

LANGUAGE TEACHING POLICY EFFECTS
– A CASE STUDY OF FINLAND

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1. Emergence of foreign language teaching policy

Systematic attempts to define a national policy of foreign language teaching are of relatively recent origin. The growing need for such a policy is due to a number of developments. The fact that the teaching of foreign languages has expanded to encompass larger sections of the population including both younger and adult learners means that language teaching has become increasingly more institutionalized. Like any system, it requires systematic planning and evaluation.

In the United States the growing enthusiasm for teaching foreign languages in the elementary schools (FLES) led to the National Defence Education Act (1958) in the aftermath of Sputnik, and the Bilingual Education Act (1968). The "Strength Through Wisdom" commission report (1979) made a number of recommendations to improve the declining situation in language teaching. In Finland a national commission (1979) outlined a comprehensive plan for foreign language teaching policy for the next three decades. Another commission (1990) analysed what implications the recent changes in Europe had for the language teaching provision (see Takala 1993a, 1993b). A major language teaching policy document has recently been produced for The Netherlands (van Els – van Hest 1992; van Els 1993).

It seems that a major development in education in general, and in language education as a specific instance, is a growing realization of them as social institutions, as social systems that serve some fundamental social desires, needs and functions. Language teaching serves basic communication needs, and as its importance tends to increase all the time, it acquires the characteristics of

any institutionalized process. This means, among other things, that language education is becoming and needs to become more and more organized, i.e. roles and role relationships are specified in greater detail. Language teaching becomes more systematized, which means that tasks are also specified and it also entails that language teaching is not dependent on particular individuals.

Language teaching is not only the activity of individual teachers – it is a system of activities. 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 their interrelationships. For all this we need models to help us to describe and work out the practical consequences of different approaches.

One possible model (Takala 1979) is presented in Figure 1. It is an adaptation of similar models proposed by Mackey (1970), Stern (1970), Strevens (1977), Spolsky (1978) and others. All of these models seek to define what disciplines contribute to language education; what the tasks of theoreticians, applied linguists and practitioners are in language education; what factors/major variables interact to place language learning into its sociopolitical context. There seems to be a broad consensus that a general model for second/foreign language teaching theory and practice needs to be comprehensive (cover all possible situations); it needs to stress the principle of interaction (the interdependence of components) and the multifactor view (no single factor can predominate), and it needs to recognize that scholarship underlying language teaching is multidisciplinary (Stern 1983: 35-50).

According to the model above, and other similar models, formal language teaching in a school-type context takes place in a complex setting consisting of a number of levels. At level 1, the societal level, the need of language proficiency is manifested in a more or less clearly defined language teaching policy and it is recognized in the form of societal support for language teaching. At level 2, the school system level, we are concerned with the foundations of language teaching, its infrastructure: the organizational and administrative framework and the traditions of language teaching. At level 3, we are concerned with the definition of the general approach or strategy of language teaching. This is usually expressed in a curriculum (syllabus). Curriculum/syllabus construction is a demanding task in which a number of disciplines can and should be involved. This written curriculum (= the intended curriculum) is put into practice in classrooms (= the implemented curriculum), to a varying extent, at the level of teaching (Level 4). Teaching takes place in a complex setting, where many tactical decisions must be made by the teacher every day. This sets high demands on teachers' pedagogical subject knowledge. The curriculum/syllabus is, however, realized by the pupils at the level of learning (= the attained curriculum). An integral part of the whole system is evaluation and feedback.

