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Reflections on the development and impact of language education in Finland

Abstract

The article outlines some aspects of the development of foreign language provision in Finland relating it to a long historical perspective but focusing on developments during the past few years. Great changes in language teaching provision made FL study a regular part of every pupil's and student's study programme. This quantitative expansion in terms of people studying languages has been partly counteracted by cuts in study hours and increased electivity, which has led to an undesirable narrowing down of the individuals' language repertoire. In recent years, language education has been strongly influenced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which has made itself felt in curriculum development and assessment. Language examinations are being increasingly linked to the CEF. If this trend becomes common in Europe, and if the relating of curricula and examinations is properly done, the transparency and comparability of language education will be greatly enhanced in Europe, creating a kind of Language Euro currency.

Some introductory remarks

Finland is an interesting setting for a discussion of language education. The nation is relatively young as an independent political unit (since 1917) and thus has been fully sovereign to exercise the right to determine language policy for less than a hundred years. Some eight hundred years of being part of the Swedish kingdom has left a profound cultural legacy which probably is not fully appreciated, and probably less so at present than before the recent rapid internationalization and globalization started to make an impact. My own experience suggests that the fruitful Nordic co-operation in the field of education and culture in the 1960s and 1970s is much less intensive in these days. The Swedish rule was followed by a hundred years of Russian rule, during which Finland enjoyed the status of a grand duchy, with largely continued cultural and educational autonomy.

During the long Swedish rule, Latin and Swedish were for a long time the languages of education and administration. Finnish started to get official recognition in the latter half of the 19th century. In the final stages of the Russian rule there were measures taken to strengthen the role of Russian in education, language education and

administration but the period was probably too short to have any major impact, in part due to the opposition that the attempted Russification policy engendered.

After the gaining of independence, Finnish and Swedish were ratified as the national languages and linguistic rights were spelled out in detail. An important aspect was the principles that regulate the linguistic status of the local government units.

In the first 4-5 decades of independence the educational system followed the traditional European model of tracking: a small minority obtained lower and upper secondary education whereas the majority only received elementary education. This meant that a small minority had a substantial part of their curriculum devoted to languages whereas the majority did not receive any L2 instruction.

Since the mid 1960s, however, modern language study gradually started to enter the programme of all pupils and by the end of the 1970s the whole age group had studied at least two L2s when they graduated from the 9-year comprehensive school. At present *all* persons between 16 and 40/45 have had formal instruction in at least one foreign language (in addition to the other national language). A substantial part of the older age groups have also had similar education.

Issues and trends in modern language provision in Finland

Language education has a long history. There are documents referring to it, which cover a period of some 2000 years. The history has been one of pendulum shifts from a more formalistic to a more functional orientation (Kelly 1976, Laihiala-Kankainen 1993, Takala 1979). Changes have been largely responses to changes in patterns of communication and to criticism about ineffective and/or irrelevant language instruction. Familiar names such as Erasmus, Luther, Locke, Milton and Pestalozzi have written about "proper" ways of teaching languages. A classical case is the pamphlet *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren!* It was published by Wilhelm Viëtor under the pseudonym: *Ein Beitrag zur Überbürdungsfrage von Quousque Tandem* (Heilbronn: Gebr. Henninger, 1882¹), which reflects the impatience of the Reform movement representatives concerning the unsatisfactory state of languages education. (There is intertextual reference to Cicero's famous speech in 63 against Catilina, which contains the phrase „Quousque tandem abutere patientia nostra?“)

Thus it is obvious that language education has recurrently been perceived to a problem and a burden. It was so also in Finland up to the mid 1900s: a substantial part of pupils/students had problems in languages and had to do make-up work in the summer to try to pass a test, which then entitled them to be promoted to the next grade. Many did not pass, which meant that they had to repeat a grade. There were a number who repeated the same grade twice and then had to leave the school. Some sought access to another school but many interrupted their education. For the majority of pupils, the 8-year secondary school was thus in practice a 9-year school. Grade-repetition was especially common in the second grade as students were not allowed to proceed to the final grade when one would have taken the tough matriculation examination (Takala 1998).

