

**FINNISH UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOW WELL CURRENT ENGLISH TEACHING PREPARES FOR THE MATRICULATION EXAMINATION**

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<p>Tiivistelmä - Abstract</p> <p>Ylioppilaskokeiden painoarvo Suomessa on kasvanut merkittävästi vuosina 2018–2020 toteutetun opiskelijavalinta-uudistuksen myötä: useat korkeakoulut ovat siirtyneet valitsemaan enemmistön opiskelijoistaan ylioppilastodistusten perusteella. Tämän vuoksi on syytä tutkia, valmistaako suomalainen lukiokoulutus opiskelijansa riittävän hyvin ylioppilaskokeita varten. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy erityisesti englannin kielen opetukseen ja oppimiseen.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää nykyisten lukiolaisten tai aiemmin Suomessa lukiokoulutuksensa saaneiden henkilöiden kokemuksia siitä, kuinka hyvin lukion englanninopetus valmistaa ylioppilaskokeeseen. Tutkimuksen aineisto on kerätty kyselylomakkeella, jossa kielitaidon eri osa-alueet ovat jaoteltuna ylioppilaskokeessa testattavien kategorioiden mukaisesti kuullunymmärtämiseen, luetunymmärtämiseen, tekstin tuottamiseen ja kielioppiin. Kyse-lyyn on myös sisällytetty kysymyksiä koskien suullista kielitaitoa, siitä huolimatta, että se ei tällä hetkellä ole osa kielten ylioppilaskokeita. Suullisen osion sisällyttämisestä ylioppilaskokeisiin on keskusteltu paljon vuosien varrella, joten myös sen opettamisen riittävydestä on relevanttia kerätä lisää tietoa. Kyselyn tulokset analysoidaan pääasiassa määrällisesti tilastollisesti kuvaavan analyysin avulla.</p> <p>Analyysi osoittaa, että enemmistö vastaajista kokee kuullunymmärtämisen ja tekstin tuottamisen harjoittelun lukion englannintunneilla riittämättömäksi ylioppilaskokeen kannalta. Mahdollisina selityksinä tälle nousee avoimissa vas-tauksissa muun muassa ylioppilaskokeen kuullunymmärtämistehtävien vaikeus ja sekä kuullunymmärtämisen että kirjallisen tuottamisen vähäinen harjoittelu. Sen sijaan luetunymmärtämisen opetus koetaan pääosin riittäväksi. Vas-taukset osoittavat, että kieliopin harjoittelu koetaan jopa liialliseksi, suuren harjoittelumäärän viedessä aikaa muihin kielen osa-alueisiin keskittymiseltä. Suullista tuottamista käsittelevät vastaukset osoittavat, että vastaajat pitävät sitä kaikista vähiten harjoiteltuna kielen osa-alueena.</p> <p>Näiden tulosten perusteella lukion englannin kielen opetusta tulisi kehittää siten, että opetus vastaisi riittävydeltään ja vaikeustasoltaan paremmin ylioppilaskokeen tasoa, jotta kaikilla opiskelijoilla olisi tasavertaiset mahdollisuudet pärjätä kokeissa kielitaidon lähtötasosta riippumatta.</p> <p>Tulokset eivät ole laajemmin yleistettävissä, sillä tutkimukseen osallistui 26 vastaajaa. Tämän vuoksi lisää tutkimusta aiheesta kaivataan. Tuleva tutkimustieto voisi myös pyrkiä selvittämään syitä tuloksille: Mistä opiskelijoiden kokema riittämättömyys tiettyjen osa-alueiden kohdalla johtuu?</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The matriculation examinations are the only nationwide standardized tests in Finland. In order to graduate from upper secondary school, the students have to successfully complete the examinations according to the requirements set by the Finnish Matriculation Examination Board, along with completing courses included in the upper secondary school curriculum.

While graduating from upper secondary school has always been a remarkable achievement in a young person's life, it has recently become much more significant; in the majority of academic disciplines in Finnish universities, more than half of the positions are presently assigned based on success in the matriculation examinations.

Since the matriculation examinations are so prominent in the current context, it is important to examine how well the students are prepared for them. Therefore, this study seeks to discover how well does upper secondary English education prepare the students for the matriculation examination test, and if every skill needed in the examinations is taught comprehensively enough. If the English teaching is not sufficient, it would be unjust to expect the students to succeed in the examinations with only the information they have received through formal education. This specifically has not been studied in Finland previously, although some studies (see Yliluoma, 2022) have studied whether the four main communicative goals of language teaching, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, are balanced in upper secondary English teaching.