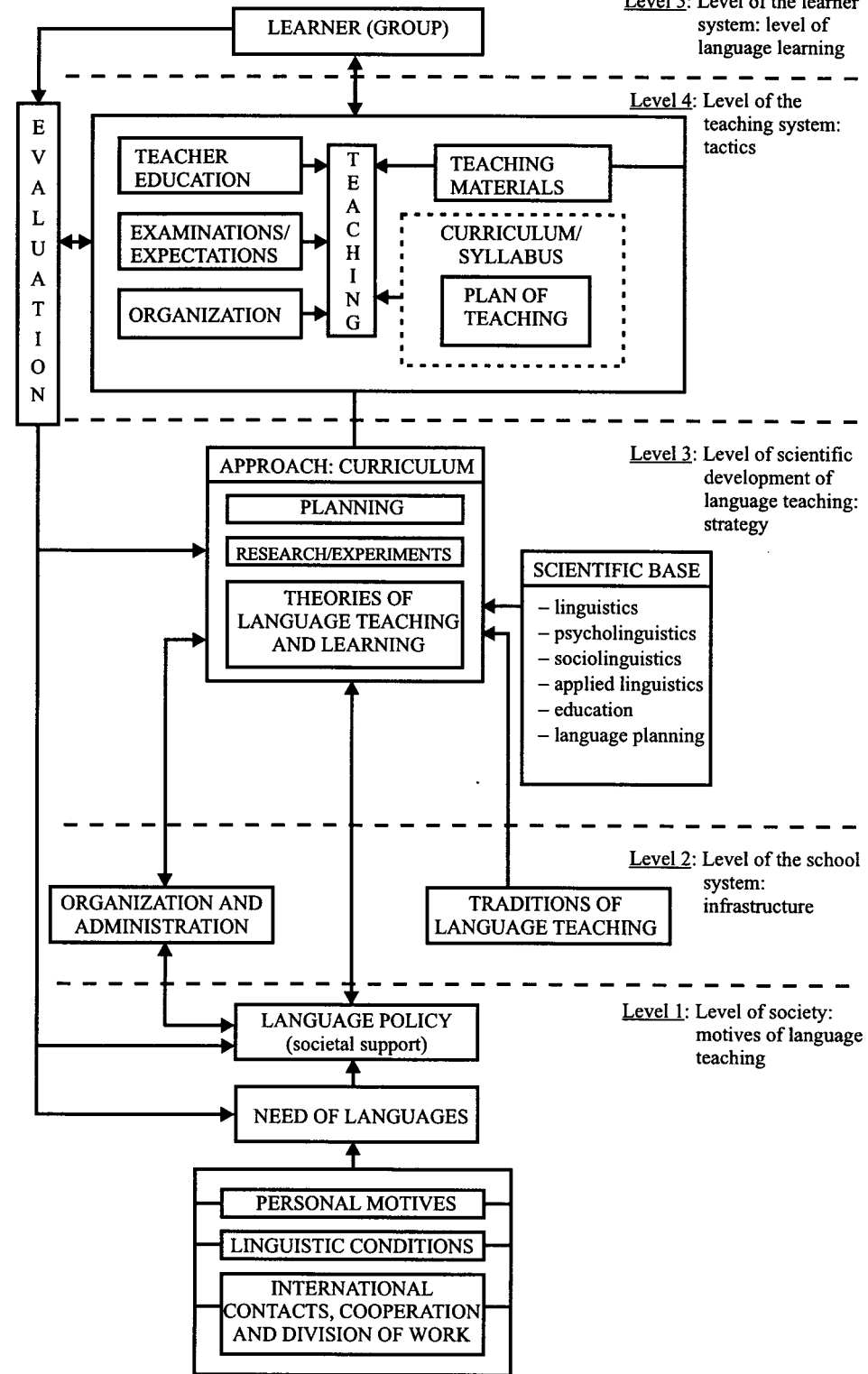


Figure 1. General model of the language teaching system (Takala 1979)

Evaluation data are mainly collected from the teaching and learning levels and this feedback information is used at all other levels as well. This does not mean, however, that evaluation cannot focus on other levels as well.

3. Knowledge of foreign languages in Finland

In the preceding sections, a systems approach to language policy planning and implementation has been advocated. An important aspect of such an approach is evaluation of what effects the programmes (and changes in programmes) have had. Alderson (1986) has reminded us that there is a need to ask whether innovations actually work. The remainder of this article will address the question: What are the outcomes in a country like Finland where a systems approach to language teaching has been implemented with some degree of consistency over a quarter of a century?

The Central Statistical Office of Finland has conducted large-scale surveys, with statistically representative samples, of adult education in 1972, 1980, 1990 and 1995. Not surprisingly, the surveys show that the active population (18-64) has participated in adult education programmes in increasing numbers: 20%, 37%, 44%, and 48%, respectively. In a quarter of a century, the proportion has more than doubled. The absolute number of adults taking part in language courses has risen from c. 125,000 in 1980 to c. 250,000 in 1995 (8% of all adults).

