



# Paths to Learning Second Languages in Finland

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## Abstract

*This article is concerned with comparative approaches to second language instruction and second language choices in Finland and describes the challenge of preserving Finland's language and culture while facing the globalization process. The article discusses the success of Finnish second language learning and aims to investigate how Finnish and English as second languages are taught and learnt in Finland compared to other countries as well. The goal of this study is to discuss issues related to teacher training and its role in second- or even third language acquisition.*

*We articulate the following research questions: How does the English-language teaching line serve the international families? How does Finland develop successful teaching practices and what problems of implementation does it face? What are the challenges of teaching the pupils' mother tongue and a second language (L2) (Finnish, Swedish, English, Russian etc.) at different levels of education? What are the differences between acquiring a Finnish or an international degree concerning adult education?*

*The methodology chosen for this article is a comparative study and it is used to showcase the differences between the Finnish and English second language instruction in Finland. In regard to the theoretical framework to second or foreign language acquisition, learning and teaching, I embrace linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural frameworks and approaches.*

## Rezumat

*Acest articol propune o abordare comparativă în ceea ce privește predarea unei limbi secundă și alegerea ei în Finlanda și descrie provocarea păstrării limbii și culturii finlandeze în timp ce se confruntă cu procesul de globalizare. Articolul discută succesul învățării limbii finlandeze ca a doua limbă, și își propune să investigheze modul în care finlandeza și engleza sunt predate și învățate ca a doua limbă în Finlanda comparativ cu alte țări. Scopul acestui studiu este de a discuta aspecte legate de pregătirea cadrelor didactice și rolul pregătirii lor în dobândirea unei a doua sau chiar a treia limbi.*

*Formulăm următoarele întrebări de cercetare: Cum servește linia de predare în limba engleză familiilor internaționale? Cum dezvoltă Finlanda practici didactice de succes și cu ce probleme de implementare se confruntă? Care sunt provocările predării limbii materne și a unei a doua limbi (finlandeză, suedeză, engleză, rusă etc.) la diferite niveluri de învățământ? Care sunt diferențele dintre dobândirea unei diplome finlandeze sau internaționale cu privire la educația adulților?*

*Metodologia aleasă pentru acest articol este studiul comparativ și este utilizată pentru a arăta diferențele dintre instruirea în finlandeză și engleză ca a doua limbă în Finlanda. În ceea ce privește cadrul teoretic pentru dobândirea, învățarea și predarea unei limbi secundă sau limbi străine, îmbrățișez cadre și abordări lingvistice, cognitive și socioculturale.*

**Keywords:** second languages; Finnish; English; teacher training; adult education

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## Theories of second language acquisition (SLA)

Regarding the research of second language acquisition there has been a clearly discernible change of perspective. A few decades ago, the studies were almost exclusively of a pedagogical nature: the main research direction was a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of different language teaching methods. Although interest in the empirical study of language teaching methods has not diminished, more and more researchers have turned their attention to the process of language learning rather than the process of language teaching. This change of perspective has greatly contributed to the fact that second language acquisition – despite its multidisciplinary nature – has become an independent discipline (Kovács 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Current research instead is characterized by an increasing cognitive orientation. There has been an increase in the number of researchers and theorists for whom second language acquisition is primarily a mental process taking place in the individual. Yet, the process takes place in a social and societal environment, the characteristics of which can greatly influence the process. However, we talk about the acquisition of a new system of knowledge that takes place in the human mind. According to Ellis (2003), the spread of the cognitivist vision in SLA is such a strong trend that the field will soon presumably integrate into cognitive science as a subfield of it.<sup>2</sup>

For researchers examining the sociological or cultural context of second language acquisition, external linguistic behavior (at individual or group level) will continue to be the subject of research. Regarding the theories of second language acquisition, Krashen (1982) distinguishes

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<sup>1</sup> Kovács Gábor, “Idegenyelv-elsajátítás”, in *Pszicholingvisztika 1-2*, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2014), 593-674.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, Nick C., “Constructions, Chunking, and Connectionism: The Emergence of Second Language Structure”, in *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, ed. C. J. Doughty, M. H. Long (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 63-103.

between implicit and explicit forms of language knowledge. Krashen bases his separation of the two types of knowledge on linguistic considerations, primarily on Chomsky's idea about the language acquisition device we were born with. Nonetheless, in the discourse of second language acquisition the social, linguistic and psychological frameworks are interconnected.

