

# Multilingual Native Language Lesson, a Pilot Project in Tuusula, Finland

The article concentrates on the instruction of native languages in Finland. First, a general overview and a brief history are presented. In the second part, the focus is on a pilot project of multilingual native language lessons at Hyökkälä school in the municipality of Tuusula.

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#### Supporting children with a multicultural background in Finnish schools

The multicultural and multilingual population in Finland is increasing every year, which can be noticed within the schooling system. In Finnish schools, there are several ways to support immigrant children: instruction preparing for basic education, instruction of Finnish as a second language, instruction of native languages, instruction of different religions and part-time special needs education. It is seen as equally important to give immigrant children a chance for effective integration and simultaneously preserve and develop their cultural and linguistic identity.

#### Instruction of students' native languages

Instruction of students' native languages started in Finland in 1970 and was firstly applied to refugee children from Chile (Ikonen 2007). Nowadays, developing multilingualism is stated to be of high importance in the new National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014). The subject is described as a curriculum supportive subject yet excluded from the official list of school subjects (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014). Lessons take place during students' school day, which differs from a usual Sunday school heritage language teaching model in other countries. Reasons for teaching native languages in Finland within the schooling system are the following:

- 1) the native language is everyone's basic right according to the Finnish law and the language of our heart, thinking and identity;
- 2) learning their native language helps students to link themselves into the chain of generations;
- strong native language skills are the key concept of integration;
- 4) linguistic diversity is an important resource for the development of individuals and the whole society (Mäkelä 2007).

The largest minority language groups in Finland according to the Finnish Statistical Agency's database (StatFin Database 2020) are Russian (85 000 people), Estonian (49 000), Arabic (33 000) and Somali (22 000). However, the participation of children in native language lessons gives a different perspective. According to various sources (The Trade Union of Education in Finland, OAJ 2019; Finnish National Agency for Education 2020) the largest minority children's groups participating in these lessons come in a different order: Russian (5667), Arabic (3067), Somali (2271) and Estonian (1432). All together about 22 000 children with a multilingual background participate in native language lessons every year.

There are about 60 different native languages being taught in 84 municipalities of Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education 2020). These lessons are largely funded by the state, which requires four students to form a native language group. Nonetheless, municipalities decide the minimum number of students for forming a group. Thus, the minimal number of students varies from 6 to 15 depending on the municipality. Practically, there are about 10–30 students of different age and linguistic proficiency in each group depending on the municipality. Some municipalities do not offer instruction of students' native languages at all, since it is optional. Hence, the situation regarding the accessibility of instruction of native languages varies widely for different language speakers across municipalities/regions.

## Pilot project: Multilingual Native Language Lesson

The largest linguistic minority population groups in the municipality of Tuusula (population of 39 301 in 2021) are Estonian and Russian. Instruction of these native languages started in 2015. Nevertheless, for smaller language groups, there is no such possibility. Consequently, these students do not have a chance to maintain their native language skills outside their homes and acquire academic skills in formal education. The solution was found in a multilingual native language lesson pilot project, when a multilingual group for students speaking different languages was established at Hyökkälä school in August 2018 and continued until 2020. The project was temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 situation.

The lesson was managed by two teachers. A group of primary school students speaking different mother tongues (Arabic, German, Kurmandji, Portuguese, Turkish) and aged 7-12, were taught simultaneously once a week. Students' Finnish and native language skills, learning potential and their learning-to-learn skills and motivation varied to a greater extent.

### Teaching the Multilingual Native Language Lesson

The aims of the project as well as the planning of the lessons were based on the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014): supporting students in building their personal, cultural and linguistic identity, supporting and developing cultural diversity and multilingualism, educating language-aware children and increasing their understanding of global thinking, and developing students' interaction skills, respectful attitudes towards other people and equality. Increasing the participation of multicultural families in school life was also a goal of the project.

Multilingual events, for example, a celebration of multicultural children's literature in a local library, were utilized. Teaching methods included singing songs and reading books in different native languages. Games, visual arts, crafts and other creative works offered possibilities to produce speech in students' own language.

This project discovered four important factors in teaching multilingual native language lessons. First, the easiest way for students to begin their study was discussing topics that were familiar from their homes, such as family, holidays, home-made food and traditions. These topics were the easiest because students were used to talking about them in their native languages. By contrast, topics such as hobbies, nature or history were more difficult because these topics were associated with the school environment where students did not use their native languages.

Second, it was important to give students tools to learn and study their native language independently at home. Students received homework from every lesson in order to learn together with their parents. Parents were enthusiastic to help with the homework since usually they could not help their children with school work in Finnish. By helping their children to complete the native language homework, parents were able to use their knowledge about their language and culture. Doing homework together helped children to establish and strengthen connections with their parents. It also made parents an authentic resource of the language.

Third, while lacking teaching materials in different languages, it was discovered that material meant for the second language (L2) teaching could be used for multilingual groups. Most of this material is language neutral. For example, picture cards with no words can be named in different languages. L2 teaching materials also take into account cultural awareness by illustrating people from different cultural backgrounds.