In 1995, the Statistical Office interviewed a representative group of adults (18-64) and asked them to self-assess their language skills on a five-point scale, ranging from the ability to manage in familiar routine situations (Level 1, approx. Level A1 in the Council of Europe Framework Scale) to the ability to handle the foreign language almost like the native speaker (Level 5, approx. Level C2 on the CoE scale). While self-assessment certainly is subjective, there is some research evidence that there is quite a high correlation between self-assessment and external assessment in Finland. Large-scale comparative studies with school children indicate that even young Finnish pupils tend to underestimate their reading ability in comparison to several other countries. Thus, in Finland, a survey using self-assessment can be taken to give an adequately accurate picture of a nation's pool of foreign language skills. The survey is one of the main sources for a recent report (Sartoneva 1998), which assesses the level of language proficiency of the Finnish adult population. The present writer was a member of the steering group for the project.

With the caveat that there is some error due to the subjectivity of self-assessment, the situation in the mid-1990's in Finland was such that 72% of the adult Finnish-speaking population (about 3,2 million people) knew at least one foreign language at least on Level 1 (including the second official language of the country). About 28% (c. 900,000) report not knowing any foreign language.

In view of the growing internationalization and Finland's strong dependence on foreign trade, it is positive to note that English is not the only language known; at least at Level 1, English is known by 66% of the adult population (about 2,1 million), Swedish by 55% (1,8 million), German by 28% (930,000), French by 8% (260,000) and Russian by 5% (160,000), respectively.

Finns tend to be relatively multilingual (at least at Level 1): 51% (1,6 million) of the adult population know English and Swedish, about 27% (c. 900,000) know English and German, about 26% (830,000) know German and Swedish, and English, Swedish plus German is known by about a quarter of the adult population (800,000 people).

There is, of course, great variation in the level of foreign language proficiency. Among those (66%) who report knowing English, the median level is 3 ("I can cope well in practical situations, write private and semi-official letters."). It is also an equally frequent category (mode) as Level 2. The median level for Swedish is 2, which is also the mode. For German, French and German the median and mode are Level 1. High levels of language proficiency (Levels 4 and 5) are reported by some 430,000 in English (about 10% of the total adult population), some 165,000 in Swedish (c. 4%) and about 35,000 (c. 0,8%) in German. Native speaker level (5) proficiency is reported by about 60,000 people both in English and in Swedish (c. 1,5% of the total adult population).

Even if Finland is officially bilingual, such conditions that would lead to learning (or acquisition) of Swedish as a second language only apply in limited coastal regions. Thus, language learning in Finland is basically "instructed foreign language learning". Recently, the presence of English has grown remarkably, thus supporting formal instruction through "incidental" learning.

Even if foreign language study in adult age is popular (8% of all), and about one million hours (lessons) were provided in 1995 (about 670,000 hours in the public sector and some 380,000 hours in the private sector), the main contributor to language proficiency is basic general education before entry to the world of work. This is shown by the very strong link between the level of education and degree of language proficiency. The gradual introduction of the comprehensive school from the beginning of the 1970s (with two compulsory foreign languages, plus an optional third language studied by about one third of all pupils), and the fact that already in the 1970's about one third of all 19-year-olds had matriculated from the senior secondary school (rising to c. 50% in the mid-1990s) have meant that the younger generations have had a great deal more education (and foreign language education) than the older generations. The remarkable rise in extensive general education is shown by the fact that in 1978 9.7% of the population over 15 had taken the matriculation examination, in 1991 18.9% and in 1995 21.0%. In 1995 about a quarter of women aged 15 or above had the matriculation examination while the proportion for men was

18%. Thus Finnish women have a better overall foreign language proficiency than men.

The large provision of foreign language education for adults has, indeed, compensated missing or limited opportunities to learn foreign languages in formal education. Because of language study in adult age, there is about 20% increment in the pool of language proficiency (i.e., people who have not received language instruction in their school age but report some foreign language proficiency).

The above means that the EU recommendation (White Paper 1995) about its member country citizens knowing two foreign languages so that they can communicate with them is fulfilled by about 60% of all Finnish adults, by more than 80% of 35-year-olds, and the younger generations exceed the recommendation.

Several surveys of needs analyses over the past ten years indicate that, in quantitative terms, the need for further training is the greatest in the languages that Finns already know most and best. The need for better skills in English is clearly the greatest. Better knowledge of Swedish and Russian would be required especially in the service branch, German in business and industry, and French in administration and large exporting companies. There is an apparent paradox in the current situation: while 72% of adults report that they would need further language training, and such training is easily available at a reasonable cost, only 8% participate in such training. Another paradox is that those who already know foreign languages best and most, are also the ones who most actively engage in further language study. This is the familiar accumulation of participation effect or a "weak version" of the "Matthew effect" (Ch. 13, 12): "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath".