When we examine the development of foreign language (FL) knowledge, we must distinguish between two different processes according to Krashen's (1982)<sup>3</sup> monitor theory. Krashen separates acquisition from learning and finds that conscious or anterior learning is not a condition for acquisition. According to his findings, during the process of acquisition the focus should be on the message itself rather than on the form. The monitor hypothesis concludes that assertions in a second language are enabled by acquisition while conscious learning only shapes the form of the speaker's utterances, therefore it functions as an editor or monitor. Acquisition is used in a contrasting way, since it is the one that opens the way to effortless and natural speech.

Balboni (2018) finds that a theoretical framework is also needed to regard second language education interculturally.<sup>4</sup> Each state and society has different visions, traditions and ideas about foreign languages, their character, function and diverse concepts about foreign language learning and teaching. The language education framework could serve as a reference point for language instruction scientists and educational forces to formulate language education policies and practices that can be regarded as standards.

### Rendering key terms

Balboni (2018) emphasizes that a *second language* "does not refer to the 'second' language learnt by a person. [...] A *second language* is the second language present in a person's everyday life, the first language being his or her native language."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Krashen, Stephen D., *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (Oxford: Pergamon Press Inc., 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Balboni, Paolo E., *A Theoretical Framework for Language Education and Teaching* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

Saville-Troike (2012) defines *second language acquisition* as “the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language.”<sup>6</sup>

*Second language learning* is defined by Saville-Troike (2012) as the process of “adding another language to one’s first (or native) language”<sup>7</sup>, “the acquisition of a complex cognitive skill”, it “is like the acquisition of other complex skills”.<sup>8</sup> It involves several circumstances and measures and it is affected by the knowledge of the first language (L1) and other personal and circumstantial factors.

Balboni (2018) does not equalize a second language with a *foreign language* indicating that “a foreign language is not spoken in the country where it is taught, and this means that there is no environmental input or reinforcement.”<sup>9</sup>

### **English on new study paths in Finland**

The way Finnish people view second language teaching has undergone significant changes since English words have been introduced in the everyday Finnish language conversations. English is present in the Finnish education, media, business and scientific field. As well, Finland is a multilingual country where the Russian, Estonian, Somali, Arabic, Kurdish, Albanian and Chinese communities are the most significant. English helps the Finnish society boost collective and industrial development. Guillerna (2018) argues that while students in other European countries with vivid cultures have little ambition to learn English, Finnish students consider that fluency in English is a requirement in the world of international business and science, since it has become the *lingua franca* of our times.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Saville-Troike, Muriel, *Introducing Second Language Acquisition* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Balboni, Paolo E. 2018. p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Guillerna, Pablo Franco, *Comparative Study of English Education Instruction in Spain and Finland* (University of Eastern Finland, 2018).

Pupils with an immigrant background experience English very differently depending on their own culture. They study English as a foreign language but the groups may be mixed in such a way that for some pupils English is in fact their mother tongue or second language. In international schools the disadvantage is that students are not separated based on their mother tongue or language background, and their language level and skills may vary very much within the same group. Balboni (2018) states that a second language is present in the environment and social context where it is taught, while the aim of foreign language teaching is to initiate the course of acquisition and not to improve an acquired language.<sup>11</sup>

As regards the assessments in English as a foreign language, they should be adapted and learner-centered. In foreign language education teachers should consider the pupils' different perceptions of the language and its effects and role on pupils' thinking when applying a variety of assessment methods. In mixed groups the pupils with diverse language backgrounds will not interact in the same way and will not have a similar competence in the case of text production and interpretation. Therefore, pupils who are merely observers of English need particular tasks compared to those ones for whom English is their mother tongue.