The present study aspires to use authentic data and thus focuses on the perceptions of current or former upper secondary school students.

The overall aim of this study is to discover whether upper secondary school English teaching in Finland is comprehensive enough considering the matriculation examinations. Research that would critically evaluate the current state of English teaching with regard to the matriculation examination has not yet been conducted. By providing the students' perceptions of how well all the areas of language competence are taught, this study can provide useful information for developing upper secondary education further.

Firstly, this thesis explores previous literature around the topic, thus situating the current study to its field. Secondly, research questions, as well as data and analysis methods will be presented, after which the data will be analyzed. Finally, the study moves on to discussion and conclusions about its results.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

This section looks into previous research on the topic, and by doing so seeks to provide a theoretical framework for the current study in the field of foreign language teaching and teaching development.

### **2.1 The English Matriculation Examination in Finland**

The Finnish Matriculation Examinations (from now on referred to as ME's) are held twice a year, and they are the only nationwide standardized examinations in the country (Leontjev, 2022, p. 134). The purpose of the ME's is to measure whether students have acquired the knowledge and skills required by the Finnish national core curriculum for upper secondary education (FNCCUE) and have reached sufficient maturity to meet the objectives of upper secondary education (The Matriculation Examination Board, n.d.). According to the most recent data from the Finnish Matriculation Examination Board, altogether 22 041 students registered to participate in the English ME solely in the fall of 2023. The English ME consists of four sections, each of which is designed to test a specific subcategory of language proficiency: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary and structures, and written production.

Finland had a remarkable reform of student selection in higher education implemented in the spring of 2020. With the reform, in most fields of study over half of the places are now allocated on the basis of success in the ME, the rest by entrance examination or other selection methods (Karhunen et al., 2022). Thus, the role of ME is now more significant than ever. To guarantee that the students receive enough information on all four categories tested in the English ME, it is important to study how the students perceive the comprehensiveness of upper secondary English education. Currently, research on this is very limited.

## **2.2 Existing research on upper secondary English teaching in Finland**

Although there is not much existing research that evaluates the contents of upper secondary English courses, this research gap has not gone totally unnoticed. Yliluoma (2022) conducted an interview study on a similar subject as the present study, also based on the recently increased role of the ME in Finland. The aim of the study was to find out whether the four main communicative language competences, namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking, were balanced in Finnish upper secondary school teaching. Yliluoma connected this theme to the ME's by further analyzing whether the examination has any impact on the learning or the teaching.

The study was conducted as an interview for two upper secondary school English teachers with a considerable amount of experience in the field. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed Yliluoma to ask for more information or clarification if needed. The interview questions were categorized in the following manner:

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. (Yliluoma, 2022, p. 10)

Although both interviewees appreciated all the language skills equally, they perceived that reading is the most frequently practiced skill. Similarly, both teachers viewed listening getting the second most attention in teaching. According to the interviewees, writing, on the other hand, tends to be the least practiced skill. It was also brought up that the frequency of exposure each skill receives varies a lot between different courses (Yliluoma, 2022, p. 12).

Yliluoma's (2022) study offers an interesting counterpart to the present study. Whereas the aims are fundamentally very similar, the previous study presented the teachers' views on the subject, while this study seeks to provide the students' perceptions. While it must be recognized that Yliluoma (2022) interviewed only two teachers, and so the findings of the study cannot be generalized further, this still creates an opportunity to compare the results and opens possibilities for future research.

## **2.3 Absence of bias in ME**

Matriculation examinations are not exclusive to Finland, so studies regarding the test itself have been conducted around the world. For instance, Cheng and Qi (2009) examined the contents of China's equivalent, the National Matriculation English Test

(NMET) and the “validity, reliability, discrimination power, fairness, impact, and washback” of it. Cheng and Qi analyze the test using Anthony Kunnan’s test fairness framework (2004). Kunnan’s framework can be used to evaluate a test’s fairness through five points: 1) validity, 2) absence of bias, 3) access, 4) administration and 5) social consequences (pp. 37-39). While analyzing the absence of bias in the NMET, Cheng and Qi address the problem with foreign accents in listening exercises. Cheng and Qi discuss the fact that audio materials used in education were recorded solely by British speakers for a long time, but the NMET’s had started using audio materials with different English accents as well. This created a bias since the formal education had familiarized the students with only the British variant (p. 62).