I have estimated that the current Finnish population has spent more than one billion hours (1,000,000,000) in formal language study and devoted a considerable amount on homework related to language study. This is a vast investment by any criteria. It has led to a definite increase in the overall pool of language proficiency. Extensive language study by the whole age group leads to great variation in the learning outcomes, but it is – finally – being recognised that even a relatively modest overall skill, and partial skills, are extremely valuable. If we use the native speaker as the norm, the outcome is almost inevitably bound to be the judgement found in Daniel (5:25): "Thou art weighed, and art found wanting". The native speaker as a norm is quite unrealistic and can be very demotivating. It is probably best discarded in language education circles.

4. How good are Finns in comparison to other nations?

Given the importance of foreign language proficiency (at least as manifested in a number of policy statements of international organisations), it is surprising to note that there have been only two major comparative studies of foreign language proficiency and they were carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) thirty years ago (Carroll 1971; Lewis – Massad 1971). Another similar study by IEA had to fold up before it could proceed to collecting language proficiency data due to the impossibility of securing required funding.

The IEA surveys showed that Finnish pupils and students performed at average or slightly above average level in the language tests. National assessment surveys covering a thirty-year period show that there has been a clear improvement especially in English listening comprehension (Takala 1998).

Figure 2: TOEFL (July 1993 through June 1995)

Native language	List. compr.	Read. compr.	Struct/ Writt.	Total	Number of examinees
Bulgarian	57	56	59	572	3,527
Chinese	52	52	54	554	314,881
Czech	57	55	57	563	1,835
Danish	62	57	60	599	1,707
Dutch	63	59	61	608	3,418
Finnish	60	57	59	586	2,343
French	54	55	56	551	39,761
German	59	57	59	587	28,952
Greek	56	51	55	538	20,250
Hungarian	57	55	57	563	3,007
Italian	53	57	57	554	15,229
Japanese	49	49	50	494	272,350
Korean	49	52	52	510	129,847
Norwegian	61	56	58	582	3,397
Polish	56	54	55	551	5,456
Portuguese	54	55	54	544	14,302
Russian	55	54	55	544	18,868
Spanish	55	55	54	544	72,512
Swedish	62	56	58	586	5,609
Turkish	52	51	53	518	23,275

In the absence of proper comparative studies with statistically representative samples, widely used international language tests and international "barometers" (self-reporting surveys) provide some indication of obtained language proficiency. The best known such language tests are TOEFL and the Cambridge examinations. Below, Finland is compared to some selected other countries.

Figure 3: Cambridge examinations 1993-1996

	First Certificate in English		Certificate in Advanced English		Certificate of Profic. in English	
Finnish	68.9	(N=1504)	67.1	(N=993)	64.6	(N= 448)
German	67.8	(N=14056)	67.6	(N=3193)	62.5	(N=4760)
Italian	63.9	(N=20892)	63.0	(N=3538)	57.7	(N=4103)
Swedish	70.9	(N=4994)	69.3	(N=3047)	63.9	(N=1508)
All	63.1	(N=442326)	63.4	(N=105329)	59.4	(N=88535)

Summing up, the formal educational system and public and private adult education have devoted and continue to devote considerable time and financial resources for producing a better and more versatile knowledge of foreign languages in Finland. The limited available evidence suggests that the results are at least satisfactory, perhaps even good, taking into account the fact that Finnish speakers have to overcome the extra burden of entering the world of languages that belong to a different language family.

Professor Sajavaara currently co-ordinates a project, funded by the Academy of Finland, which deals with the effectiveness (productivity) of language education in Finland (for a good synthesis of recent research on educational effectiveness, see Scheerens – Bosker 1997; Alderson – Berretta 1992 and Weir – Roberts 1994 address evaluation in language teaching). Two reports have been published, and the general impression in them is that good progress has been made over the past few decades. In particular, there has been definite improvement in the systematic development of the language teaching provision from childhood to adult age. However, too little is known about the quality of learning in Finland and there is almost no solid information about how well the Finnish language teaching system is performing in comparison to other countries. The third report of the project seeks to answer a question raised by Peter Strevens (1971) almost thirty years ago: Where has all the money gone? The challenge is to try to provide some answers to the question that is frequently raised in these times of increasing insistence on accountability: How much does language education in Finland cost and what do we get from our investment in language education?

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