

**EFL TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE EFFECTS OF THE
MATRICULATION EXAM ON UPPER SECONDARY TEACHING**

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Ylioppilaskoe on Suomen koulutusjärjestelmässä suoritettava standardisoitu valtakunnallinen koe. Kokeella on merkittävä vaikutus oppilaan akateemisiin tulevaisuudennäkymiin, ja täten kokeeseen valmistautuminen edellyttää tietynlaisten taitojen harjoittelua lukio-opiskelussa. Lisäksi kokeen painoarvo on viimevuosina noussut uudistuksessa, jonka myötä suurin osa yliopistojen lähtöpaikoista täytetään suoraan ylioppilaskokeen tulosten pohjalta. Tässä tutkimuksessa selvitetään lukion englannin opettajien näkemyksiä ja kokemuksia siitä, mitä kielitaitoja lukioenglannissa harjoitellaan, miten ylioppilaskoe vaikuttaa opettajiin ja heidän opetukseensa, sekä mitä vaikutuksia kokeella on opettajien mielestä oppilaisiin.</p> <p>Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin puolistrukturoituja haastatteluja käyttäen. Haastateltavana olivat kaksi englanninopettajaa, joista molemmat omasivat noin 30 vuoden kokemuksen lukio-opetuksesta. Haastattelut olivat 21 ja 33 minuuttia pitkiä. Osallistujilta kysyttiin kysymyksiä neljään teemaan liittyen: 1) heidän opettajataustastansa, 2) eri kielitaitojen (lukeminen, kirjoittaminen, kuuntelu ja puhuminen) opetuksesta lukiossa, 3) ylioppilaskokeen vaikutuksesta heihin ja heidän opetukseensa, sekä 4) ylioppilaskokeen vaikutuksesta heidän oppilaisiinsa. Pienestä osallistujamäärästä johtuen tutkimuksen tulokset eivät ole yleistettävissä, mutta molemmilla osallistujilla oli kattava kokemus sekä lukio-opetuksesta että englannin ja/tai pedagogiikan tutkimuksesta.</p> <p>Tutkimustuloksista ilmenee ensimmäisenä, että lukeminen ja kuuntelu saavat enemmän huomiota lukio-opetuksessa verrattuna kirjoittamiseen ja puhumiseen. Päällimmäisinä selityksinä tälle on, että produktiivisia taitoja on työlästä arvioida reseptiivisiin taitoihin verrattuna, että suullisia taitoja ei tällä hetkellä testata ylioppilaskokeessa, ja että oppilaat lukevat ja kuulevat englantia paljon vapaa-ajallaan. Toisena havaintona aineistosta tehtiin se, että opettajat lähtökohtaisesti opettavat englantia elämää eivätkä koetta varten, mutta toisen vuoden opiskelijoista lähtien alkavat tuomaan esille ylioppilaskoetta ja siinä vaadittavia koeominaisia taitoja sekä strategioita, osittain oppilaiden oman halukkuuden takia. Opettajien mukaan oppilaat sen sijaan kokevat ylioppilaskokeen joskus vahvastikin ahdistavana ja stressaavana. Opettajat kuitenkin näkevät ylioppilaskokeessa vaadittavien taitojen menevän paljolti päällekkäin tosielämässä vaadittavien taitojen kanssa. Jatkossa olisi hyvä tutkia laajemmassa mittakaavassa, kuinka hyvin Suomen ensimmäisen ja toisen asteen koulutuksessa harjoitellut taidot vastaavat työelämässä ja vapaa-ajalla vaadittavia taitoja.</p>	
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1. INTRODUCTION

In order for a speaker to be considered proficient in a specific language, the ability to interact in both written and spoken language in a multitude of contexts and ways is necessary. Language proficiency thus consists of several different skills that must also be practiced in different ways at least when it comes to a classroom setting with limited time and resources. Traditionally language proficiency has been divided into four separate competences: reading, writing, listening and speaking (Krashen 1981: 100, The Council of Europe 2001: 90-91). The Finnish national core curriculum, or NCC, (Opetushallitus 2019: 180) also directly states that throughout upper secondary English studies, the student practices both written and oral interaction in a variety of ways.

Although there is limited research on how balanced the teaching of different language competences actually is on the upper secondary level, there are three interesting studies to consider when approaching the subject. The first is by Härmälä et al. (2014), in which the researchers looked at the EFL learning outcomes of students finishing primary education in Finland in 2013, using reading, writing, listening and speaking tests to measure students' English proficiency. The second study, Härmälä and Marjanen (2022), is a very similar one but conducted 8 years later in 2021 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The third and final study to examine, Hildén and Rautopuro (2017), observed the same students from the Härmälä et al. (2014) study three years later who took the matriculation examination, henceforth referred to as ME, the most influential test in the Finnish educational system taken at the end of upper secondary school. The study measured correlations between the students' ME grades and their earlier, post-primary education grades in the four different language skills.

The ME is in fact the only standardized nationwide test in the Finnish educational system (Leontjev 2022: 134), having four subsections: reading comprehension, listening comprehension, grammar and vocabulary, and a written essay (Leontjev & Pollari 2022: 156). The ME has always had a considerable impact on university admissions, with a large portion of applicants qualifying via a combination of their ME grades and entrance exam score. However, the role of the ME was further increased in a reform between 2017 and 2020, with over half of university admissions now taking place via the student's matriculation exam grades alone, and the remaining via the respective entrance exam (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2022b: 1, 2022c). Because of this reality, it is sensible to deduce that the contents of the ME

and the skills tested there must have some effect on the teaching practices and attitudes of upper secondary school teachers. The effects of the ME on upper secondary teaching have indeed been investigated from some perspectives. For example, Leontjev and Pollari (2022) found that the ME has resulted in an assessment culture that leans more towards the summative rather than formative assessment, while Nissilä and Tikkanen (2021) found that the recent university admissions reform has resulted in students choosing optional language courses less. Kupiainen et al. (2018) have also examined and critiqued the efficacy of the new system in considerable length.