The Finnish Matriculation Examination might have the same issue even in the current context. Mäki-Penttilä (2015) studied teacher trainees’ perceptions of English accents and pronunciation and the teaching of those. According to Mäki-Penttilä, the teacher trainees he interviewed were not satisfied with education on different English accents, with the trainees stating they had not been taught different accents well enough during their time in school. The only exceptions were British English, American English, and an occasional example of Australian English (p. 19). Despite this, the National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary Education (2019) lists different accents and registers as one of the aims for the education:

Upper secondary school language teaching develops students' multilingual competence, which consists of different levels of proficiency in first languages, national languages, and foreign languages, as well as their different dialects and registers (p. 174).

Different English accents have also made their way into the ME’s through listening comprehension exercises. This could be seen as questionable considering that studies such as Mäki-Penttilä’s suggest that at least some Finnish students feel like the subject is not covered well enough. On the other hand, in Yliluoma’s (2022, p. 14) study one of the interviewees mention that based on their experience, the students usually seem confident in self-evaluations about listening comprehension exercises, regardless of accent or the speaker. However, it is important to consider that Yliluoma’s study focused on the teachers’ perspectives, whereas Mäki-Penttilä studied the perceptions of the education current teacher trainees have received in school.

## **2.4 Balance between reading, writing, listening, and speaking**

While research that compares the English matriculation examination and the contents of teaching is currently limited, some research on English competence acquired in Finnish schools has been conducted. For instance, Härmälä and Marjanen studied the



English skills of Finnish 9th grade students in 2021. The aim of this large-scale study was to gather reliable, national data on the achievement of the objectives set in the basic education curriculum of 2014. The data consisted of different English exercises, including listening and reading comprehension tasks, as well as speaking and writing tasks. The students' language skills were then assessed based on these exercises. The assessment was based on the European Framework of Reference for Languages, where level B1.1 (functional basic language skills) corresponds to a school grade of 8 on a scale from 4 to 10. The assessment was conducted electronically (pp. 4-5).

Even though this study does not directly provide information about to what extent each language competence has been taught during the primary education, the results could also implicate or project this. Thus, the findings of Härmälä and Marjanen (2022) are worth exploring in this study.

The study by Härmälä and Marjanen (2022) discovered that reading comprehension was the strongest skill among the students finishing their primary education, with 52.2% reaching the level B1.1 (p. 5). This corresponds with Yliluoma's (2022) study, in which the considerably experienced teachers viewed reading as the most frequently practiced skill also in upper secondary school (p. 12). According to Härmälä and Marjanen, speaking was the second strongest skill, with 38% reaching the B1.1 level, and listening comprehension followed right after with 34% of the respondents. According to the study, only 29% of the students were able to reach B1.1 level in writing (p. 5). This result also corresponds with Yliluoma's research, where the interviewed teachers estimated writing to be the least practiced skill in upper secondary education (p. 12).

Although Härmälä and Marjanen (2022) conducted their study on students who were finishing their primary education, and Yliluoma (2022) on upper secondary school teachers, it is interesting to notice a connection between the strongest and weakest skills and the most and the least taught skills. Since research shows that writing is the weakest skill among students after primary education, but it could also be seen as the least frequently practiced skill in upper secondary education, it could suggest that upper secondary education should be emphasizing text production more prominently than it currently is. If all the subcategories of language proficiency are not covered sufficiently, the students cannot be expected to succeed in the different parts of the ME.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

This section presents the research questions, how the data was collected, and how it was analyzed.

#### **3.1 Aims and research questions**

As the aim of this study is to find out how well does upper secondary school English teaching prepare the students for matriculation examinations currently, the research questions are:

*RQ 1) According to the students' perceptions, how well does upper secondary school English teaching prepare for the matriculation examination test in Finland?*

*RQ 2) How well are the skills tested in the matriculation examination taught in Finnish upper secondary education?*

#### **3.2 Data**

To answer the research questions, the first step is to recognize and categorize the skills that are tested in the current ME's. As stated in the background section above, language competence is often divided into four main communicative competences: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, this division does not compare to the contents of the ME as such; the current examination lacks a test of oral skills, which has been widely criticized by many studies (see Ahola-Houtsonen, 2013; Keränen,

2017; Smedberg, 2019; Suutarinen, 2013). The traditional division of language competence, on the other hand, does not acknowledge grammatical abilities separately, but testing the students' grammar skills is its individual part of the ME. Therefore, this study takes grammatical abilities into account as a separate entity, and so language competence is divided into five categories: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, written production, grammatical competence, and oral production, which will be acknowledged in the questionnaire even though it is not currently part of the ME's.

The data for this study is gathered through a questionnaire conducted on Webropol, a platform specifically created for making and distributing surveys. Since this study focuses on the Finnish context, the target group for the questionnaire is current or former students who have received their upper secondary education in Finnish schools. There was a total of 26 respondents.