All of this had as a consequence that languages were considered difficult subjects (mathematics had the same reputation). This perception was reflected in the public discussion related to the introduction of the comprehensive school in Finland. Doubts were commonly expressed about the ability of the whole age group to learn foreign languages. In the early years of experimentation with the comprehensive school in the late 1960s, there were schools where some pupils were exempted from the study of foreign languages or studied only one language instead of two. By the same token, foreign languages (and mathematics/physics) had 2-3 streams (ability groups) to accommodate the putative great differences in language learning ability. One problem with streaming was that the lowest stream did not allow access to upper secondary education (ie. there was an educational blind alley). The present author conducted a number of studies which showed that there was a considerable overlap in the performance level of the streams. It was also discovered that boys and pupils in remote rural areas tended to choose the lowest stream leading to undesirable self-selection bias and problems of educational equity. (Takala 1998) All of these issues coupled with strong political emphasis on educational equality led to the removal of streaming in 1985.

The 1970s and the first half of the 1980s can be regarded as the „golden era“ in foreign language education in Finland. The whole age group studied the other official language of the country (Swedish/Finnish), one foreign language and a third of the age group studied also an optional second foreign language in the comprehensive school. Language study started fairly early (usually in grade 3, age 9). Upper secondary school study expanded, which meant that a greater proportion of the age group continued foreign language study and took language tests in the matriculation examination. The reform of all secondary education meant that language study became a regular part of vocational education as well. University students also continued to study the other national language and at least one foreign language, and Language Centres were established to provide this LSP-oriented teaching provision.

The formal language provision has been supplemented by educational television and extensive study of languages in adult education (Takala 1998, Sartoneva 1998).

This remarkable „success story“ was counterbalanced, however, by policy decisions which have substantially cut the number of lessons especially for the other national language. The study of a second foreign language in the upper secondary school was made optional for those students who had chosen an advanced course in mathematics. This meant a considerable drop in the study of foreign languages and also in the number of students taking language tests in the matriculation examination. It is probable that the position of the other national language will be further eroded by the recent decision to make it an optional test in the matriculation examination from 2005 onwards.

Despite some undesirable trends, language education in Finland is still quite extensive: a colleague and I have estimated that at least a billion hours have been used by the Finnish people on language study during the past 50 years. This is a considerable investment in language education by any criteria.

Impact of increased language teaching provision on language proficiency

There are a number of individual and institutional factors that influence language proficiency (Carroll 1971; Stern 1983; Spolsky 1978, 1989; Strevens 1977; Takala 1979). Here the focus will be on institutional factors leaving motivation, personality and related factors largely untouched. The quality of teaching is undoubtedly an important factor but as there is no reliable research evidence of it, it will not be discussed either, as it would be based mainly on speculation.

More objective information is available on the amount of time devoted to language study and the proportion of the age group that has participated in language study. These are factors that are immediately amenable to policy choices and can be labelled under the umbrella term „opportunity to learn“ (OTL). Several studies, notably the IEA international studies (Carroll 1971, Lewis & Massad 1971), have shown that one of the most important factors affecting learning is exactly opportunities that are provided for learning (cf. the concept of affordance by James Gibson).

As stated above, during the past 50 years, Finnish people have devoted about one billion hours on language study. This means, as a rough estimate, 10 000 € of instructional costs per person.

There has been clear improvement in the level of English proficiency, especially in listening comprehension. (Takala 2004)

Public and personal investment in language study is seen in the adult population (see Table 1). About two-thirds of adults have a varying level of proficiency of at least one 'foreign' language, about 60% speak at least two foreign languages, and one quarter three foreign languages. The best known languages are English, Swedish and German.

Table 1. Knowledge of foreign languages among the Finnish active work, 2000 (Takala 2002)

Age	Does not speak any foreign languages	Speaks one foreign language	Speaks two foreign languages	Speaks more than two foreign languages
18 – 24	0 %	8 %	33 %	59 %
25 – 29	5 %	13 %	40 %	42 %
30 – 34	5 %	17 %	40 %	37 %
35 – 44	14 %	17 %	33 %	36 %
45 – 54	36 %	16 %	20 %	27 %
55 – 64	49 %	15 %	16 %	20 %
Total	22 %	15 %	28 %	35 %
Total in 1995	28 %	14 %	27 %	31 %

There had been some positive change in the five-year interval: whereas 28% of adults in the active work force reported no knowledge of foreign languages in 1995, the corresponding figure in 2000 was 22%. Also, while 4% of the youngest age group – all of whom had studied at least two languages in the comprehensive school – re-

ported no knowledge of foreign languages in 1995, there were no such self-assessments in 2000. There had been a slight increase in the number of people speaking more than two foreign languages.

Table 2 presents self-assessments in terms of the level of language proficiency levels, which are equated to the CEF levels even if not identical with them.