However, there is no research on how the ME, especially with its increased impact after the recent reform, affects EFL teaching specifically. There is also no direct research on how balanced upper secondary EFL teaching is in terms of the four main language competences. The present study will thus investigate those questions from the perspective of upper secondary EFL teachers, whose views and experiences are explored through interviews. The background chapter first explains the relevant ideas, terms and prior research, much of what was already briefly introduced here. Secondly, the present study chapter presents the research questions and explains the methodology of data collection and analysis for the study. Thirdly, the data, consisting of two teacher interviews, is analysed and discussed in the findings chapter. Finally, the conclusion chapter critically evaluates the present study, summarizes its main findings, and examines its implications to the field on a broader level while also presenting potential ideas for future research.

2. BACKGROUND

This section will first attempt to make language proficiency quantifiable and measurable by dividing it into four distinct competences of reading, listening, writing and speaking, and then examines them further. Secondly, previous research on the proficiency of Finnish students in these four skills is overviewed. Finally, the ME and its current impact on university admissions as well as previous research on its effects on upper secondary EFL teaching is explored.

2.1 Defining reading, writing, listening and speaking

Chapelle (2021: 11) writes that measuring language proficiency is a challenging topic that necessarily also relates to assessment, with many different frameworks having been developed

over the past 60 years. Harsch and Malone (2021: 33) list some of these, such as the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL) and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Banerjee et al. (2021: 78) assert that all language testing should start with defining the specific language skill to be measured, and then designing a task or a test which fits that purpose. The challenge thus is to decide which skills to choose, and at which point do we have enough of them to say that, by testing and assessing those skills, we will have an accurate enough measure of a speaker's language proficiency.

Most commonly language proficiency has been divided into four distinct competences: reading, listening, writing and speaking (Krashen 1981: 100). Furthermore, in an article about the benefits of testing language proficiency through these four different skills, Galaczi (2018) points out that a learner's ability in each can be unbalanced, with only moderate relationships among the different skills having been demonstrated in research. She highlights that by testing the four different skills, a more balanced approach to language learning is encouraged, resulting in the ability to use language effectively in the real world. This division also works particularly well for the purposes of this thesis, as testing and assessing reading, listening, writing and speaking is practical in a school setting. For example, in the Finnish ME, there is a clear listening section, reading comprehension section, and a written essay section (Leontjev & Pollari 2022: 156). Discourse about incorporating speaking into the test has been ongoing in the recent past, but due to the relative difficulty and resources required of testing it (Nakatsuhara et al. 2021: 285), no concrete progress has been made.

The Council of Europe (2001: 90-92) separates reading, writing, listening and speaking into four distinct communicative language processes that cover both the receptive and productive aspects of language use, though they clarify that these processes involve many overlapping skills. For example, visual, orthographic, linguistic, semantic and cognitive skills are all listed as part of the reading process in order to fully understand the text. While writing, listening, and speaking also obviously involve cognitive and linguistic skills, writing for example specifically involves manual skills in order to produce the actual text, listening specifically involves auditory-phonetic skills, and speaking specifically involves phonetic skills. Also, while there is a lot of skill overlap, some language processes evidently emphasize certain skills more than others.

The Council of Europe (2001: 91-92) categorize writing and speaking as productive language processes, with both of them requiring planning, formulation, and articulation. Planning involves the selection and mixing of the user's general knowledge and language competences, while formulation involves lexical, grammatical, and either orthographic or phonological processes, and articulation involves the physical process of either producing speech or writing. Reading and listening, on the other hand, are categorized as receptive language processes, requiring either visual or auditory perception, identification of the text and its relevant information, semantic and cognitive understanding of the text, and interpretation of the message. In interaction, productive and receptive processes and the skills involved overlap.

One last point about these four communicative processes that is relevant to the topic of teaching languages is the logistical practicality of testing and assessment. Jeon and Yamashita (2021: 265-266) mention that in reading comprehension tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the reader is usually required to simply pick out main ideas and points of the writer. Batty (2021: 275-276) points out that listening comprehension tests, such as TOEFL and IELTS again, are often operationalized via multiple choice questions. These are both in stark contrast to how the productive processes, speaking and writing, are tested and assessed. Nakatsuhara et al. (2021: 285) mention that direct assessment of speaking is largely agreed upon to be logistically difficult and resource-intensive, resulting in compromises, while Yoon and Burton (2021: 295) describe writing assessment to also be resource intensive due to the time it takes to evaluate and score essays. This means that the assessment of reading, listening, speaking and writing requires different amounts of time and effort, a fact that makes the pursuit of balanced language assessment all the more complicated in practice.

2.2 Reading, writing, listening and speaking proficiency of students

Regarding the teaching of the four different language skills in upper secondary EFL and how balanced it is, the most relevant studies are by Härmälä et al. (2014), Härmälä and Marjanen (2022), and Hildén and Rautopuro (2017). First, Härmälä et al. (2014: 11-12) conducted a comprehensive study which looked at 3476 students finishing primary education in Finland in 2013, testing their reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking and writing in EFL. The level of good performance, which corresponds with a grade of 8 on a 4 to 10 scale, was reached by 77% of students in speaking, 72% in writing, 67% in listening and 62% in

reading. Härmälä et al. (2014: 189) stated that the biggest predictors for good grades were students' use of English outside of school, the hours available for English classes, and positive attitudes towards the importance of English in the real world.

Härmälä and Marjanen (2022: 12-13) conducted a very similar follow-up study in 2021, this time involving 5022 students finishing primary education, and again testing the four different language skills. They found that this time only 52% of students reached a proficiency level equivalent to grade 8 in reading comprehension, 34% in listening comprehension, 38% in speaking, and 29% in writing. The biggest predictors for good grades were again students' extracurricular use of English and positive attitudes towards the real-world importance of the language, but also a positive view of their own proficiency as well as time designated to doing exercises. In an Yle news article by Virranniemi and Vuorela (2022), Härmälä points out that the pandemic likely played a negative role in the grades, lowering both students' and teachers' motivation to participate and also making it difficult for teachers to answer to the needs of weaker students, explaining much of the decrease in students' results.