The questionnaire is constructed according to the categorization of skills required in the ME. There are two same basic questions for each of the skills (except for oral production), which are:

- 1) How often was skill X practiced in upper secondary school English lessons?  
and
- 2) On a scale of 0-5, rate whether skill X was sufficiently practiced with regard to the English ME (0= not practiced sufficiently, 5= Fully sufficient practice)

For the first question, the Likert scale is used. The options and their explanations are: 1) never, 2) rarely, 3) sometimes, 4) often, and 5) always. The second question uses a slider switch, allowing the respondents to evaluate how satisfied they were with the teaching of each of the skills. In addition to the basic questions, there are two single-answer multiple choice questions for scaling the least and most practiced skills. At the end of the questionnaire there is also an open question. This provides the respondents with an opportunity to express their perceptions freely in case the questions fail to cover something noteworthy. Furthermore, there is one additional question regarding the teaching of different English dialects in the listening comprehension part of the questionnaire.

### **3.3 Methods**

Since the data for this study is mostly numeral, quantitative analysis, more specifically descriptive statistics, will be used for analysis. As Denscombe (2014) summarizes, descriptive statistics provide a precise way to describe the profile of the data, including

frequencies, averages, and distribution. For descriptive statistics it is common to draw correlations between parts of the data, trying to find connections. According to Denscombe, the method offers overall a straightforward way to summarizing and presenting the findings. Taking these principals into account, the most obvious trends have been recognized from the data and will be presented and discussed further in the next section. Averages between responses regarding the different sections will be compared to discover whether the respondents are equally satisfied with the teaching of each skill.

Responses for the open question will be analyzed partially quantitatively, examining how frequently a specific skill is mentioned in the answers. However, these responses require qualitative analysis as well, analyzing the content of the responses more thoroughly.

## 4 ANALYSIS

This section will analyze the data collected through the questionnaire. The data will be analyzed in five separate sub-sections, following the division of language competences established in the previous section: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, written production, grammar, and oral production.

### 4.1 Listening comprehension

The questionnaire had three questions concerning listening comprehension: one regarding the representation of different varieties, one about the frequency of practicing said skill, and one where the respondents had to evaluate if they felt the skill was practiced comprehensively enough.

Listening comprehension exercises in the ME's may vary in type, some being multiple choice questions, some requiring the students to write down their own answers (List of English ME's, The Finnish public broadcasting corporation Yleisradio, n.d.). The exercises often utilize authentic audio- and video materials, for example excerpts from radio programs, podcasts, or vlogs. When looking at Finland's English ME's from the past five years, every exam out of the ten have included these types of exercises (List of English ME's, The Finnish public broadcasting corporation Yleisradio, n.d.). Due to the authentic nature of the materials, the excerpts may include different accents. However, when the respondents were asked to choose all the English varieties they got acquainted with during their upper secondary English lessons, there was only one variety that all 26 respondents marked down: British English. The three most answered varieties alongside British English were American, Australian and Indian English. The options outside these four included Irish English, Scottish English, Jamaican English, and other varieties that were not listed. Each of these options were

checked by less than 50% of the respondents. Based on this data, it seems that different varieties of English are not represented comprehensively during upper secondary education. The FNCCUE from 2019 states that the education should develop students' multilingual competence, which includes, for example, foreign languages, their dialects, and registers. Since the ME's are drafted based on the national core curriculum, these results could suggest that listening comprehension is not practiced sufficiently in regard to the ME's.

When asked how often was listening comprehension practiced in English lessons in upper secondary school, the majority of the respondents, 58% (N=15), chose option 3 (sometimes). 31% (N=8) of the respondents answered 4 (often), and the rest, 11,5% (N=3) chose 2 (rarely). None of the respondents chose options 1 (never) or 5 (always), as seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1 How often was listening comprehension practiced in English lessons in upper secondary school?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	In total
0	3	15	8	0	26
0 %	11,5 %	57,7 %	30,8 %	0 %	

The respondents were also asked to evaluate on a scale from 0 to 5 whether listening comprehension was practiced enough considering the ME, and the average score of the respondents to this question was 3,2. Compared to the other areas taken into account in the questionnaire, this score is one of the lowest, suggesting that the respondents are least satisfied with how well they were taught listening comprehension. These results align with the comments received in an open-ended question "Do you feel that there is a particular area or skill that could have benefited from more practice? Was too much time spent practicing a skill in class?"; five out of seven responses mentioned listening comprehension as something that should have been practiced more. One of the responses highlighted the importance of analyzing the contents of listening exercises:

Extract 1

Every lesson had reading comprehension and every now and then listening exercises, but I don't think that for an average student just listening was enough - we didn't process the material we heard enough in my opinion.

