been made more specific than the 1994 curricula.

An important change is the selective utilization and adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). During the construction of the curriculum, it was noted that despite the long-term emphasis on communicative competence, there was no clear progression indicated in the curricula. To remedy this problem, a proficiency scale was made a part of the new curricula, adapted from the Framework. Target levels are specified for the end of grade 6, the end of grade 9 and the end of senior secondary school.

The proficiency levels refer to the themes, tasks, texts and conditions/constraints of communication. In terms of productive skills, reference is made to language resources, fluency and accuracy.

Table 1. Target levels (2004) for languages at the end of the comprehensive school (grade 9)

Language	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
A-English (7-year course)	B1.1	A2.2	B1.1	A2.2
A- German (7-year course)	A2.2	A2.2	A2.2	A2.2
A- French (7-year course)	A2.2	A2.2	A2.2	A2.2
A- Russian (7-year course)	A2.1	A2.1	A2.1	A2.1
A-Swedish (7-year course)	B1.1	A2.2	A2.2	A2.1.2
B-Swedish (3-year course)	A2.1	A1.3	A2.1	A1.3

Table 2. Target levels (2004) for languages at the end of the upper secondary school

Language and syllabus	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
English/A (10-year course)	B2.1	B2.1	B2.1	B2.1
Other A-languages (10 yrs)	B1.1- B1.2	B1.1	B1.2	B1.1- B1.2
English/ B2 (5-year course)	B1.1	B1.1	B1.1	B1.1
Other B2-languages (5 yrs)	A2.2	A2.1- A2.2	A2.2- B1.1	A2.1- A2.2
English/B3 (3-year course)	B1.1	A2.2	B1.1	B1.1
Other B3-languages (3 yrs)	A2.1- A2.2	A2.1	A2.1- A2.2	A2.1
Swedish/A (10-year course)	B2.1	B1.2	B2.1	B1.2
Swedish/B1 (6-year course)	B1.2	B1.1	B1.2	B1.1

Apart from the inclusion of the proficiency scale to make progression more visible, the new curricula bring forth learning strategies as an interesting new element. Thus, in the new curricula specific goals for learning strategies are defined.

Discussion

Hopefully the proficiency level approach will be increasingly used in the way shown above as a means of specifying learning goals, of assessing and reporting in a more transparent manner what level individuals have attained in their "interlanguage" and what level is attained in different educational institutions (Figuearas et al., 2004). It seems desirable that the traditional norm-referenced grading practice will increasingly be supplemented and perhaps ultimately replaced by criterion-referenced grading, thus linking the Finnish grades to an internationally recognised proficiency level system. Currently the best proficiency level system is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) and Finland has taken a major step in applying some of its principles in the new language curricula.

Related to this, the grading system needs to be reviewed. The current practice of awarding only one "omnibus" grade for the language proficiency attained and the attainment of other curricular goals is clearly highly problematic. There are all indications that a profile of attainment is conceptually more justified. In practice, the portfolio currently offers the best opportunity to do this. It also allows a flexible use of self-assessment and self-reflection, recording a personal history of language use, exhibiting one's concrete "products" in using the language. It makes the charting of progress visible. Another clear challenge in future curriculum development is a more explicit definition of the cultural aspect of language study.

Overall, I believe that the language curricula in schools need to be multidimensional, in other words they need to take proper account of a number of potentially important components in defining the goals of language education (cf. Brown 1995). This is illustrated in the sketch below. In some cases one "node" may be given prominence for a certain reason. To give an example, "a task-based" curriculum may be deemed appropriate in some context whereby the task would be the primary determinant in defining the curriculum and the other "nodes" would be defined accordingly.

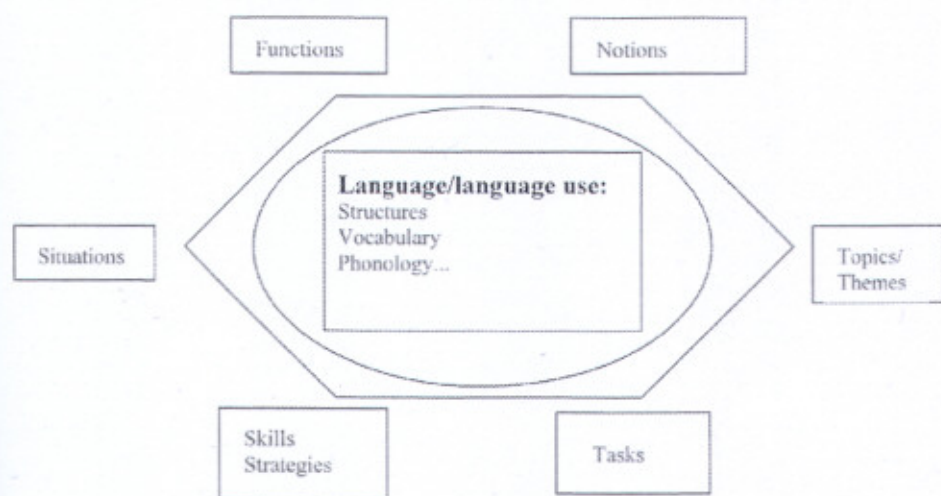


Figure 2. Model for developing language curricula

As a final challenge I would like to propose that it would be desirable to promote the development of language curricula by arranging national symposia, perhaps bi-annually, where research and development work on curricula is presented and discussed. This would facilitate the systematic use of ongoing research information to be utilized in the development of the key steering instrument in language education.

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