Finally, between these two aforementioned studies, there was a follow-up study to Härmälä et al. (2014) by Hildén and Rautopuro (2017) in which the ME results from the same students were examined three years later in 2016, apart from those that did not move to upper secondary school, choosing vocational school instead. As such, this study had 1310 participants compared to the original 3476 (Hildén & Rautopuro 2017: 28-29). The performance data in this study only looked at how post-primary education proficiency in each of the four skills correlated with ME success (Hildén & Rautopuro 2017: 30), and the strongest correlation was observed in reading and listening, while the weakest correlation was observed in speaking (Hildén & Rautopuro 2017: 33). According Hildén and Rautopuro (2017: 33), this comes as no surprise since the ME lacks a speaking section and two thirds of the points are received from receptive tasks.

2.3 The ME and its current role in university admissions

As previously mentioned in the introduction chapter, the ME is a Finnish nationwide high-stakes test at the end of upper secondary school that tests reading comprehension, listening comprehension, grammar and vocabulary, and essay writing (Leontjev & Pollari 2022: 156). Admissions to university programs used to happen through two main routes: either by scoring

well on the respective entrance exam or with a combination of the entrance exam score and ME grades converted into points. However, the situation changed between 2017 and 2020 in a reform where the latter method was changed to only account for the ME grades. Thus, in the present day admissions to university programs take place either through the respective entrance exam or through the ME (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2022a). With this change, the ME became the main pathway to higher education in Finland, with slightly over half of all admissions taking place through it (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2022b: 1, 2022c). The reasoning for this reform was that a focus on entrance exams results in a market of unequal preparatory courses and creates costs for the applicant, and that two thirds of students are left with no higher education position immediately after finishing their secondary education, which is stated as an exceptionally high number internationally (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2022b: 5, 2022c). Utilizing the ME in the university application process more, in other words, reduces the need for the student to prepare for two large exams simultaneously.

Kupiainen et al. (2018: 193) point out that ME success does indeed explain future academic success better than the complicated points-calculation methods that preceded the admissions reform, though there is of course variation between different subjects. In this light, this reform seems to be a step in a better direction. However, Kupiainen et al. (2018: 189-190) criticize how points are given from different subjects, stating that Finnish and literature giving points to virtually every program is justifiable, but that A-level English being only one possible source of points, especially in universities where English is a central tool of learning, is questionable. They also question why maths and real subjects (i.e., subjects other than natural sciences, languages, art, music or PE) offer equal points to each other in many programs despite a highly variable scope of studies depending on the subject, and with maths having the benefit of improving common knowledge and logical thinking – something that cannot be said for every subject that provides equal points to it. A relevant note to add here is that a change to the current points-giving model will be implemented in 2026, acknowledging that the current model has evoked public critique as well as created stress for upper secondary students (University of Jyväskylä 2022).

Kupiainen et al. (2018: 184-185) critique the current system further, writing that depending on the syllabus and exams the student chooses to take at the end of upper secondary school, a weaker student can get better points when applying to higher education. Although this problem has existed long before the 2017-2020 reform, it is now emphasized due to the role of the ME

having been elevated. Kupiainen et al. (2018: 183) worry that an already unsure young student entering upper secondary education is faced with more and more questions, having increased pressure to decide very early on in their upper secondary journey which higher education program to aim for, which courses to choose, and which exams to finally take to get the maximum points and best possible chance of getting admitted to a university. One final point worth mentioning about the work of Kupiainen et al. (2018: 186) is the topic of course grades. They state that course grades have a relationship with ME success but do not fully explain it. They follow that the most likely explanation for this is that there is a lot of variation between upper secondary schools in how easily high grades are given, and that this is also why using grades in the higher education student selection process is not recommended. However, they do make a good point about how it is interesting that grades are still used when applying to upper secondary school itself.

2.4 Previous research on the effects of the ME on teaching

Although it is clear that the ME and university admissions pose stress to the upper secondary school student as outlined earlier by Kupiainen et al. (2018: 183), a topic that has been much less researched, especially after the recent university admissions reform, is what their effects are on EFL teaching specifically. Some research does exist that relates to the subject however, such as how these changes negatively impact the popularity of optional language courses in upper secondary school, or how the ME affects the assessment culture of upper secondary school teachers. The EFL reading, listening, writing and speaking proficiency of students finishing primary education as well as the ME results of the same students finishing upper secondary school three years later have also been studied, giving some, albeit limited indication to how different language skills correlate with ME success.

Nissilä and Tikkanen (2021) report that popularity of foreign language courses other than English has decreased in upper secondary education in recent years, with the reform playing a role in it; having a broad language repertoire is not rewarded highly enough in current university applications, lowering students' motivation to take on additional foreign language courses. Pollari et al. (2022: 229-230) also investigated reasons for why the popularity of optional languages in upper secondary school is currently waning. They found that on the micro- and meso-level, students either see them as too laborious or are unable to fit them into an already busy study schedule. On the macro-level however, the main reason was university admissions.

Optional languages offer no points for programs that are not directly linked to languages, and so the macro-level guides the attitudes and decisions of the micro- and meso-levels.

Leontjev and Pollari (2022: 155-156) have also argued that the ME contains qualities that encourage an assessment culture that leans more towards assessment *of* learning rather than that *for* learning, having led to teachers focusing more on summative rather than formative assessment. They refer to a 2019 study of 918 participants by Mäkipää and Oaukrim-Soivio where students felt that teachers primarily used tests and exams for assessment, as well as a 2009 study of 8500 participants by Välijärvi et al. where 35% of students felt that their teachers only taught for the purposes of the ME. Additionally, Leontjev (2022: 146) later found that the ME seems to have a greater impact on the assessment culture of teachers than the NCC does, with the former again emphasizing summative assessment and the latter emphasizing formative assessment. The study noted that teachers feel the ME and NCC contesting each other, and that it is difficult for these two different assessment cultures to coexist in practice.

The research overviewed in this chapter shines some light on the effects of the ME on certain upper secondary school practices and how different language skills correlate with ME success. However, it does not quite answer the question of whether upper secondary EFL teaching itself is viewed as balanced. It also fails to answer whether the ME affects EFL teaching in upper secondary school, and what those effects might be. The next section will follow up on this gap and explain the aims of the present study.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

This section outlines the research questions that the present study attempts to answer and explains the data and how it was collected and analysed.

