

STRIVING TO LEARN VERSUS  
“I KNOW ALL I NEED”:  
The perceived foreign language skill development  
of first-year university history students

Bachelor's thesis  
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## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract  <p>Kielitaidon kehittymistä on tutkittu paljon, mutta korkeakouluissa tapahtuvaa kielellisestä kehitystä ei niinkään, varsinkaan Suomessa. Opiskelijat ovat muutaman pakollisen kielikurssin jälkeen oman motivaationsa varassa, jaksavatko he pitää yllä kielitaitoaan. Tutkimukseni tarkoituksena on tuoda esille, kuinka ensimmäisen vuoden historian opiskelijat näkevät oman kielitaitonsa ja sen kehittymisen joko parempaan tai huonompaan suuntaan vieraiden kielten kanssa heidän omasta mielestään. Tutkimusmateriaali kerättiin kyselylomakkeella, joka jaettiin opiskelijoille heidän ensimmäisen vuotensa maaliskuussa. Kyselylomake oli jaettu kolmeen osaan. Ensimmäinen osa keskittyi heidän kielitaitonsa syntymiseen sekä kehitykseen ennen yliopistossa aloittamista, toinen osa heidän kielitaitonsa kehitykseen ensimmäisen vuotensa aikana ja kolmas heidän tulevaisuuden suunnitelmiinsa kieliä kohtaan.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa selvisi, että opiskelijat eivät nähneet suuria eroja kielitaidoissaan, vaikka heillä olisi ollut opiskelujensa välissä väli vuosia ja vaikka he eivät olleet pitäneet kielitaitoaan yllä aktiivisesti. Englannin kielitaito oli poikkeus, sillä sen nähtiin yleisesti kasvavan jo aikaisemmasta korkeasta tasostaan huolimatta. Opiskelijat pitivät kieliä, etenkin englantia, ja kielitaitoa tärkeänä yhä globalisoituvammassa maailmassa varsinkin tulevan työllistymisensä vuoksi. Sivuaaineenaan historiaa lukevat näkivät kielet tärkeämpinä kuin he, jotka lukivat historiaa pääaineenaan. Molempien ryhmien motivaatio kieliä kohtaan oli kuitenkin erittäin tavoitekeskeistä. Tutkimuksesta voitiin päätellä, että opiskelijoilla on mahdollisesti hieman vääristynyt kuva omasta kielitaidostaan, sillä vähäinen harjoitus rapistaa jokaista kielitaidon osa-aluetta; kielitaito on jatkuvasti kehittyvä osa osaamista. Sen tärkeys on yhä kasvava kansainvälistyvässä maailmassa.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

There is a growing need for knowing more languages than one's mother tongue. In the globalizing world it is important to know at least one of the most spoken languages. The language chosen depends on a variety of reasons, such as geographical location, working prospects and interests. In the Western part of the world, this language is often English. Nowadays, though, it is often not enough to know just one foreign language, no matter how commonly spoken. The world is becoming smaller and the people closer to each other and the need to understand one another is imperative. For example, Finland is a country in Northern Europe located between Sweden and Russia. As a country with a native language that has a low number of speakers, both native and non-native, languages are especially important for the Finns so they can be understood. Language learning is an encouraged and valued part of the Finnish education. However, the motivation for language learning is often very instrumental; students' reasons for learning are often to gain something out of it, such as good grades, not to enjoy it. The pattern is also the same for adults.

Language skill development, second language acquisition and motivation are all very extensively researched. However, few studies have concentrated on the language skill development of university students. They are more often focused on the language learners who have already graduated from higher education, or are still in secondary or upper secondary education. University students come from different backgrounds and are in very different stages of their lives. Hence, their motivations and interests towards languages might vary. This is still an unexplored area of the field, and important to study to understand the adult language learners in higher education and how they continue learning languages: if their habits and motivation change or not.

This study is focused on the first-year university history students in Finland and how they perceive their language skills and the possible change in them. The paper is divided to first introduce the theoretical framework, which entails factors that affect language skill development and then turns its focus from general language learning to adult-focused. Finnish language education system is also introduced to gain background for the participants in the survey. The data and methods are then presented, after which the analysis of the mentioned data commences. The paper concludes with a brief summary of the study and the implications of the findings. The limitations and possible future research are also discussed.

