

Language education in the Finnish National Core Curricula

Language education has become a prominent factor in education of all levels. Its importance was duly recognized while updating the latest Finnish national core curricula for basic and upper secondary education in 2014 and 2015, respectively. The purpose of this article is to provide insight into how language education is integrated into Finnish education.

The basis of the latest Finnish curricula is transversal competence – a compilation of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and will. Students acquire (and develop) knowledge and skills through active agency in for example their own studies, learning process, and society in general. Values, attitudes and will guide the interpretation of both old and new information and provide a basis for how to use the acquired knowledge. Finnish education is based on values such as human rights, equality, and equity. Students are recognized as individuals who have their own rate and way of learning. Although the goals of learning are described in the national curricula, the students are also encouraged to create personal objectives.

Language education is an integral part of transversal competence, which consists of seven interrelated entities: (1) Thinking and learning to learn, (2) Cultural competence, interaction, and self-expression, (3) Taking care of oneself and managing daily life, (4) Multiliteracy, (5) ICT Competence, (6) Working life competence and entrepreneurship and (7) Participation, involvement, and building a sustainable future. Detailed descriptions of each competence are provided in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014.

The essence of language education is the development of a linguistic and cultural identity. In addition to a stimulating learning environment, as well as appropriate and contemporary pedagogical methods, the Finnish education system aims to provide students with skills and knowledge that foster language education. Languages and language education are multidisciplinary: Each teacher functions as a linguistic model as well as a teacher of the language specific to the subject in question. Linguistic and cultural knowledge are made use of in every subject, for example by implementing multidisciplinary learning modules in basic education and thematic studies in upper secondary education. Students learn how they can use languages as support for learning in different subjects. Teachers are trained to be aware of the minority languages and language registers that the students use, and know how to encourage students to utilize these both in their studies and when functioning as active citizens.

In addition to students developing their own linguistic and cultural identities, an essential part of both the national core curriculum as well as of language education is cultural diversity. Students learn to value and embrace diversity as well as understand how cultures interact and develop alongside each other. Students also learn to appreciate the inherent relationship between language and culture and recognize the advantages of linguistic knowledge in a culturally diverse society.

Language awareness is an integral part of language education as well as learning in general. All thinking and learning occur through the medium of language, which is why languages are also what make education multidisciplinary. Language awareness denotes placing value on linguistic and cultural diversity, seeing languages as a means of negotiating and mediating meaning, and understanding how languages are relevant for the development of multi-layered linguistic and cultural identities. Alongside language awareness develops a positive attitude towards languages in general.

Language education aims to provide students with skills in multiliteracy, i.e. understanding, interpreting, and producing ‘texts’ of different media and modalities. The concept of text may refer to nearly anything which requires the use of previous knowledge to interpret what is perceived. For example, it may refer to interpreting how historical events are portrayed through buildings and the cultural setting. Multiliteracy also refers to the command of both everyday language as well as that of linguistic features specific to different subjects, such as languages and mathematics.

Language education also advocates plurilingualism, which in practice means making use of students’ language repertoires. High proficiency in one’s mother tongue(s) facilitates efficient second language learning. In Finland students are encouraged to study at least one foreign language. The curricula therefore aim to provide students with good skills in both their mother tongue and other languages. The task is challenging, as the number of mother tongues in Finnish schools is quite large due to immigration. Students are encouraged to make use of their language repertoire throughout their studies: For example, when learning a foreign language such as German, students should utilize their knowledge of Swedish. Linguistic knowledge can also be utilized in for example cultural and philosophical subjects, such as religion and history, to which languages are inherently related.

A central concept in the latest national core curricula is active agency, which denotes readiness and willingness to participate, influence and act in a democratic society. Active agency is encouraged for example by introducing an interactive, exploratory working method to learning as well as by providing

the students with a (linguistically) stimulating learning environment to promote authenticity. For languages, authenticity signifies perceiving and producing authentic language. To provide a more multidisciplinary example, students may solve authentic mathematical problems that may be related to social studies. Authenticity promotes motivation by explicitly showing the practical side of learning, which provides students with a sense of significance in their studies.

The national curricula encourage students to take part in their learning process, practice self-assessment, and become autonomous individuals. Participation and active contribution to one's own learning fosters motivation and self-confidence, as well as promotes active agency. Furthermore, cooperation is emphasized on local (classmates), national (Finnish schools of all education levels) and international (global) levels. Global cooperation plays an integral part in language education: Students are given opportunities to make use of their entire language repertoire, including the languages in which their skills may yet be limited. Practicing languages outside the classroom promotes authenticity, which together with an encouraging and relaxed atmosphere helps to develop both linguistic and intercultural skills.

The latest Finnish national core curricula and language education are inherently connected and complement each other. Language education is a multifaceted whole comprising diverse but interrelated skills, which are all also connected to intercultural competency, and more generally, to global competency.

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