3.1 Research aim and questions

The present study aims to find out EFL upper secondary school teachers' views on how much attention each communicative language competence receives in the classroom, how much and in what ways the ME influences their teaching, and what impact it has on their students. The research questions are as follows:

1. What language competences receive practice in the EFL classroom in upper secondary school?
2. In what ways does the matriculation exam influence the language competences taught in the classroom?
3. What impact does the matriculation exam have on students' experience and choices in upper secondary school?

The ME plays a large role in determining students' chances of advancing into higher education programmes in Finland, and this study investigates whether the exam and the language competences that are tested in it affect or even limit what teachers feel they should teach to their students. By extension, the study will try to detect whether students graduate upper secondary education so that they are considerably stronger or weaker in some language competences than others. The hypothesis is that since speaking is not yet tested in the ME, it receives less formal practice in the classroom and teachers cannot spend much time on it due to a sense of duty to prepare their students for the ME. In addition, due to the practical hardships around testing and assessing speaking and writing, I believe that more easily testable skills are allotted more of the classroom time – at least when it comes to formal practice.

3.2 Data, data collection and method of analysis

The data comprises of two interviews, each of which lasted roughly 30 minutes. The data was collected by interviewing two teachers with considerable experience in teaching English in upper secondary school. As Denscombe (2014: 186) points out, an interview is useful when the point is to gather information about personal experiences, opinions, feelings, and attitudes. The teachers were sent research and privacy notices via email informing them of the study and their right to withdraw from it at any point. They were also told that the interview would be recorded and transcribed. Adams (2015: 497) points out that certain interview questions may evoke pressure to give out answers that do not endanger the person's social or work position. Due to this, both teachers were informed that the recordings would only be listened to by me, the researcher, that the recordings would be deleted by January 2023, and that the participants would not be recognizable from the data. In addition, both teachers were specifically told that the purpose of the study is not to criticize them or their teaching practices, but to find out their experiences and opinions about the subject matter of the study.

The interviews both took place in a live setting in October 2022. I decided to conduct the interviews in a semi-structured format, having features of both structured and unstructured interviews. This means that there is a framework of close-ended questions, but the interviewer can also probe beyond them for more information, clarification, or if something interesting emerges (Adams 2015: 497). A semi-structured interview also has the benefit of making the interview more conversation-like, hopefully leading to more authentic data. To avoid leading the interviewee onto any path I myself had based on my background research, I only asked clarifying questions that allowed the interviewee to add more information or to clarify their views and experiences. The interview questions were divided into four rough categories (see the Appendix); 1) the teacher's background, 2) how balanced the teaching of different communicative language competences is and which competences students tend to be strongest and weakest at after graduating, 3) the impact of the ME on students' futures, and 4) the influence of the ME on teaching. Despite the semi-structured interview format, I asked all the pre-determined questions in roughly the same way in both interviews, only breaking the structure for clarification and to delve deeper into any interesting topics. This decision to lean slightly more into a structured format was ultimately because, as Adams (2015: 493) points out, to take full advantage of a semi-structured interview format, the interviewer needs to be experienced, sensitive and nimble. This is not particularly feasible in a practice study such as a bachelor's thesis, which is the first "real" study most university students will ever conduct.

Both of the interviews were conducted in English. This, in retrospect, was probably not ideal because even though the interviewees were highly proficient in English, the register and terms around the interview topics almost certainly would have been clearer and easier to communicate in Finnish. However, I ultimately do not think this affected the quality of the data, but rather the interview process itself. This is because if something was unclear, code-switching to Finnish was used for those specific terms. Furthermore, Ruusuvuori et al. (2010: 369) point out that even when conducting an interview in the native language of the participant and reporting it in a different language such as English, the translation process can prove tricky with regards to conveying the exact meanings spoken in the original language of the interview. In other words, I would have had to make the translation compromises of certain terms regardless, only later in the process.

The research method used for the analysis was qualitative content analysis. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009: 92) divide this process into four steps: 1) determining what is interesting in the data, 2)

going through and extracting the interesting parts from it, 3) categorizing the data into themes, and 4) drawing and writing out conclusions. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 93, this kind of approach fits a study like this well, where the interview questions were already split into distinctive themes. The interviews were transcribed before the analysis, with the main emphasis on what was said rather than how it was said due to this study mainly being interested in experiences and opinions on the actual subject matter. According to Ruusuvuori et al. (2010: 364), transcription that is too detailed can make the language unintelligible and difficult to read, while completely raw transcription leaves out certain, sometimes very relevant properties of communication and interaction. In light of this, I chose to transcribe features such as emphasis, pauses, and filler words in addition to the words that were said. I think it is relevant for the reader to know if the teachers had to think more on certain questions, while they had their views and opinions more readily available for other ones, possibly indicating that certain subject matters are more on their mind than others. My interpretations of the data were contrasted with theory whenever appropriate, because as Ruusuvuori et al. (2010: 23) mention, analysis is not complete before it is combined with theoretical viewpoints and current practical issues around the topic. Quotes from the transcriptions are used to support my conclusions whenever relevant, as according to Ruusuvuori et al. (2010: 363), this obviously enhances the validity and reliability of the interpretations made.

4. FINDINGS

This section will discuss the main findings of the study. Both teachers currently had around 30 years of experience working as upper secondary school teachers as well as conducting research related to their subject, which is visible in the way they reflected on the topic and discussed it at length. To protect the privacy of both teachers, any personal or other kind of information that could be used to identify them has been left out, and their names have been changed and will be simply referred to as Teacher A and B. The analysis is divided into three sections to relate the findings to the three research questions: the first section examines English teaching from the viewpoint of the four basic communicative competences, the second section examines the effects of the ME on teaching, and the third section examines the teachers' perceptions on the effects of the ME on students.

4.1 Reading, writing, listening and speaking in upper secondary EFL

Something that both teachers echoed was that there is no single most important English skill for upper secondary students to learn, instead all of the communicative competences are important (Examples 1 & 2). Both also added that what will be the most important English skill highly depends on what the student is going to do in their academic or professional future. These answers repeat the sentiment that a balanced approach to teaching English is indeed important (Galaczi 2018).