Jokaisella tunnilla oli luetunymmärtämistä ja aina välillä kuunteluharjoituksia, mutta en usko, että keskiverto oppilaalle pelkästään kuunteleminen oli tarpeeksi - me emme käsitelleet kuultua aineistoa mielestäni tarpeeksi.

Another respondent emphasized the level of difficulty in the ME's, saying that the listening comprehension exercises in the examination were very hard and seemed almost like conundrums. In relation to this, it was also mentioned that many had difficulties with different accents and idioms. Fourth respondent reported that listening was not practiced until the last year of upper secondary school:

Extract 2

Listening comprehension was not practiced much during upper secondary school, until the final year, in the form of listening "tests" particularly in preparation for the matriculation exams. Listening comprehension is my weakest area, and it had a negative impact on my final exams.

Kuullunymmärtämistä ei juurikaan harjoiteltu lukion aikana, ennen kuin vasta viimeisenä vuonna nimenomaan ylioppilaskokeisiin valmistavien kuuntelu"kokeiden" muodossa. Kuullunymmärtäminen on minulla on itselläni heikoin osa-alue, ja vaikuttikin ylioppilaskokeessani negatiivisesti.

Based on the answers regarding listening comprehension, it seems that students feel they could benefit from more practice. As one of the respondents noted, it would be important to not only do the exercises and go over the correct answers, but also process and analyze the content more thoroughly.

The results compare with previous research to some extent. As mentioned in the literature review of this study, Härmälä and Marjanen (2022) found that listening is the second weakest skill among students finishing their primary education, which does correlate with the current findings. However, in Yliluoma's (2022) study, the interviewed teachers estimated listening getting the second most attention after reading in upper secondary English lessons. This contradiction could be a result of the sheer difficulty of listening comprehension exercises in the ME, since the open answers suggest that they are seen as very demanding. There might also be some school- or teacher-specific variation on how often listening comprehension is practiced.

## 4.2 Reading comprehension

In ME reading comprehension exercises the students need to possess extensive vocabulary, including synonyms, as well as ability to understand and internalize different types of texts (Perälä, n.d.).

Regarding reading comprehension, there were two questions: How often was it practiced during upper secondary English lessons and do the respondents feel it was enough.

Again, as can be seen in Table 2, none of the respondents chose option 1 (never) when asked about the frequency of practicing. Whereas with listening comprehension the most popular option was 3 (sometimes), with reading comprehension the most frequent option was 4 (often). This would indicate that reading comprehension is practiced more than listening.

TABLE 2 How often was reading comprehension practiced in English lessons in upper secondary school?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	In total
0	3	6	14	3	26
0 %	11,5 %	23,1 %	53,9 %	11,5 %	

When asked to evaluate on a scale from 0 to 5 whether the skill was practiced comprehensively regarding the ME, the average score was 3,5. This is the second highest average score compared to the same question about other skills.

19% (N=5) chose reading comprehension as the most practiced skill of all, while 12% (N=3) named it as the least practiced one. Since this is a small-scale study, any further conclusions cannot be drawn from this controversy. However, these results could indicate differences in practices between schools or individual teachers.

As quoted in the previous sub-section, one of the respondents mentioned that reading comprehension was practiced in every lesson. In addition to that, reading comprehension was mentioned in two other answers to the open-ended question, both of which expressed that more time should have been spent to reading different types of texts.

Based on these results, it seems that most the respondents were satisfied with how well reading comprehension is practiced: the majority of respondents reported that it was practiced often. However, some of the responses contradict with this. Three respondents chose it as the least practiced skill, and a total of three answers to the open-ended question mentioned that they would have benefited from more practice.



### 4.3 Written production

The written production part of ME's evaluates the students' abilities to communicate clearly and pleasantly in a foreign language, to use the foreign language as authentically and accurately as possible, and to use words and phrases stylistically appropriate to the chosen topic (Perälä, n.d.). Based on past examinations, the texts are either narrative, descriptive, abstract, or argumentative. Speeches are also a common theme for the written production part (Perälä, n.d., List of English ME's, The Finnish public broadcasting corporation Yleisradio, n.d). Written production is the largest single part of the examination: The maximum number of points for the text are 99, which makes up roughly a third of the overall maximum points (299).

Questions regarding written production were the same two as for reading comprehension: How often was it practiced and do the respondents feel it was enough. The results are very similar to the first category, listening comprehension, as can be seen in Table 3. 50% (N=13) of the respondents reported that writing was practiced sometimes, 35% (N=9) chose option 4, often, and 15% (N=4) chose 2, rarely.