## **2 LANGUAGE SKILL DEVELOPMENT**

I will consider the different aspects influencing language skill development in this part of my study. I will begin with what affects foreign language learning and language skill development universally, afterwards what specifically concerns adult learners. I will end the section by describing second language learning in Finland.

### **2.1. Factors affecting language skill development**

Even though second language acquisition (SLA) is clearly marked with universal tendencies (e.g. developmental sequences, acquisition orders, Universal Grammar), it is clear that SLA learners are not all alike nor do they attain similar degrees of knowledge of proficiency over time (VanPatten and Benati 2010: 42). Individual differences are one of the biggest factors that affect language learning, especially in second language acquisition. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1999) include a long list of individual differences in their research: age, aptitude, motivation, attitude, personality, cognitive style, hemisphere specialization, learning strategies, memory, awareness, will, language disability, interest, sex, birth order, and prior experience. These variables all affect language learning universally, regardless who the learner is. The ones particularly relevant to the study, age, motivation, interest, attitude and prior experience, are elaborated under.

Age is generally thought as the biggest factors affecting language skill development and acquisition. As studies have revealed, ultimate attainment of a second language is more achievable by younger learners but older learners' rate of acquisition is much faster (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1999: 155). Although the latter learn faster, they also forget faster unless they continuously brush up their skills. The younger the learner starts, the better the acquired languages stick.

Motivation in language learning affects the learning process considerably. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1999: 173) introduce how Gardner and Lambert (1959) divide motivation in second language acquisition into two different kinds: integrative and instrumental motivation. The former includes motivation to be a part of a different ethnolinguistic group and identify with it, while the latter entails motivation to learn a language for a specific purpose, i.e. advancing one's career or studies. This division is generally accepted amongst L2 researchers.

Integrative motivation is associated more often with younger learners and instrumental motivation with older learners but the two mixing is not rare.

Interests are also considered as important affecting factors. Freeman and Long (1999: 204) state that Henning (1983) conjectures that successful SLA may be dependent on the interests that a language learner brings to the learning situation. The more the learner is interested in the subject, the more the learner is likely to learn. The situation is the same with the method of learning. One interested in music is likely to learn more through music or otherwise seek aid from it.

Attitude towards languages is another huge factor affecting language learning. L2 learners' attitudes to the target variety of the language are likely to influence their motivation which, in turn, is highly likely to influence their success in acquiring the language (Timmis 2007: 123). A positive attitude towards the target language and people is often needed to develop one's skills. Freeman and Long (1999: 178-179) list factors, for example parents, peers, learning situation, teachers and ethnicity as affecting the attitude of the learner both positively and negatively. Especially the people, whom the learner looks up to, can have a huge effect on the learner. A parent who has a negative attitude towards a language rarely has a positive influence on the learner's attitude towards learning the language. Timmis (2007: 124) states that Ellis (1994) considers attitudes to be one of a set of social variables with the potential to impact on acquisition.

Prior experience and knowledge has a considerable effect on language acquisition and learning. Not only will one's knowledge of one's native language influence SLA, but also knowledge of other languages will have an effect (Freeman and Long 1999: 205). Knowing other languages can have a positive effect when learning new ones, especially if they share features, but also a negative one if the previous learning experiences have been unpleasant. However, bilinguals will pick up the new language faster and go farther in the acquisition process than monolinguals (Bowden, Sanz and Stafford 2005: 124). This is most likely because of their previous experiences and knowledge of strategies to learn languages.