Table 2. Level of language proficiency (%) among the different age categories of the Finnish active work force, 2000 (Takala 2002)

Level	Swedish			English			German			French			Russian		
	18-34	35-44	45-64	18-34	35-44	45-64	18-34	35-44	45-64	18-34	35-44	45-64	18-34	35-44	45-64
0	16	32	52	5	18	51	64	69	77	86	91	95	93	95	96
1	20	18	13	9	17	13	16	14	8	8	4	3	4	3	2
2	14	13	8	11	13	10	9	8	7	3	2	1	2	1	1
3	27	16	11	20	22	11	7	5	4	2	2	0	1	0	0
4	13	8	6	25	17	8	3	2	2	1	1	0	0	0	0
5	2	3	2	20	9	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	2	3	2	10	5	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	6*	6*	6*												

*Mother tongue (estimate)

More recently, there have been growing interest in the educational system in relating language examinations and certificates to the Common European Framework of Reference proficiency levels. The present author was a member of an international Authoring Group that prepared a Manual (2003) which provides guidelines for doing this. Subsequently I edited a Supplement to the Manual (2004). Some aspects of the work are reported in Figueras et al. (2005).

The new Finnish national curricula for languages (2004) indicate target levels on proficiency levels that are adapted to be appropriate for schools but still compatible with the CEF levels (http://www.edu.fi/julkaisut/maaraykset/ops/lops_uusi.pdf) The following tables (Table 3 and 4) indicate the curricular target levels for the comprehensive school and the upper secondary school.

Table 3. 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 4. 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

Together with a colleague (Dr Felianka Kaftandjieva from the University of Sofia) I have helped to conduct studies that have related A-English and B-Swedish tests in the Matriculation Examination to the CEF. Using a certain approach of standard setting (cf. Kaftandjieva 2004), it was possible to indicate what our Matriculation Examination grades mean in terms of the CEF levels. There are 6 passing grades (laudatur – approbatur) in the Matriculation Examination and they are awarded on the basis of slightly modified normal distribution. Figures 1a, 1b, 2 (English), 3 (Swedish) and Table 5 show the results.

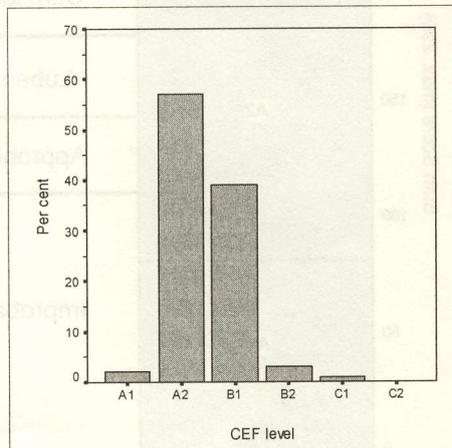
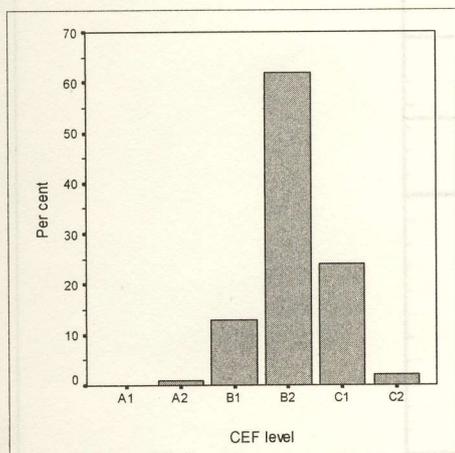