Fourth, we observed that some students were extremely reserved in speaking their native language at school. Since they were not adjusted to it in school settings, they felt difficult to produce speech in their native language. In order to help students to overcome this problem, a few methods were created. For instance, students were asked to utter greetings in different languages simultaneously, not one by one. Also, students were encouraged to speak by whispering if speaking out loud was too fearsome. The most efficient method was to guide students to make a video in their own language. Students became so motivated in filming that they imperceptibly spoke their own language to a digital device. They used audible voices and were able to find words and proverbs. The digital device was less of a fearful listener than a teacher or a classmate.

#### Feedback of the project

Feedback of the project was recorded from students, teachers and local authorities. It was discovered that most of the students were really motivated to learn their own native language. All students admitted that it felt "good" to be able to practice their native language at school. They used the expression "my language" regarding the subject being taught, which was truly personal and intimate. Students seemed to be deeply connected to their parents, siblings and "their country" during the lessons and mentioned these important sources of "their language". At the end of the school year, all children were able to describe ways for independent maintenance of their native language at home, however, "speaking to parents and siblings" was mentioned more often than "reading and writing". Younger students didn't associate "knowing" the language with "reading" (and even more seldom with "writing"), only with "speaking" it. Getting to learn about other languages and cultures was mentioned as a positive bonus of the lessons.

The teachers noted that the project had a positive influence on children's identity and self-image. The project offered students a chance to practice their native languages as a part of a school day and different languages could be used in everyday school life. Teachers also noticed that, through the project, learning and exploring students' native languages became systematic. In spite of the linguistic input being small, students surprised the teachers with the result of learning: students' multilingual competence was developed and their code-switching skills improved when they got chances to practice their native language in front of others. Teachers were pleased to see that cooperation between school and home was being strengthened when students were provided with hints and tools to be able to learn the language at home independently and with the help of parents. For teachers, the project provided a positive multilingual challenge: they were able to instruct the multilingual group even without being fluent in the target languages. Teachers also found out that they got a chance to notice the unseen part of students' skills and competences because of this project.

At the same time, the teachers reported some negative feedback. The linguistic input in these lessons was small and the learning was time-consuming. The course delivery was demanding and required two teachers in the classroom. Books in every student's native language were not available, too. The success of a lesson depended on families: it was almost impossible to organise the instruction of a multilingual group without the help and support of students' parents. Teachers noted that some students with poor learning skills faced obstacles while learning their native language and that, in general, development of students' linguistic skills was slow.

The Finnish National Agency for Education as well as the local municipality authorities gave positive feedback on this project. The multilingual native language lesson was included in the ECML project – A roadmap for schools to support the languages of schooling

(https://www.ecml.at/ECML-Programme/Programme2016-

2019/roadmapforschools/tabid/2994/language/en-GB/Default.aspx). Hyökkälä school is enthusiastic to carry on with the project of teaching a multilingual group.

#### Abstract in Estonian:

## Mitmekeelne oma emakeele tund, Soome Hyökkälä kooli pilootprojekt

Antud artiklis antakse ülevaade projektist, mille käigus ühes Soome põhikoolis õpetati uusimmigrantidest õpilaste erinevaid emakeeli samaaegselt.

Oma emakeele õpetus algas Soomes 1970 aastatel ja alguses oli mõeldud vaid Tšiili pagulaslastele (Ikonen 2007). Uues 2016. aasta riiklikus põhihariduse õppekavas oma emakeele õpetus, mitmekeelsuse ja multikultuurilisuse arendamine on peetud eriti tähtsaks. Oma emakeel on riiklikku õppekavas toetava aine positsioonil, kuna see toetab teiste ainete õppimist, õpioskuste kujundamist ja õppekava üldeesmärkide saavutamist. Oma emakeelt peetakse mõtlemise ja identiteedi keeleks ja igaühe põhiõiguseks vastavalt Soome seadusele. Oma emakeele õppimine loob ühendusi põlvkondade vahel ja tugeva põhja integratsioonile. Tugev emakeele oskus on põhjaks abstraktse mõtlemise arengule. Kõige paremini areneb emakeel akadeemilise õppimise kaudu kooli oludes. Keeleline mitmekesisus on tähtis allikas isiksuse ja kogu ühiskonna jaoks.

Praegusel hetkel Soomes õpetatakse umbes 60 eri keelt oma emakeelena ja õpetamist toetatakse riigi poolt. Kokku nendes tundides käib natuke üle 22000 lapse. Kõige rohkem lapsi osaleb vene (5667), araabia (3067), somaali (2271), ja eesti keele (1432) oma emakeele tundides. Võrdluseks kõige suuremad vähemuskeelte grupid on vene (85000), eesti (49000), araabia (33000) and somaali (22000). Siiski ei ole võimalik avada oma emakeele gruppe kõikide keelte jaoks, sest vastava keele rääkijaid võib olla liiga vähe.

Mitmekeelne oma emakeele tund on tund, kus erineva emakeelega ja eri vanuses lapsi õpetatakse samaaegselt kahe õpetaja poolt. Vaatamata sellele, et õpetajad ise ei valda õpilaste emakeeli, siiski on võimalik arendada laste emakeelset sõnavara, lugemisoskust ning julgust kasutada keelt avalikult. Projekti kaudu õnnestus tuua multikultuursed perekonnad koolile lähemaks, sest ilma vanemate abita seda poleks võimalik ellu viia.

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