TABLE 3 How often was writing longer texts (e.g. essays, opinion pieces, blog posts, letters, emails, etc.) practiced in English lessons in upper secondary school?

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	In total
0	4	13	9	0	26
0 %	15,4 %	50,0 %	34,6 %	0 %	

When asked to evaluate on a scale from 0 to 5 whether the skill was practiced comprehensively regarding the ME, the average score was 3,2, which is the same as with listening comprehension.

38% (N=10) chose writing as the least practiced skill during upper secondary English education. If we exclude oral production, which is not currently tested in the ME's, the results show that writing was overall the least practiced skill among the respondents.

These results correspond with the responses to the open-ended question. One respondent stated that written production was the most difficult part of the examination, saying that it should have been practiced more. Another respondent reported that writing was almost completely neglected during upper secondary education. The same answer emphasizes the importance of practicing writing longer texts, mentioning important aspects such as organizing a text:

### Extract 3

I think writing longer texts should be practiced more in upper secondary, because we only wrote about two texts that were longer than one sentence. By practicing writing more, structural errors could be avoided in the exam, and you would be able to form better paragraphs.

Minusta lukiossa pitäisi enemmän harjoitella pidempien tekstien kirjoittamista, sillä kirjoitimme lukion aikana vain noin kaksi yhtä lausetta pidempää tekstiä. Harjoittelemalla kirjoittamista enemmän välttyisi yo-kokeessa rakennevirheiltä ja muodostaisi parempia kappaleita.

The results regarding written production align with previous research. In Yliluoma's (2022) study the interviewed teachers estimated writing as the least practiced skill. Härmälä and Marjanen (2022) also found writing to be the weakest skill among students finishing their primary education.

These findings could suggest more attention should be given to written production. As mentioned, one single writing task makes up a third of the total points in the English ME. While written production is the biggest part of the ME, it seems like it is also one of the least practiced skills which is problematic.

## 4.4 Grammar

In the current English ME, there is no separate section for testing only grammatical abilities. Instead, grammar and vocabulary are combined as one. The most recent exercises follow the same pattern: typically, there is a text with some missing words, and the students need to produce the missing word or words in the correct form based on Finnish translation that is provided (List of English ME's, The Finnish public broadcasting corporation Yleisradio). Sometimes the students need to choose the correct alternative from English options, for instance: "Their exclamations when they see the myriad stars with the Milky Way stretching from a) a horizon b) horizon c) the horizon to horizon in a truly dark sky" (Matriculation Examination Board, Fall 2023).

In the past five ME's, from fall of 2022 to spring of 2024, the section for grammar and vocabulary has consisted of two or three questions, with their combined worth varying from 29 to 38 points. This makes grammar the shortest part of the examination. It is also worth the least points.

The questionnaire had the same two basic questions about grammar as about the previous categories: How often was it practiced and do the respondents feel it was enough with regard to the ME. The results suggest that grammar was practiced most of all during upper secondary school, with the vast majority of 69% (N=18) of the respondents choosing it as the most practiced area of language competence. Most

respondents, 54% (N=14), reported that grammar was practiced often, and 35% (N=9), chose option 5, always. None of the respondents chose options 1 (never) or 2 (rarely). When asked about the sufficiency of practicing grammar on a scale from 0 to 5, grammar received the highest average score of all the different areas, 4,5.

Grammar is also the only skill that the respondents reported receiving too much time in upper secondary English lessons. This was brought up in two of the answers to the open-ended question:

#### Extract 4

As a student of English and having learned a lot more about languages, I would argue that it might not be so important to practice grammar the most of ALL of them [the skills], it is of course a terribly important area, but I would say that balancing all these areas so that they are practiced more or less equally would be more useful when looking at the big picture.

Näin englanninkielen opiskelijana ja paljon lisää kielistä oppineena, väittäisin, että kielioppia ei olisi ehkä aivan niin tärkeää harjoitella KAIKISTA [osa-alueista] eniten, on se tietenkin ihan hirveän tärkeä osa-alue, mutta sanoisin, että näiden kaikkien osa-alueiden tasapainottaminen niin, että kaikkia harjoiteltaisiin lähemmäs yhtä paljon, olisi kokonaisuutta katsoessa hyödyllisempää.

#### Extract 5

I think quite a lot of time was spent on grammar in the lessons. More time could have been left for reading, writing, and speaking.

Mielestäni kielioppiin käytettiin tunneilla melko paljon aikaa. Siihen käytettyä aikaa olisi voinut jättää enemmän lukemiselle, kirjoittamiselle, ja puhumiselle.