The reason these factors are especially relevant to this particular study is that they affect the self-perception of learners' language skills. Ushioda and Dörnyei (2009: 3) cite Dörnyei (2005) on a psychological theory of 'possible selves' which says that possible selves represent

individuals' ideas of 'what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming'. The learners have different types of experiences as language learners, so all those factors affect the ideas they have on their language skills: what skills they could have, want to have and are afraid of weakening. Ushioda and Dörnyei (2009: 3-4) continue citing Dörnyei's (2005) second language motivational theory where the central concept is the ideal self, which refers to the representation of the attributes that someone would ideally like to possess (i.e. a representation of personal hopes, aspirations or wishes). The identities of learners that they have built through their lives are a big part on how they perceive their skills and view as ideal. Later they remember their best at something, and the idea of not being as good anymore can be hard to confront, even if the learners have not used their skills for a while, which can create a slight distortion on their self-perception of their skills. On the other hand, the ideal self can also create a strong motivation to reduce the discrepancy between the current and possible future selves (Ushioda and Dörnyei 2009: 4).

## **2.2. Adult second language acquisition**

Adult second language acquisition differs from how younger learners learn. Social and affective factors are likely to vary with age and may favour younger L2 learners (Bowden, Sanz and Stafford 2005: 110). Younger learners, for example, may have more desires to assimilate into the L2 culture, have more motivation and/or have a more positive attitude towards language learning. It is likely that quality and frequency of language input and use is quite different for a child acquiring language compared to that of an adult (ibid.). Younger learners often have greater chances to come in contact with native or other speakers and different situations regarding languages. They are given more chances to be exposed to languages in school and other environments than most adults. Bowden, Sanz and Stafford (2005: 127) also state that empirical research since the 1970s has supported the claim that elements of L2 performance decline with increasing age. It is likely that biological changes and deterioration are enhanced by the lack of opportunities and interest.

Adults, despite not being offered as many chances to learn and/or improve their language skills, often have more experience and are more flexible regarding languages and language learning than younger people. Experienced language learners have more strategies to develop their skills unlike their less experienced counterparts. They look for more sources of input, make early efforts to use the new language, and show self-direction and a positive attitude

toward the task (Bowden, Sanz and Stafford 2005: 122). They also have clearer goals and reasons why they learn languages. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1999: 175) quote Cooper (1981) about the importance of the language learning context: ‘If most students had to know a given foreign language in order to accomplish some goal to them, then most would learn it.’ This is most likely why instrumental motivation is more common with adults than integrative motivation. Advancing a career or another similar goal is often a reason for the adult learners to learn languages.

### **2.3. Language learning in Finland**

Finland values language learning. The country has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. Majority of Finnish people speak Finnish as their native language. Students are encouraged to learn other languages too through basic education as well as higher education. The foreign languages offered depend on where the school is located. Different regions of Finland value different languages. For example, especially Eastern Finland values Russian because of the long shared border with Russia. French and German are also more widely offered foreign languages around Finland while Spanish has a growing standing in Finnish school system. English and the second official language, Swedish, are exceptions as they are offered in every school. Learning English can be started either in first, third or fifth grade and Swedish or Finnish in third or seventh grade. This depends on the language learning choices made in primary school. Starting English is not stated in the law but, as it is, it is considered an obvious choice. Elaborated under is the foreign language learning base in Finnish education.

In the Finnish National Board of Education’s Syllabus for Basic Education (2014: 130; 215; 368) meant for primary and lower secondary schools, it is stated that at least one advanced language and one semi-advanced language syllabus belong in a student’s curriculum. One of these is the second official language (Swedish or Finnish) and an unspecified foreign language or Sami language. English is only offered as an advanced language and is the most common foreign language to be learnt. A semi-advanced curriculum for English can be drawn up, however, in special cases on local level (ibid.).

In upper secondary school, studying one advanced and one semi-advanced language is mandatory. In the matriculation exams at the end of the studies it is also mandatory to take an



exam on at least one advanced foreign language. The language learners are otherwise encouraged to study as many languages as they wish. The Finnish National Board of Education's Syllabus for Upper Secondary School (2015: 115), for example, state that students are encouraged to learn and strengthen their skills to act in culturally and linguistically various contexts both locally as well as internationally.

At university, the language learners have only a few mandatory language courses. At the Finnish university that was in the focus of the present study, there are three: one offered in the learner's native language, one in the second official language and third in an unspecified foreign language. These courses are stipulated by the state to show skills to work in those languages in official capacity in their chosen field. Otherwise the language learners can decide if they want to continue learning languages, often depending on their major. However, language courses are often highly recommended.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

#### **3.1. Research questions**

My collected data is based on first-year history students' self-evaluation on their language skills. I will focus on three different questions in my study.