Example 1

Teacher A: My motto is that they learn English for their lives and not for the matriculation exam, so in my opinion communication skills are the most important. But that of course covers everything ... I think that it really sort of depends what they are going to do after upper secondary school but all academic studies nowadays require English skills and the current world requires that you are able to communicate in English. So I think that fluent communication, whether it is written or oral, they are the most important ones.

Example 2

Teacher B: Well umm... It's not a very easy question to answer what are the most important ones. If you think about their future needs I think they should actually know all possible things, but nowadays I think you have to be orally very skilled, you have to know how to communicate, in written and spoken language, and of course it entails understanding spoken language, understanding texts, so it's actually very hard to put something from those skills to the first place and just leave the others. It's a difficult question to answer ... And depending on the future positions where they work and what they're doing it depends on that how they communicate in English.

The teachers were also both of the opinion that reading is the most practiced skill in upper secondary school, with listening as the runner-up at least in terms of frequency of exposure (Examples 3 & 4). In addition, while teacher A said outright that writing receives the least formal practice, teacher B alluded to it indirectly by saying that reading, listening and speaking are all practiced in one way or another all the time, leaving out writing aside from writing out short answers for exercises. Teacher A also mentioned that it depends a lot on the course, with certain courses having more focus on a particular area of language use and others having more focus in another one. Indeed, in the NCC, one can find different English courses having different learning objectives. For instance, the ENA5 course has a specific focus on scientific texts and writing, while the ENA8 course has a specific focus on spoken interaction (Opetushallitus 2019: 183-184). Worth noting, however, is that the former course is mandatory and the latter is an optional one.

Example 3

Teacher A: I don't know. It is really difficult to, to sort of give the percentages – I think that in an ideal world they should have sort of a similar amount of time and attention. But I don't know whether that is true and it of course also depends on the course ... Overall I would say that I would prefer it to be sort of kind of even, but I think that I have to admit that... Writing probably receives a bit less practice than for instance reading and listening. I think that reading might be the one that gets practiced the most because quite a lot of the lessons are somehow based on a text – we read a text first and then the discussions or roleplays and vocabulary exercises et cetera et cetera are sort of built upon that text. So in that sense I think that reading might be number one.

Example 4

Teacher B: Reading, understanding a text – written text, definitely. Listening perhaps is on the second place. And uhh, well writing not that much but if you really include all the little bits that you write doing some exercises then it's like every lesson includes that. Speaking yes, every lesson includes. Really a hard question, I've never really thought about whether they are balanced compared to each other, I've never really thought about that.

Considering how Nakatsuhara et al. (2021: 285) and Yoon and Burton (2021: 295) described speaking and writing respectively as logistically difficult and resource intensive to assess, these findings are not surprising. Interestingly however, teacher B said they like to include an oral test on every course (Example 5).

Example 5

Teacher B: I at least include one oral skills test into all my courses or modules. And then there is this national kind of test which is optional. And you can take it if you want but it's not really obligatory so.

Regarding where students tend to be strongest and weakest at after graduating upper secondary, Teacher A was somewhat undecided at first and concluded that it varies a lot, though later mentioned that students are probably at least expected to be the best on the reading comprehension side of things, with listening comprehension following behind (Example 6). Teacher A afterwards mentioned that the reading and listening comprehension tests can sometimes be very demanding. This may also explain why reading and listening are practiced the most.

Example 6

Teacher A: Hmm ... That is very individual. There are very very big differences between students – some students are really good at speaking – some might be really brilliant at writing but do not necessarily feel very comfortable speaking, so I think that the individual differences are really great. But according to... well ... I think that where they are expected to probably perform the best is reading. So I think that if we come to the matriculation exam for instance, the reading comprehension texts are sometimes really demanding. They might be really really tough. Listening comprehension probably comes second in that case.

Teacher B answered this question with noticeably more certainty, stating that students are definitely stronger on the comprehensive side of things, reinforcing this statement by referring to students' self-evaluations in which they express being able to virtually always understand the main points of a text, both written and spoken, but rate themselves lower at producing language (Example 7).

Example 7

Teacher B: Yes. It's on the comprehensive side. Certainly. When they evaluate themselves – when they assess themselves – they usually say that I'm very strong at understanding English, whoever speaks, whatever the accent, and reading text they can kind of always understand the main points even though they don't know all the details. But when it comes to producing language they always tend to rate those skills lower than the ones that are on the side that you have to receive and understand it.

Perhaps this is partially because productive skills are tougher to formally test and assess, but likely also because many students tend to be shy about speaking in a foreign language in the presence of the rest of the class. The same, although to a lesser extent, might be said for written production where the students still need to express their thoughts and ideas outwards – something that does not necessarily come naturally to some individuals. In addition, students' extracurricular exposure to English via entertainment and the Internet may contribute to their greater capability for comprehension than for production, though the Internet does offer a platform for the latter as well. This idea is reinforced by the findings of Härmälä and Marjanen (2022); students finishing primary school spent a lot of time watching movies and video clips, listening to music, and following social media outside of school, and their free time use of English correlated with good grades in school. Importantly though, in an article written by Virranniemi and Vuorela (2022), Jyväskylä University docent Katja Mäntylä notes that the type of English used on students' free time is often very different from that encountered at school and later on in working life.

Pennycook (2010: 682-683) offers an interesting view, saying that in our globalizing world, we should change the way we view language in general. Although more than 10 years ago now, he described current English taking part in a hybrid environment, where multilingualism, multiculturalism, code-switching and word-borrowing have begun to change the landscape of languages. Pennycook wrote that languages, cultures and identities are now frequently mixed in a world of electronic media and transnational environments. With technology advancing and people becoming more and more digitally connected, the needs and demands of society are

constantly changing. Thus, an interesting and relevant topic for continuous research would be whether the educational system is keeping up with these changes and offering students the language skills they will need in the real world after graduation.

4.2 The impact of the ME on teaching

Both teachers strongly stated that they refuse to mention the ME for the entire year one whenever new students roll in, and consequently do not let it affect what they do in the classroom (Examples 8 & 9). However, both teachers felt that they must bring it up eventually as well as start teaching certain test specific skills.

