

Book Review

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Börje Vähämäki: Mastering Finnish. Textbook and two cassettes. Second edition. Aspasia Books, Beaverton. Ontario, Canada. 1999. ISBN 0-9685881-0-7. p. 288

Finnish for orderly people

The new textbook for learning Finnish, by Börje Vähämäki, professor of Finnish studies at the University of Toronto, is intended for adult beginners. It covers most of Finnish grammar, apart from some infinitives and participles of verbs and their uses, and some less frequent forms, mainly necessary for decoding written texts. The vocabulary which emerges from the text material is fairly extensive and well-chosen. The cassettes contain the texts, with the setting given in English, followed by the dialogue or narrative read in Finnish. The exercises are only in the written form, although many of them encourage oral production. The language of instruction is English. The book also contains a reference grammar, the translations of the texts, and a key to the exercises. Committed learners can thus embark on Finnish even on their own. This is further aided by the sensible instructions given on page x.

What's new?

Mastering Finnish by Aspasia Books is the second edition of a textbook by the same name, published in 1994 by Hippocrene Books. The dialogues, texts, exercises and grammatical explanations are nearly identical in both editions. Most of the changes are technical or visual: The Guide to pronunciation -section has been moved from the back of the book to the front (except that the promised graphic indication of intonation (p. xi) is now missing). The pages are larger, the font is smaller, and the photographs have been removed, which results in slimmer volume, by a hundred pages. Visual changes are an improvement, particularly sentence types and other structural formulae are now clearer. Nor do I miss the slightly blurry black-and-white photographs, as the same Finnish

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tourist sites etc. can now be found in colour in the Internet. The cassettes have been re-recorded which yields much improved technical quality and somewhat more natural diction. The fact that the same voices appear in many different roles is probably less disturbing when the dialogues are heard one by one. One male voice sounds like the synthetic recordings on Finnish trains, and most are unconvincing when they are supposed to sound like young people. Good quality recordings simply require professional actors and professional studios, and this is a question of money: textbooks of Finnish are never best-sellers.

Language material

Each chapter contains dialogues, narratives and exercises. More space is taken by notes, structural explanations and word lists. Spoken Finnish has a marginal presence. The characters of the book “speak” mostly the written standard Finnish. An attempt to include a spoken variety is made in chapter seven, which lists the most common morphological features of spoken language. Anyone who speaks like the characters of this book is going to sound stiff and foreign, but then this may be the safe approach that many learners want. At least the strictly normative variety only carries the general label of conservatism, not that of belonging to any specific region or sub-culture. Exercises let the learner to practise in many different ways, although additional material, particularly for listening skills, is required. Translating is a central way of learning here, and English is also liberally used in all instructions; there are certainly more words in English than in Finnish. This may make learners feel safe but robs them of opportunities of incidental learning. The author's experience as a translator also shows in another way: vocabulary items, various expressions and notes are very well and pragmatically accurately translated or explained in English.

Grammar

The presentation of grammar is the strong point of this book. You have to like grammar and classifications to choose this book, but if you do, you get clear and down-to-earth explanations. Grammatical terminology is mostly introduced - even the term as verb (p. 8) is explained, while diphthong (first on p. xi) is only defined much later (p. 225). Phonology and morphology resemble those found in most textbooks of Finnish but syntax is given much more space and thought. It reflects the research interests of the author well applied. Particularly the sentence types are clearly and repeatedly emphasised, which is important for learners with typologically different L1s.

Culture

Culturally Mastering Finnish belongs in North America. The focus is that of American Finns coming to visit the country of their ancestors. Finland is shown to be what these visitors expect it to be, not what it is today. The cultural clichés are all present, from Kalevala to regional stereotypes. Some of the facts are out-

dated: The museum of modern art Kiasma, an important landmark in the heart of Helsinki, is not even on the map. Tourists complain about the high price of train tickets, even if the price given is a quarter of the real price in 1999. Visitors using this book as their introduction to Finland and Finnishness are in for a surprise!

Learner's view

The back cover claims the course to be imaginative. This can be true if the teacher is - the textbook itself gives little nourishment for creativity. But the dialogues do lend themselves for parody: no 18 year old in Finland talks like Marjut, nor would she invite her mother's publisher to her birthday party! Another back cover claim "unique combination of practical exercises and step-by-step grammar" also rings rather hollow: most textbooks combine exactly the same features. Different learners need different books.

Who is this book good for?

Vähämäki sets out to provide the learner with "practical skills in everyday Finnish", "language of social interaction", and "solid foundation in Finnish grammar" (p. ix). Acquiring practical skills certainly requires more than studying this book - or any book, even with the exercises. Language of social interaction can only really be learnt in real life situations, and this book helps one to get started in getting into such situations. But those who expect a communicative and functional approach will be disappointed. The solid foundation in Finnish grammar is certainly given. Vähämäki's book is a very good no-nonsense description of Finnish for those who prefer to learn a language via a thorough presentation of grammar and who use text material only as an illustration of the structures. There are many learners who prefer to study a textbook first and then go out and try what they have learnt. In an all-English environment this may be the only way, at least until we get more and better learning materials available in the Internet.