Figure 1a. Distribution of CEF levels: A-English

Figure 1b. Distribution of CEF levels: B-Swedish

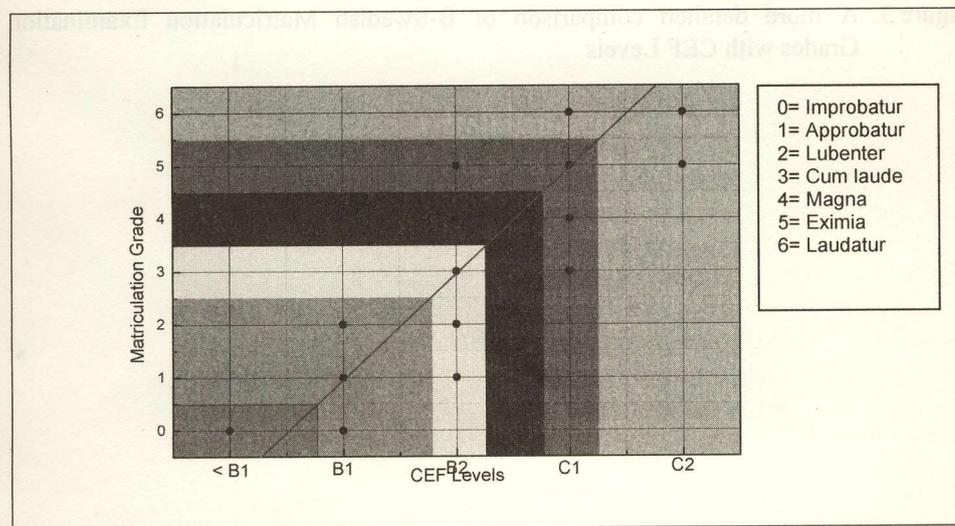


Figure 2. Correspondence between Matriculation Examination Grades and the CEF Levels

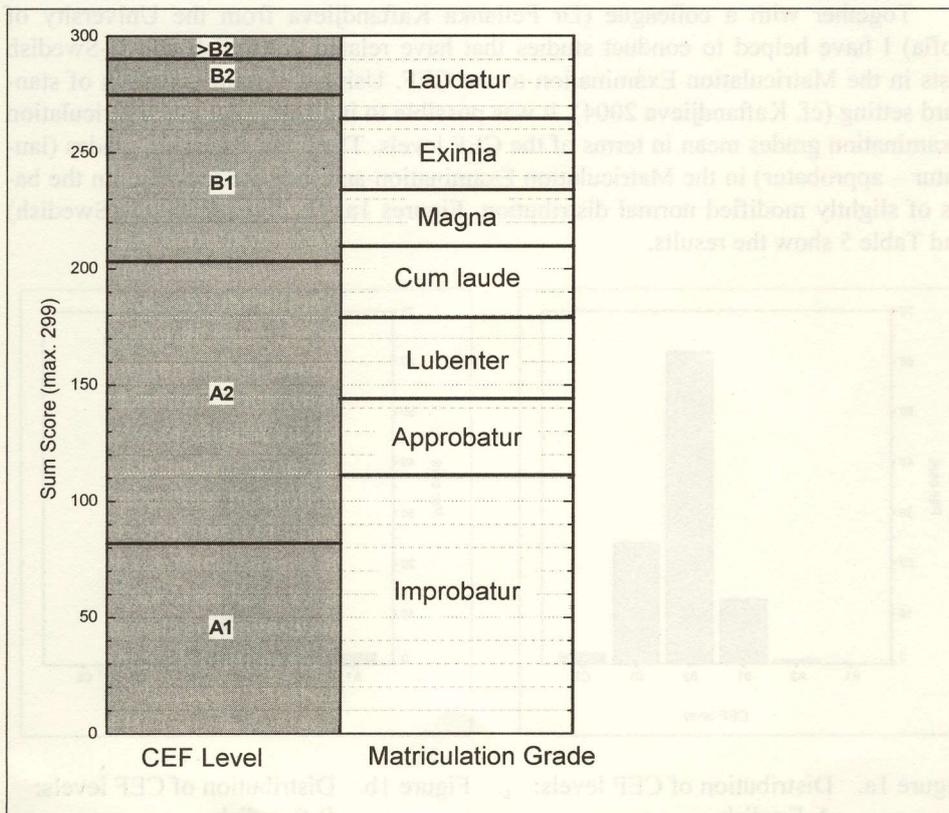


Figure 3. A more detailed comparison of B-Swedish Matriculation Examination Grades with CEF Levels