Example 8

Teacher A: Depends on the course, again. If I'm teaching year one, not at all. I refuse to say the words matriculation examination at that point. Umm, now I'm teaching course number 4, so it's the first course in year 2, and yes, guilty as charged. I have mentioned the matriculation examination because I know that they are going to be talking about them so yeah, I have said that for instance we are going to try the speech and a letter to the editor during this course because, like it or not, they are genres that come up very often in the matriculation examination, so you're doing two things at the same time. So you are practicing for them [the ME writing tasks], and you're practicing your skills.

Example 9

Teacher B: Umm, during the last year certainly. Because it's really, really it's out there already on the national curriculum that all those last courses or modules they all kind of also want to teach you some test-wisness – it's there. And it wouldn't be fair if they spent that time and we never ever thought about how to answer those questions or something. It's there. But I at least try to avoid referring to that test too early on and leave it to the very last minutes, kind of to make it... make it sound a lot like we're studying for life and not for the test. But it's there, certainly it's there.

Both teachers also pointed out how, even though students may be practicing for the ME, much of that practice does help in the real world as well. For example, teacher B mentioned the more general skill of learning to write your main ideas into a concise answer (Example 10). Teacher B also made the interesting and important point that as long as the skills they teach to the students are useful, the students still express the same interest even if the teacher tells them those skills will never be tested in any exam (Example 11).

Example 10

Teacher B: And also it's not just because of the exam, it's also after school when we talk about, for some, to summarize the main points in your answer. It's not just something you need in a test – it's a skill you need afterwards, from a text to really make a concise answer and write it clearly – use the proper words. So even though it's just for the test, I might say that you need this skill after leaving this school – it's not for the test, you have to be able to put the right words into a concise answer.

Example 11

Teacher B: Okay. One example is this, uhh they're going to give you oral presentations and themes, and I always say this is not tested. But you might need it when you leave the school and you apply for a job or for work and you have to. We do video CVs nowadays already, and it's definitely because it's a very useful skill. It's really relevant for their future life to be able to really give and present yourself in the best possible way, in English. Yeah, that's one thing I remember just right here that is not for the test, it's for the future.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from this is that as long as the skill being practiced in the classroom is well justified and explained with regards to its importance for *something*, whether for life or a test, the students will receive it well. Obviously when considering that the ME tests language skills in a wide variety of ways, there must naturally be a great deal of overlap between the language skills needed in the ME and in the real world. However, it is still important that the teachers pointed this out, as sometimes a test can be exactly what motivates a student to learn and guides their focus towards practicing specific skills.

When asked about what the teachers would do differently if there was no ME, teacher A made an interesting point of how multiple choice is an extremely test specific skill that they would leave out, pointing out that it is something completely detached from the real world needs of people (Example 12). Teacher A followed by making a similar point about the 700-1300 character limit in the written essay section of the ME that recently became more strict due to the digitalization of the exam, not allowing for a single additional character past 1300 whereas an excess of up to 25% characters used to be acceptable before (Example 13). Constraints are understandable in a test, both to give the student an idea of what is expected of them and to control the assessment workload, but it is difficult to deny that such a limitation rarely takes place outside of that very specific setting – it is mainly there *because* it is a test.

Example 12

Teacher A: Hmm... I probably wouldn't do as much multiple choice. Cause multiple choice is a skill you don't need in real life. I don't think that anybody ever watches a documentary or reads a book or a newspaper and answers multiple choice questions at the same time. So I would include reading comprehension, I would include listening comprehension, but I don't think that I would have that many multiple choice formats.

Example 13

Teacher A: I think that writing is one skill where the matriculation exam might give sort of constraints. Because it is one really particular type of writing. And I don't know whether you know that as of this autumn the character limit – it used to be 700 to 1300 – but you could go over by 25%. But as of this autumn, it is 1300 and not a character more ... But anyway so 1300 characters is a very short text if you try to have a lot of content, if you try to have good vocabulary, different structures, a logical, uhh, structure

in the text et cetera et cetera et cetera so. So once again it is a bit like the multiple choice – I don't think that you ever are going to be asked to write a text between 700 and 1300 characters and that's it.

Teacher B said that although the curriculum emphasizes intelligibility over form in using a foreign language, the ME requires students to be very exact, and teacher B simply states this fact to their students – telling it how it is (Example 14). Teacher B pointed out how this is yet another aspect where teaching would likely look different were there no national test, i.e., just learning to get the message across. They also expressed a desire to practice oral skills more (Example 15). Considering this with the fact that teacher B already tests oral skills on every course, they clearly see oral skills as both valuable and at least somewhat underpracticed in the current environment, likely due to the lack of national level testing for it at this time. Teacher B also emphasized that upper secondary English teaching will be influenced for certain the day speaking becomes tested on a national scale.

Example 14

Teacher B: Well this is one, and it's a bit contradictory. Our national curriculum says that, umm, to get your message through is the main point in using language. But, for the test you have to be very exact. It's not just like you just get your message through – you have to be very exact. But when you leave our school, go use it [language], get your message through and it will be enough. But for certain purposes you have to be able to write very nice formal academic English in some situations. So there might be like a thought where I'd like to spend more time somewhere else [if there was no ME] but I have to do this.

Example 15

Teacher B: A nice question. Umm... Perhaps I would spend some more time on oral skills. The day when they are going to be tested, that we really have a test for them, that's going to influence our teaching for sure. For sure. Because we have more pressure on giving them all the possible things they need to get a good grade for that.

As presented in the background chapter, Leontjev and Pollari (2022: 155-156) found the presence of the ME resulting in an assessment culture that leans more towards the summative than the formative side. Leontjev (2022: 146) also later noted upper secondary school assessment culture being affected more by ME than the NCC, with teachers feeling that the two factors contest each other and cannot easily coexist. The comparison of what kind of learning outcomes the NCC expects and what kind of learning outcomes the ME tests seems like another interesting topic for research, especially considering that those two are the main forces guiding course contents and the skills practiced within upper secondary schools, and that they already seem to be at odds with each other in the context of assessment culture. When, for example, the NCC expects students to be able to communicate orally but the ME entirely neglects to test

speaking, different teachers may draw very different conclusions regarding what kind of direct attention and practice oral skills deserve in their classroom – something that would be better investigated in a much larger study than the present one.