1. According to the history students, did their language skills develop and/or degrade and what influenced the change?
2. How do the history students regard languages, especially English?
3. What are the history students' plans for the future regarding languages?

As an English major with history as my minors, I contemplated a lot about how other history students felt about languages and what their language skills were like. The lecturers encouraged language learning on the side but I did not know if other students actually considered it. Since I knew that the primary and secondary sources for both Bachelor's and Master's theses are preferred to be in their original, non-translated forms, I wanted to see if the other history students had understood the importance of languages. Thus, I decided early on what I wanted to study for my own Bachelor's thesis. I had three presumptions. First, I believed that history students' perceived language skills either stayed close to same level or

degraded compared to the skills they had before entering university. Secondly, I assumed that only their English skills would develop continuously, since the history course exam books are often written in English which increases vocabulary and develops students' skills. Thirdly, I thought that they would acknowledge languages as relatively important but would likely be satisfied with their current language skills.

## **3.2. Data**

### **3.2.1 Subjects**

The data was collected through a questionnaire during the last basic course of history on March 3, 2015. The subjects (N=33) of my study were all first-year history students at a university in Finland. The only requirements I had were that they studied history as either their major or minor subject and were in their first year of university. There were a few respondents who did not fit the requirements as they were not first-year university students and were removed from the initial number. The gender distribution was 13 males and 20 females. The age distribution was between 19 and 60, where 24 was the age average. 13 of the participants were history majors and 20 minors. All of the participants were native Finnish speakers. The second official language, Swedish, was to be treated as a foreign language if it was not the participants' mother tongue or they were not bilingual. This was mentioned to the participants before handing out the questionnaires. If in some cases Swedish had been participants' first language, then Finnish would have been considered as a foreign language the same manner Swedish was in the study.

The aim was to see whether they felt their language skills changed for better or worse during their first year since entering the university, so the students were asked to assess their own development. I asked and was granted the permit to conduct my questionnaire by the lecturer and course coordinator. I also told the students that answering the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. All the answers were given with their consent.

### 3.2.2 Questionnaire

I chose to use a questionnaire because it is one of the most used methods of collection for experiential, empirical information (Alanen, 2011: 146). A well-constructed questionnaire is on-topic and precise which I strived to be. Alanen (2011: 149) also stated that every part of the questionnaire should link to the research questions. I agreed and only asked what was necessary for my study.

The questionnaire was a combination of closed questions and open questions. The language used in the questionnaire was Finnish, the native language of the students. The questionnaire can be found in the Appendix both in Finnish and English. In the beginning the students were asked to state their gender, age, major and minor subjects and their mother tongue. This was done partly to see their eligibility for the study as well as to determine motivational etc. factors for comparison. The rest of the questionnaire was divided into three parts: past, present and future. I decided to divide the questionnaire in such a way for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted the questionnaire to be clear and easy to understand for both my subjects and myself. Secondly, the division helps linking to the research questions and what the study is about.

The questions covering the past focused on the students' skills before entering the university and created the base for the study. They were asked to list the languages they knew before entering the university as well as evaluate their skills with them. To help them assess their language skills, they were given a Likert scale of 1-5 (very basic-excellent) to base their assessment on. The students were also asked to tell where and how they learnt the languages and if they had gap years. The first part of the questionnaire was the longest with six questions.

The present focused on their first year and consisted of three questions. To be able to see the difference between the past and present, the students were asked to list any new languages they had learnt but also to list all languages they knew and evaluate their skills again. They were then asked to consider if their skills had developed or degraded and why that was.

The future focused on their plans for future regarding languages. The students were asked to tell if they had plans to study languages in the future but also if they felt that languages are needed in the future and elaborate their answers. The last part consisted of only two questions.

Before using my questionnaire, I tested it by asking fellow university students to fill it. I wanted to make sure my subjects would be able to understand the questions and answer them. After the test, I found that I should highlight some words to emphasise and draw the students' attention to the points of the questions. I also edited a few words since they could be misleading and ambiguous.