Some Finnish schools have started opening new school paths for immigrant children for whom it is easier to learn and express themselves in English. For these children an English-language teaching line is more suitable than the already existing bilingual education which uses Finnish and English as teaching languages. The new English-language teaching line serves those international families who speak English and a local language in the family. Before establishing the new study path, immigrant pupils have studied in Finnish while now some of them have access to English-language teaching as their mother tongue. In the mixed classes, where children have very different backgrounds, proficiency in Finnish is not required but English knowledge is required to become a pupil. While most of the teaching is done in English, there are also some lessons taught in Finnish, some hours in the pupils' mother tongue and in Finnish as a second language. This language teaching strategy is suitable for foreign families living in Finland

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<sup>11</sup> Balboni, Paolo E. 2018.

for a short time. Through the English-language teaching line the children have the possibility to study in a familiar language. Moreover, those who extend their stay in Finland for a few years must study Finnish or Swedish more broadly.

### **Finnish second language teaching and the role of educators**

In contrast with the courses of English as a foreign language, in the case of Finnish as a second language the aim is to group pupils according to their competence and level of the Finnish knowledge. After mapping the pupils' mother tongues and Finnish second language teaching at different levels of education, the Finnish educational institutions have sought to reach successful teaching practices and implementation methods. In order to support the foreign speakers' integration into the Finnish society and the speakers' mother tongues, the basic education curriculum includes two language curricula: Finnish or Swedish as a second language and the pupils' mother tongue. As Tainio (2019) points out, it is the interest of the Finnish state to encourage individuals to learn the Finnish language and understand the culture without losing their own values and native language.<sup>12</sup>

Karjalainen (2014) infers that only those students identify themselves as bilingual who start learning Finnish at an earlier age in an informal environment. Those students who start learning Finnish only formally do not identify themselves as bilingual.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, they consider that their Finnish skills are not satisfying. Contrary to this group, the students with bilingual identity evaluate their Finnish language proficiency as sufficient. The research results show that not the student's learning age is significant in determining one's own linguistic identity but the learning method. In addition, foreign students have a positive attitude towards the Finnish language and believe that it is essential to know it as a second language or mother tongue.

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<sup>12</sup> Tainio, Liisa, 'Toinen kieli ja oma äidinkieli perusopetuksessa', *Kieli, koulutus ja yhteiskunta* 10(3) (2019).

<sup>13</sup> Karjalainen, Hanna-Mari, *Språklig identitet, finska som andraspråk och dess användning. En fallstudie av svenskspråkiga ungdomar i olika språkmiljöer i Finland* (Uleåborgs universitet, 2014).

Finland is characterized by a language-aware education but challenges cannot be avoided either. Since teachers can only support pupils to learn the second language, it remains the duty of parents to nurture the children's mother tongue in their home. Since second language instruction in Finland begins at an early age, teachers agree that the significance of efficient teaching has become more emphasized and teachers should be highly qualified. Teacher training in Finland is located in universities and its role is to produce qualified teachers who meet the foreign language requirements and are able to establish multilingualism and serve the linguistic rights of the public. Guillerna (2018) observes that the teaching work is more recognized in Finland than in other European countries, as teaching in Finland is perceived as the upholder of the Finnish society.<sup>14</sup> When compared to other countries, the success of the teacher career in Finland lies in the length of the studies and practice periods. Another dissimilarity between Finland and other countries is that Finnish teachers are encouraged to think independently and do not have to face standardized methods and tests as well as state supervision like in other countries.

### **Perspectives on language choices in the Russian communities of Finland**

Concerning second language choices, Russian is present in Finland due to economic links, although Swedish has been the most favored option in Finland. The new Russian immigrant generation has been studied from the point of view of socio-psychological, sociological, cultural sciences and applied linguistics. Rynkänen's (2013) study shows that for Russian immigrants Finnish as a second language has different meanings depending on the age group.<sup>15</sup> Immigrants at preschool age have good language skills in Finnish and they often do not consider it as a second language. In turn, the scope of use of Russian is quite limited in this group. It symbolizes family

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<sup>14</sup> Guillerna, Pablo Franco 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Rynkänen, Tatjana, 'Многоязычное языковое сообщество: русскоязычные иммигранты Финляндии' [Multilingual Speech Community: Russian-Speaking Immigrants in Finland], *Slovo. Journal of Slavic Languages and Literatures* 54 (2013): 133–149.

ties and an opportunity to obtain a job but it is characterized by a gradual loss.