4.3 The impact of the ME on students

When asked if the ME creates pressure for the teachers, neither teacher expressed being particularly stressed by it (Examples 16 & 17). However, both teachers had the experience that the ME is an impactful and stressful event for the students, and that students want their teachers to be available for help. This prompted an additional research question (question 3 in the present study chapter) that I did not originally plan to include in this study. However, due to the amount of data the teachers provided on the topic of the ME affecting the emotions and experiences of students, the addition was made.

Example 16

Teacher A: Personally I don't think that I struggle that much. Because I try to prioritize the things that they might need in life. As I said, they study English for life and I hopefully teach English for life as well. Umm, but of course I have to keep in mind that matriculation exam is a big thing for them, so of course I have to prepare them for the skills and exercise types and strategies and stuff like that that they probably will encounter in the matriculation examination.

Example 17

Teacher B: During the last year of their studies here – and I know they're really stressed out because of the test coming – they want their teacher to be... available for the questions for how do you get the maximum points. And of course we want to show them the way.

This is indeed something that seems to repeat in the discourse around the ME; students feel a stronger pressure from the high-stakes exam than teachers do. Though this seems obvious since it has a tremendous impact on future prospects of the students, it should still be clarified. Teacher A also pointed out that students can be both stressed and eager about the ME, but that for some students who feel pressured to choose their target field early on, the joy of learning can suffer (Example 18). This echoes the sentiments of Kupiainen et al. (2018: 183) who said that the student entering upper secondary school is filled with an excessive number of questions around the system of learning rather than the process of learning. It is as if school becomes a strategy puzzle where the goal is to simply complete it optimally, rather than focusing on the journey. Importantly however, this is obviously not the case for every student – something that was later also clarified by Teacher A. Teacher A also confirmed what Nissilä and Tikkanen (2021) as well as Pollari et al. (2022: 230) have written: the ME and its increased presence in

university admissions in recent years has resulted in students studying foreign languages other than English less (Example 19).

Example 18

Teacher A: I know that they are quite anxious in all the meanings of the word. They are slightly stressed but they are also quite eager in a way because matriculation examination is an initiation rite as well. So I think that it has put a bit too much weight on selecting the subjects that you think will give you the best score for the future career, and it puts the stress in year one. And I think that it is way too early because you may change your mind so many times during the three years that you usually are here in upper secondary school. So if I were a dictator, I would let them study whatever they want to study in upper secondary school and find the sort of joy in studying the things that they want without calculating too much that how will this affect my chances to get into university of that particular field or something like that so... I think that in that way it has spoiled the joy of learning in upper secondary school and it has made it even more stressful for them.

Example 19

Teacher A: My view as a researcher is that it has affected studying foreign languages – additional foreign languages – in upper secondary schools, because I know that is the case.

On the topic of what role university entrance exams should have compared to the ME when it comes to higher education admissions, neither teacher had a direct response, indicating that it is either a difficult question to quantify, it is not a very dominant topic on their minds, or more likely a combination of both. However, both teachers made interesting, related points. First, teacher A said that students may sometimes hold the ME to almost an irrationally high regard due to the media overselling its importance to them (Example 20). Secondly, teacher B voiced the opinion that the natural sciences have too large a role in programs where it is not directly relevant to the studies at all, expressing that many students have verbalized it as unfair (Example 21). Although mathematics offers clear benefits for logical thinking, this is an understandable sentiment. It is questionable to think that just because a student is mathematically untalented or simply uninterested, they should have a decreased chance of being admitted to a university program which they might be well suited for that simultaneously has nothing to do with the natural sciences. This also touches on the same topic as the critiques made by Kupiainen et al. (2018: 189-190) on how ME grades for different subjects translate into points for various university programs.

Example 20

Teacher A: I think it's a sort of a sad thing that the media has somehow advertised the matriculation examination and its... the sort of role of the matriculation examination in getting into university. So I think that some of the first year students in upper secondary school may have the impression that EVERYBODY gets in through the matriculation examination. So if you fail a matriculation examination

– I mean not *fail* fail – but sort of not do as well as you’d hope to, then that’s it. You don’t have a chance of getting in.

Example 21

Teacher B: Well not to (laughs) sound like I don’t, I didn’t appreciate all the natural sciences or mathematics related things, but it doesn’t really serve... uhh... people who are more oriented to things not doing anything with maths. It’s not fair. And that’s what we get from our students as well, that you have to be very good at maths although your future career might not have anything to do with that area. And they would like to really use their abilities in languages and so on and so forth. So that’s actually the only thing I know nowadays because I haven’t really followed the discussion about if they have any statistics about so and so many students are left out of a place to study because of this new system – I don’t really know the facts – but what I get from the students they don’t see it as fair, and I don’t see it as a fair system nowadays.

Finally, when questioned about what the role of course grades should be with regards to students’ future prospects, teacher A expressed how they currently play no role whatsoever (Example 22). They said that how despite consistently declaring the unimportance of course grades to the students, some of them unfortunately obsess over the numbers. Teacher A also pointed out that formative assessment should be the focus, but that summative assessment takes up so much time that there is not much left for the former (Example 23). This view is in line with what Leontjev (2022) as well as Leontjev and Pollari (2022) concluded about the assessment culture of upper secondary schools of today.

Example 22

Teacher A: At the moment they don’t play any role. I think that for some universities of applied sciences also take the grade point average, or the average of your course grades of the final certificate of your upper secondary school into account. Umm... I don’t know. Of course it makes course grades somehow futile, so why bother – why do we have to work so hard for the assessment if it has no role at the end of the day? But then again even though students know that it doesn’t any role, they are extremely eager and anxious and stressed of their course grades as well.

Example 23

Teacher A: All assessment should improve learning and so all assessment including course grades should give them feedback on their learning and their studying and their skills and improve them, and give some sort of guidance ... I think that that is important but sometimes we don’t really have that much time for that because summative assessment – the course grades, uhh... create quite a lot of work. By the way do you know how much teachers usually use of their working time for assessment?