## **4 THE PERCEIVED DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE SKILLS**

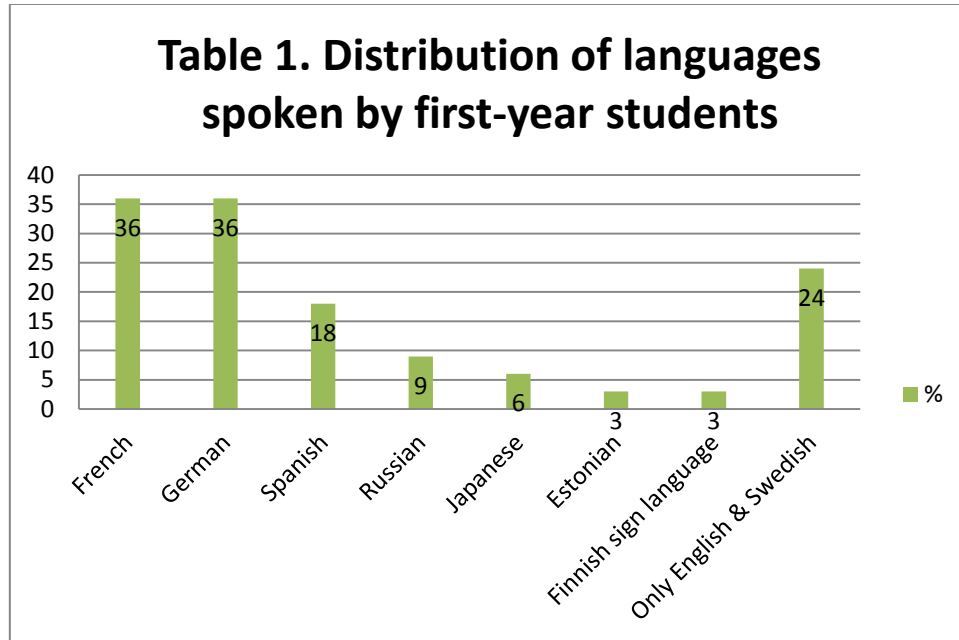
The purpose of this study is to see if the first-year history students' language skills developed in any way from when they entered the university and what influenced the change based on their self-evaluation. Skill refers to the ability to perform, and in SLA, skill is generally conceptualized as speaking, listening, reading and writing (VanPatten and Benati 2010: 149).

This chapter of the study is divided into three parts: the history students' skills in languages before university, the change in their skills during the first year at university and their future plans with languages. Particular focus is on English as the best known foreign language in Finland, apart from Swedish.

### **4.1 Language skills before university**

All the participants knew at least two foreign languages, English and Swedish. 8 of the 33 participants (24%) did not speak any other languages. This is mostly the result of the Finnish school system and languages offered as well as the respondents' interest in languages. It is mandatory to study the second official language during the school career and at least one advanced foreign language, which is often English. There are plenty of reasons for that as, for example, English is a lingua franca and a necessity to know nowadays in the Western countries. Smaller schools also rarely offer many other language options to study from primary school to upper secondary school, which is the definition for advanced language curriculum in Finland. Other foreign languages the participants knew were varied and