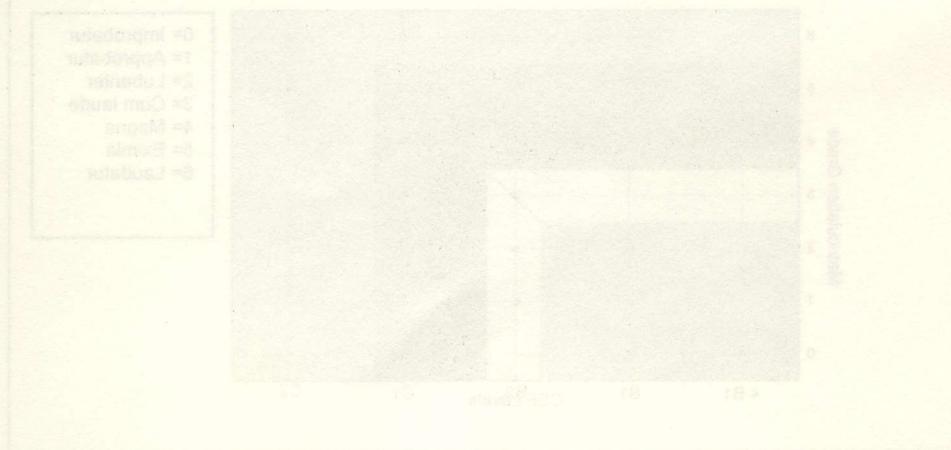


Figure 2. Correspondence between Matriculation Examination Grades and the CEF Levels

Table 5. Correspondence of Matriculation Examination grades in A-English and B-Swedish to the national curriculum (2004) levels

CEF level /Syllabus level	A- English	B- Swedish
C1.2/C2.1	Laudatur (top 5%)	
C1.1	Eximia cum laude approbatur(15%)	
B2.2	Magna cum laude approbatur (20%)	Laudatur (top group)
B2.1	Cum laude approbatur (24%)	Laudatur
B1.2	Lubenter approbatur (20%)	Eximia
B1.1	Approbatur (11%)	Magna
A2.3		Cum laude
A2.2		Lubenter
A2.1		Approbatur
A1.3		
A1.2		
A1.1		

The results indicate that the most common level (modal level) attained in the A-English test in the Matriculation Examination is B2 whereas the level is A2 in B-Swedish. This is a large difference and shows that the level obtained in English is considerably higher. One conclusion from this is that the institutions of higher education (universities and polytechnics) will have to cope with major difficulties as they will have to bring most graduates to roughly level B1 in Swedish.

Table 5 shows (probably for the first time) how the grades in the Matriculation Examination in the two languages compare with each other. It also reveals the problem in the Matriculation Examination when grades are awarded on a norm-referenced basis and not on a criterion-referenced basis. A top-level laudatur in B-Swedish corresponds, in fact, only to magna cum laude in A-English.

There is also preliminary work (Tuokko, PhD work in progress) being done to relate the results of 9th-grade national assessments in foreign languages to CEF levels. First tentative results indicate that the results for English are close to the target levels indicated in the 2004 curriculum (see Table 3).

Work is in progress to relate also other matriculation language examinations (Finnish, French, German, Russian and Spanish) to the CEF levels. It is expected that results from this work will be available in spring 2006.

Hopefully the proficiency level approach will be increasingly used in the way shown above as a means 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 (see also Figuearas et al., 2004). It seems desirable that the traditional norm-referenced grading practice will increasingly be supplemented and ultimately replaced by criterion-referenced grading and linking this to an internationally recognised proficiency level system. Currently the best proficiency level system is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Discussion

It is obvious that language proficiency is seen as an increasingly more important aspect of national human resources development (Takala & Sajavaara 2000). Language issues are also more clearly viewed as issues of human rights. In consequence, language policy and planning tend to become increasingly institutionalised activities. However, Finland does not have a good system in these areas: language teaching policy is defined more or less on an ad hoc basis. This is unfortunate and detracts from the potential we have in promoting much needed improved language proficiency in our country.

Cooper (1989) has presented a useful accounting scheme for the study - and evaluation - of language planning. It asks: what *actors* attempt to influence what *behaviors* of which *people*, for what *ends*, under what *conditions*, by what *means*, through what *decision making process*, and with what *effect*. Spolsky ja Shohamy (1999) have applied Cooper's model in an interesting fashion to indicate what is the contribution of different disciplines in the process of language planning.

The state of language policy and language planning has worried a colleague (Professor emeritus Kari Sajavaara) and myself for a number of years. As one attempt at remedying the situation we have been promoting the idea of arranging a recurring language policy and language planning Roundtable. The first one was arranged in 2004 and a collection of recent work was published in a pre-roundtable book (Sajavaara & Takala 2004), which we entitled "Language Education at the Crossroads". Our hope is that the Roundtable would help to provide a forum for the dissemination of information, for the discussion and debate of future policies, and for establishing networks. This is needed as the national authorities do not currently show sufficient interest in dealing systematically with the large array of issues in language policy and planning which require timely attention.

Notes

¹ <http://www.netzwelt.de/lexikon/1882.html>

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