These responses seem to value the communicative nature of language over the structural side. It could be argued that the ME's as well emphasize other, communicative exercises more, as the part testing grammatical and lexical abilities is notably less extensive compared to the other parts. Interestingly, The FNCCUE (2019) does not explicitly mention grammatical abilities as a learning outcome for any of the obligatory courses. Instead, the learning outcomes emphasize interaction in different contexts, self-expression, being familiar with different genres of texts, and other more communicative goals. In this way the ME seems to align well with the NCC 2019 to which it is based.

Grammar is an important part of a language and teaching grammar is naturally closely tied to teaching all the other areas of language competence as well. However, based on the responses to this questionnaire, it seems that some students feel like part of the time used to teaching grammar could be directed to other skills. Unfortunately, previous research has not separated grammar as its own area of language competence, so these results cannot be compared with other studies. However, considering that the current results seem to indicate that grammar is the most practiced skill during upper

secondary English education, there is a controversy since it is simultaneously the smallest part of the ME.

## 4.5 Oral production

Oral production of English is not currently tested in the Finnish ME's. Despite this, it is included in the present study since there has been plenty of discussion about adding an oral part to the examinations. According to Ahola-Houtsonen (2013), this was first brought up already in the 1980's. The topic has been discussed even in the recent years, as the Finnish Matriculation Examination Board stated that oral testing would become part of the ME's within the next few years (Smedberg, 2017).

Many have studied the current state of teaching English oral skills in Finnish upper secondary schools, as well as the importance of testing them (e.g. Smedberg, 2019; Keränen, 2017; Suutarinen, 2013; Ahola-Houtsonen, 2013). The aforementioned studies criticize the absence of oral part in the ME's, largely because it inevitably affects to the frequency of teaching it: the main goal of upper secondary education is seen to be the ME's, and as speaking is not tested, it is believed that oral skills are not taught comprehensively because of that.

Since the ME's are based on the NCC, it is questionable that oral production is not part of the examination. After all, as mentioned above, the NCC emphasizes abilities to interact, communicate and express oneself in different contexts.

Based on the results from the current study, some students feel like oral communication is not currently being taught comprehensively enough. Most of the respondents, 46% (N=12), named speaking as the least practiced skill in upper secondary education. Moreover, the limited number of oral exercises was brought up in one of the open comments:

### Extract 6

In terms of language use itself, I've also learned that speaking is an extremely important skill, because it's how you communicate with other people face to face, and if you don't practice it enough, it can be difficult and too exciting. This is something that should be emphasized from the very beginning and, as I mentioned in the previous question, I think that speaking was the least practised skill in high school, so it should also be practiced more. Of course, I understand that the English courses in secondary school prepare students for the matriculation examinations, which do not include speaking, but this would be very important for the students' own competence.

Myös itse kielenkäytön kannalta, olen oppinut, että puhuminen on äärettömän tärkeä taito, koska sillä tavoin kommunikoidaan toisten ihmisten kanssa kasvokkain ja jos sitä ei harjoitella tarpeeksi, voi se olla vaikeaa ja liian jännittävää. Tätä kannattaisi alusta asti painottaa ja kuten tuossa edellisessä kysymyksessä mainitsin, minun mielestäni puhumista harjoiteltiin lukiossa vähiten, joten sen osuutta tulisi kyllä lisätä myöskin. Ymmärrän toki, että lukion englannin

kurssit valmistavat ylioppilaskirjoituksiin, joissa ei puhumisosuutta ole, mutta oppilaiden oman osaamisen kannalta tämä olisi todella tärkeää.

The majority of respondents (40%, N=10) reported that speaking was practiced sometimes during the lessons. 16% (N=4) chose option 2, rarely. A combined number of 44% (N=11) of the respondents chose one of the highest options, often (36%) or always (8%).

This topic would be worth studying in a larger-scale study. It would be interesting to see how big of an effect the absence of testing has on teaching oral skills to upper secondary students. It will also be interesting to see will testing oral skills become a part of the ME's, and if so, does that effect the frequency of teaching said skills.