On the other hand, the Russian adult immigrants' standpoint differs from the previous group's language situation. The language of home communication among the representatives of the adult immigrants is predominantly Russian. Since their level of Finnish as a second language varies, this age group adopts English for social mobility. Seeing that English is a necessary working language, adults often do not master Finnish. The results of Rynkänen's (2013) analysis have shown that immigrants using Finnish as a second language have had a positive attitude towards it, yet without Finnish the connection to the society is lost.<sup>16</sup>

### **Adulthood and Finnish as a workplace communication language**

Finnish as a second domestic language education is also offered free of charge to adults with an immigrant background. Although in the most globalized sectors English is used as a common language, this does not necessarily mean that Finnish is not present as a workplace communication language. In the case of foreigners working in English, Jäppinen (2010) has found that the lack of Finnish language skills makes it difficult to adapt to one's work community. Jäppinen notes that it is not enough to know the industry-specific vocabulary when a Finnish second language learner may find it difficult to get involved in an informal exchange of information and social situations at the workplace.<sup>17</sup>

As opposed to the IT sector, in the health and social care sector the working language is mainly Finnish. For the patient's or client's safety nursing requires an advanced Finnish language proficiency level. In this case written language skills become more important. It appears that in the case of working life the sufficient proficiency in the Finnish as a second language varies from field to field. Thus, the level of sufficient proficiency in the Finnish language cannot be determined without knowing the specific field

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Jäppinen, Tuula, "Suomi (S2) korkeakoulutettujen työssä – Millainen kielitaito riittää?", in *AFinLA-e Soveltavan kielitieteen tutkimuksia 2010/2*, ed. M. Garant, M. Kinnunen (2010), 4-16.

and tasks. For instance, those who work in Finnish must manage a wider range of oral communication situations, because in addition to colleagues they must also be able to communicate in an appropriate way with various customers and patients.

Achieving sufficient Finnish language skills at work is not only the language learner's responsibility but also the education providers' and employers' duty. In order to improve skills for the working life, more Finnish as a second language should be included in English-language degrees and more attention should be paid on the development of Finnish oral language skills. It would also be important for Finnish teachers to cooperate with teachers of vocational subjects.

## **Conclusions**

Finland is closely influenced by the economic and cultural globalization and the growing number of refugees who create challenges to the Finnish education policy. Expanding the English-language teaching line has met a strong demand, since both international families as well as the business world have required the English-language instruction. However, Jäppinen (2010) acknowledges that completing an English-language degree may be inappropriate for the Finnish society if the students do not acquire the Finnish language skills as well needed in everyday life and working life.<sup>18</sup>

In regard to attitudes towards Finnish as L2 curriculum, pupils have had a positive outlook and experienced the usefulness of these courses. In pupils' view the Finnish language is a key to further studies, the labor market and coping with the new society. According to Kuukka and Metsämuuronen (2016) the aim of Finnish as L2 teaching is that the immigrants acquire basic language skills which enable them to function in the Finnish language community.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, since Finland creates conditions for studying an L2 and the student's mother tongue, it helps students achieve bilingualism.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Kuukka, Katri – Metsämuuronen, Jari, *Perusopetuksen päättövaiheen suomi toisena kielenä (S2) – oppimäärän oppimistulosten arviointi 2015* (Tampere: Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus, 2016).

The comparison between Finland and other countries shows that Finland is characterized by a lasting responsiveness to foreign language teaching and divergent concepts about teachers' second and third language knowledge and fluency. Teachers in other countries do not have to be fluent in two or three languages as in the case of Finland. Guillerna's (2018) findings reveal that there is a correlation between the attitudes from the past with respect to foreign language education and the priority of obtaining multilingualism.<sup>20</sup> Learning English and Finnish as a second language is considered essential to succeed in the Finnish society, while in other EU countries fluency in certain foreign languages is almost regarded as a drawback.

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<sup>20</sup> Guillerna, Pablo Franco 2018.

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