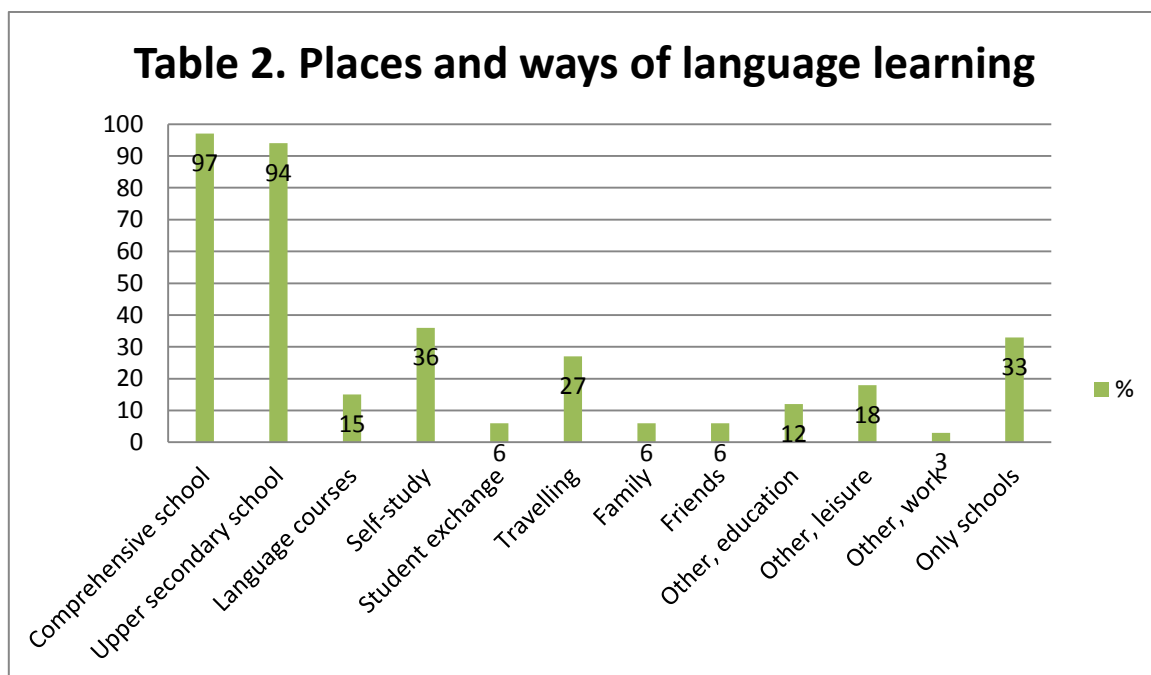
included German, French, Spanish, Russian, Estonian, Japanese and Finnish sign language. Table 1 shows the distribution of the languages the first-year students speak by percentage.



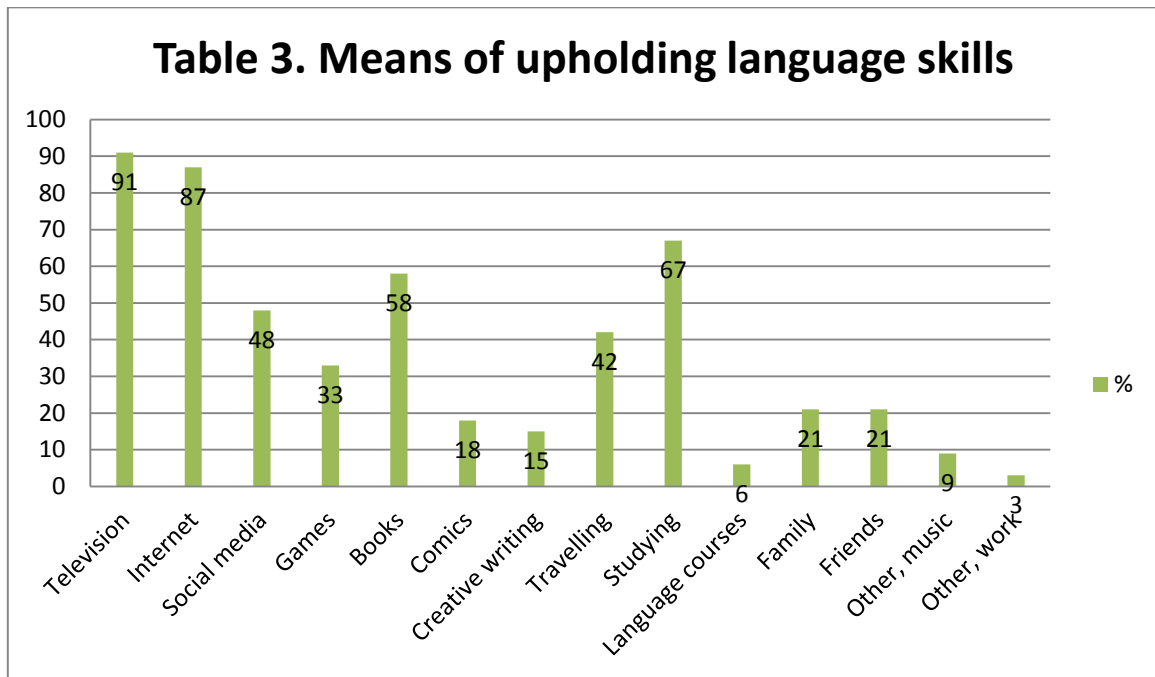
The participants' overall language skills varied. They evaluated their skills highest in English where the average score was 4.1. This relates to the fact that they probably have studied the language for most of their school careers, starting from first, third or fifth grade in, at least, most cases. For example, in 2012, over 90% of third graders started studying English as their first advanced foreign language (Finnish National Board of Education, 2012). On the other hand, the university students' Swedish skills were evaluated as merely mostly satisfactory and the average score was 2.8. This may be due to the growing negative attitudes towards the Swedish language and disinterest to study it. Although a second official language, it is often not seen favourably since less than 6% of the population (291 000) speaks Swedish as their native language (Official Statistics of Finland, 2013). One respondent even called the language a "mandatory humour option" ("*pakollinen huumorivaihtoehto*") when he listed the languages he knew for the Question 1 ("What languages did you know before the university?"). This indicates that the language is not to be taken as a serious option. In addition to English and Swedish, there were two other more commonly spoken foreign languages, French and German. These two were evaluated worse than English and Swedish. The German language skill average score was 2.4 whereas for French it was 1.6. The