Interviewer: No, I’m not familiar with the number.

Teacher A: I don’t... I haven’t sort of counted that either, but according to some international studies it is about 25-35% of all their working time. So if you think of a weekly time of sort of 40 hours of work. So it would be like 15 hours of assessment per week. I think that is a HUGE amount.

To the same question, teacher B expressed similar thoughts although in a different way, saying that it would be nice if all the hard work added up to something, but that right now the only

grade that matters is the last one, being the ME, and if the student is not on point on that day, then that is all they have to show for from upper secondary school (Example 24).

Example 24

Teacher B: Well. Umm, kind of it would be also fair to kind of reward those students who are very, umm, persistent or really put effort on their studies and make it regular and somehow showing that they're ready to work for their language skill. That would be a nice idea to say that all those courses they have done, they really matter, but nowadays it's only the last one they get (ME). And of course we have to take into account all the grades they have had so far – it's not a last year's thing – it's always an average. And I don't know if it truly shows the true talent that they have. You know, they might have their worst grades during the last year so uhh... Yeah, I would like them to be rewarded for all the work they have done during the three years.

Grades are certainly a contentious topic. As Kupiainen et al. (2018: 186) state, the ease at which good grades are given vary between schools and areas, yet teachers still spend a considerable portion of their time on summative assessment, and admissions to upper secondary schools themselves still happen through middle school grade averages. These contesting realities seem like good ground for more research and discourse.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The overarching theme throughout both the background research and the present study is that a balanced approach to learning English is important – a message that also both teachers echoed. It is thus unfortunate that among the four communicative language competences of reading, listening, speaking and writing, the matriculation exam still neglects to test speaking as a skill. Some justification for this is offered by the fact that speaking is logistically a difficult skill to test and assess (Nakatsuhara et al. 2021: 285), though many of the same problems exist with tests that target writing (Yoon & Burton 2021: 295), the other productive skill among the four. Not coincidentally, both teachers agreed that reading and listening, in that order, are the most practiced skills in upper secondary school as well as the skills in which students tend to be strongest at after graduation. Outside of a relative lack of practice and formal testing, one possible explanation for students being weaker at writing and speaking is the productive nature of the two, where the student must formulate and express their own inner thoughts and ideas, which can create barriers especially in the case of speaking. Another explanation is that the English language is commonly present in our everyday life via movies, videos, music and social media as mentioned by Härmälä and Marjanen (2022), contributing to students' receptive skills.

Undoubtedly related to holding a balanced approach to language learning in high value, both teachers also stated that they teach English for life, refusing to mention the ME at all to first year students. However, both again agreed that it must be addressed eventually, in part because it is their duty to enable the students to succeed on a high stakes exam that affects their academic paths, but to possibly even a larger part because students themselves are anxious, excited or stressed to learn the strategies involved in the ME. It is thus not surprising that the teachers expressed the ME affecting the students much more than themselves regarding the mental stress and pressure it creates. Some students get particularly stressed about the high stakes national test, and according to both teachers, upper secondary school can turn more into a strategy game of choosing the courses and subjects that yield the most points in the end, rather than studying the subjects and taking the courses that the student finds the most interesting or enjoyable. Both teachers also wanted to point out the fact that studying for the ME and studying for life often overlap, i.e., they are not mutually exclusive endeavors.

One interesting topic that arose from outside the scope of what the present study was designed to examine was that of the assessment culture in upper secondary school. The only two ways of being admitted to a university in Finland are through the ME grades, and through the respective entrance exam – course grades play no role whatsoever. This is understandable, as the ease or difficulty at which good course grades are given varies a lot from school to school Kupiainen et al. (2018: 186). What is less obvious is why teachers then need to spend so much time on summative assessment when the numbers have no impact, and the time could be spend on formative assessment instead – something that the NCC also advocates.

Because only two teachers were interviewed, the results of this study are obviously not generalizable. However, the views exhibited by the teachers were in both cases based on decades of experience in the field, arguably contributing to the reliability of said views. The choice of conducting the interviews in English was one that might have been better off abandoned in place of Finnish, considering that even though the subjects were highly proficient speakers of English, the register which the present study required would likely have been clearer and easier in Finnish, both teachers being native speakers of Finnish. However, this likely did not influence the findings, only the process itself. Dividing and confining language proficiency into the four categories of reading, listening, speaking and writing was the obvious choice and seemed to work well, especially considering that the present study was strongly linked to the

ME that tests three of said skills, with spoken tests also being constantly discussed and contemplated within the discourse.

With the changing landscape of technology and working life, it is always valuable to have more research on what skills students need in their academic and professional lives and what skills they acquire from primary and secondary education, and whether these two match. This study demonstrated that at least some students strongly orient their studying process to whatever achieves the best possible scores on the ME, the only national test in the Finnish educational system, and one in which oral skills in English are not yet tested. However, these skills are nonetheless crucially valuable in the real world and should be given more attention, especially considering that the interviewees noted students generally being weaker in productive compared to receptive skills after graduating from upper secondary school.

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APPENDIX

Interview questions

1. How long have you taught in upper secondary school?
2. What courses do you teach?
3. Do you do any other work related to language research or pedagogy?
4. What English skills or areas do you think are the most important for upper secondary students to learn?
5. What kind of activities do you use for practicing and testing reading comprehension?
6. What kind of activities do you use for practicing and testing writing?
7. What kind of activities do you use for practicing and testing listening comprehension?
8. What kind of activities do you use for practicing and testing oral skills?
9. How much would you say each of these skills receive attention relative to each other? (For example direct and indirect practice, testing, assessment)
10. What areas of English do you think students tend to be strongest at after graduating?
11. What about weakest?
12. For students applying to higher education, what are your views on the impact the matriculation exam currently has?
13. How much impact should entrance exams have in comparison?
14. What role should course grades play?
15. How much do you feel the matriculation exam influences your English teaching?
16. What, if anything, would you do differently if there was no matriculation exam or its equivalent?
17. How do you balance the following two things: preparing the students for the matriculation exam, and teaching things that are likely not tested there, yet still useful? (Such as oral skills, interaction skills, or general skills that cross subject-boundaries)