Overall, the data could indicate that some skills, such as listening comprehension and written production would require more frequent or more thorough practicing, while some time could be taken from practicing other areas of linguistic competence, such as grammar. The respondents, with only a few exceptions, seemed to be satisfied with the frequency and quality of practicing reading comprehension. In addition to what has already been said, it needs to be acknowledged that one of the open comments also stated that everything was practiced quite evenly.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to assess how well does upper secondary education prepare its students for the English matriculation examination in Finland. The aim was to provide valuable information not only for teachers of English, but for the Matriculation Examination Board and the Finnish National Agency for Education as well. The data was collected through a questionnaire, directed to current or former upper secondary school students, and the data was analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis. The research questions were:

*RQ 1) According to the students' perceptions, how well does upper secondary school English teaching prepare for the matriculation examination test in Finland?*

*RQ 2) How well are the skills tested in the matriculation examination taught in Finnish upper secondary education?*

To answer the first research question, we must first cover the second one. In terms of the second research question, it seems that some areas of linguistic competence are taught comprehensively enough, whereas some are not. As stated in the analysis section above, the data suggest that some students do not feel like listening comprehension or written production are practiced comprehensively in relation to the ME's.

Härmälä and Marjanen's study (2022) found that listening was the second weakest skill among students finishing their primary education, which correlates to the results of the current study. If listening comprehension is at a relatively low level even before upper secondary education, the students are in a need of frequent practice in it. Thus, the results of this study could be explained by lacking skills in listening comprehension to begin with. Another possible explanation for the respondents not being completely satisfied with the teaching of listening comprehension is the difficulty level of listening exercises in the ME's, as some of the open answer could indicate.

Yliluoma's study (2022) suggests that upper secondary English teachers consider listening being the second most practiced skill. Unlike Härmälä and Marjanen's (2022) findings, this does not correlate with the results of this study. This could suggest that either there are some regional differences in upper secondary English teaching, that the teachers in Yliluoma's study happened to focus on listening more, or that even though listening is practiced, the students feel it is not practiced enough. It is possible as well that the listening exercises in the ME are simply too difficult in comparison to what has been practiced, as some of the open answers to this questionnaire could indicate.

Results regarding written production, on the other hand, correspond with Yliluoma's (2022) findings. According to the responses to the current study, some feel like writing is not practiced comprehensively enough considering the ME's. The teachers Yliluoma interviewed reported as well that writing tends to be the least practiced skill. Härmälä and Marjanen's study similarly discovered writing to be the weakest skill among students finishing their primary education. Again, the low level of competence even before entering upper secondary school could explain why students feel like it should be practiced more.

When it comes to reading comprehension, the teachers Yliluoma's (2022) study considered it to be the most practiced skill. Härmälä and Marjanen (2022) also found it to be the strongest skill among their group of participants. These previous findings seem to be in line with the results of the current study, as the results indicated that respondents were mostly satisfied with the teaching of reading comprehension.

Previous research has not separated grammatical abilities to its own category, so the current results regarding it cannot be compared to anything. It would have been interesting to see what the interviewed teachers in Yliluoma's study think about teaching of grammar, or what level of competence students finishing their primary education in Härmälä and Marjanen's study would have had. However, reflecting to the second research question, the current results suggest that grammar is taught comprehensively enough for the ME's. In fact, some of the open answers even suggest that too much time is spent on practicing grammar. One possible reason for this is that the section covering grammatical knowledge in the ME's is not that extensive compared to the other sections. Thus, the students could manage to complete the section with less practice.

Based on what has been said above, it seems the different skills are not taught equally in relation to each other. This becomes evident when comparing the answers to the question: "How often was skill X practiced in upper secondary school English lessons?". The results also suggest that grammar is practiced more than the other areas of competence. On the other hand, it has to be brought up that one respondent mentioned in an open answer that everything was practiced quite evenly.

In conclusion, it is quite skill-specific how well upper secondary education prepares the students for the ME's. For English teaching in Finnish upper secondary schools, these results could implicate that the time used on practicing the different skills should be distributed more evenly, since more even distribution in practicing could lead to more comprehensive preparation for the ME's in a broader sense. However, as the contents of English lessons are guided by the Finnish NCC for upper secondary education (2019), it might limit the teachers' possibilities to affect what is being taught and how. This would be problematic, since the ME's are based on the NCC as well: if the NCC would restrict teachers from sufficiently preparing their students for the ME's, it would need to be updated. These implications could therefore be beneficial for English teachers, the Finnish Matriculation Examination Board, or the National Agency for Education, which oversees updating the NCC, by helping English teaching in Finland to develop into a more balanced and comprehensive entirety.

Lastly, it must be mentioned that this study is very limited. As there were only 26 respondents, the results cannot be generalized further. It would be interesting to see how the results would look like with more participants from all over the country, as the results quite likely vary depending on a specific school or a teacher. Another suggestion for future research is conducting a similar study, directed to upper secondary school English teachers. An adapted set of the same questions could be used so the results could be compared with the current ones. This would provide another perspective to the same question, as well as reveal whether the results would correspond with one another.



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