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CHAPTER 2.03.6. ASSESSMENT OF WRITTEN PROFICIENCY: FINNISH-SPEAKING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WRITING IN SWEDISH

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This paper presents SVE2JU, an ongoing research project at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland that focuses on Finnish-speaking university students, on their attitudes and motivation towards Swedish, and on their proficiency in written Swedish (Nordqvist Palviainen & Jauhojärvi-Koskelo in press, Palviainen submitted). The State of Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. All Finnish-speaking students are obliged to study Swedish at comprehensive school. University students must also pass a National Certificate language examination in Swedish as part of their university degree. To obtain the certificate, a student must demonstrate a spoken and written proficiency equivalent of at least level 'B1,' or level 'three out of six' on the proficiency scales provided by the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The CEFR scale describes what learners can do in a foreign language in levels from beginning to advanced (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2). Finland has pioneered its use: in addition to the National Certificates language examination, CEFR has been adapted for the National Core Curricula of Finnish schools. The SVE2JU project was initiated in 2006 after university Swedish teachers began to report dramatically weakened language skills. These made it difficult, in turn, for students to pass the National Certification language examination and reach level B1. Moreover, although the CEFR plays a central role in the newest National Core Curricula, few descriptions exist of the linguistic features that correspond to the CEFR proficiency levels.

The SVE2JU project part that focuses on written proficiency has two main aims. One, to examine whether Finnish-speaking students have the written Swedish skills requested by the State, namely at least level B1 on the CEFR scale. Two, to find the linguistic features and textual characteristics that teachers attend to when assessing student performances. Specifically, the project aims to discover the linguistic features typical to written performances at different proficiency levels.

A total of 666 students attending the compulsory course in Swedish at a Finnish-speaking university wrote an 100 to 150 word 'argumentative' text by hand on a topic given by the researcher. A sample 490 essays, seventy texts from each of the seven university faculties, were collected for assessment. Three experienced Swedish teachers trained in using the CEFR assessment scales evaluated the texts and reached an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability (Cronbach's Alpha .834). To search for textual characteristics and their relative weight in explaining the teachers' assessments, 122 of the texts (43 representing level A2, 43 level B1, and 36 level B2) were transcribed and coded in the CHAT-format (MacWhinney 2000). The five measures included were clauses/t-unit (Complexity), errors/clause (Accuracy), words/clause (Fluency) (following Wolfe-Quintero et al. 1998), number of words (Text-length), and vocd (Vocabulary diversity) (Malvern & Richards 1997). Nominal

regression analysis discovered to what extent the five measures predicted the assessments. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to investigate differences between the three levels.

In the assessment, twenty-one texts (4.3 %) were marked A1, 238 texts (48.6 %) A2, 195 texts (39.8 %) B1, and 36 texts (7.3 %) B2. A total 52.9 % of essays were therefore marked levels A1 and A2, below the level required to pass the National Certificates language examination. This high percentage is alarming and indeed points to weak skills (for a more thorough discussion of its implications, see Palviainen submitted). The five measures (Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency, Text length, and Vocabulary diversity) together predicted 87.7 % of the assessments. A model of Accuracy and Text-length explained 81.3 % of the assessments. The ANOVA showed significant main effects for Accuracy ($F(2) = 64.468$, $p = .000$), Fluency ($F(2) = 8.178$, $p = .000$), Text length ($F(2) = 34.484$, $p = .000$), and Vocabulary diversity ($F(2) = 8.724$, $p = .000$), whereas no effect was found for Complexity. Posthoc tests (Bonferroni) showed differences ($p < .05$) between all levels for Accuracy, Fluency, Text length, and Vocabulary diversity, except between A2 and B1 for Fluency and between B1 and B2 for Vocabulary diversity.

The outcomes of the assessment procedure suggest, therefore, that a relatively large group of Finnish-speaking university students do not have sufficient Swedish writing skills according to the State requirements. Moreover, analysis of the assessments showed that the length of texts and their accuracy in terms of lexical and grammatical correctness played a major role for the three teachers when differentiating between performances and levels. Lexical variation seems important in distinguishing between level A2 on the one hand and levels B1 and B2 on the other, whereas higher fluency is an important feature of level B2 in comparison with lower levels. The next step of the project will carry out more detailed and qualitative analyses of the linguistic features typical of the different levels. These will include analysis of types of errors, lexical variation, and of cohesive devices. Finally, the measure of complexity (clauses/t-unit) must be reconsidered and a more detailed analysis of complexity and mastery of linguistic structures at the different levels carried out.

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