participants' language skills in the rest of the languages were rated not very advanced and mostly as very basic or poor.

The languages were learnt mostly in schools. 97% of the students learnt their first foreign languages in comprehensive school and 94% continued their studies in upper secondary school as well as 12% in other schools before university. Although not all of them studied languages in comprehensive school, they all started learning foreign languages at some point of their education. 33% did not even mention other ways of learning languages. Different types of travelling, including exchange periods, and self-study were also some of the most common ways to learn languages. Table 2 shows the distribution of where and how the participants learnt their language skills by percentage.



The respondents upheld their skills in a variety of ways. In the questionnaire, they could pick all options that applied to them. 67% of students upheld their language skills mainly through studying in school. Most of them also watched television programmes in different languages and used Internet sites that were not in Finnish. Only 48% mentioned social media a way of upholding their skills in contrast to the high rate of Internet users among the students questioned. Table 3 shows the distribution of the participants' means of upholding their skills.



67% of the participants had a gap year or years before they began their university studies. The gap includes also previous studies after graduating from comprehensive or upper secondary school. From these, 17 thought that their gap year(s) had an effect on their language skills. Nine believed that their gap year(s) had a negative effect on their skills. They felt that when they did not use the foreign languages, their knowledge weakened. One respondent said that since they mainly used the foreign languages in classroom situations and not outside school, upholding their skills was hard. Especially Swedish was mentioned as the language with which their skills degenerated during the gap year(s).

One student mentioned that her foreign language skills weakened overall but, unlike with the other languages she knew, her English skills got better. Seven others thought that their gap year(s) had a positive effect on their skills. Unlike most other languages, the participants used English in their daily lives and while travelling. Two of the seven respondents had an exchange period abroad where their English language skills developed for the better. These seven students did not mention other languages than English in their answers to this question.

The answers reflect the participants' motivation for language learning. Since most of their learning is centred on education and schools, after they have graduated, their language skills

overall start degrading due to disuse. The Finnish school system places a lot of value on grades and the upper secondary school's matriculation examination scores that help entering higher education. Afterwards the students rarely have the drive to continue study the languages on their own. In other words, their instrumental motivation is decreasing since they do not have to strive for anything more in their studies, especially if they do not consider languages as part of their future career.

In addition, the weakening Swedish skills also correlate to the lack of use. Most of the Swedish-speaking Finns are largely gathered on the west coast geographically so the respondents may not consider the language worth knowing if they do not live there, have Swedish-speaking relatives or any integrative motivation to belong to the ethnolinguistic group. On the other hand, English had a more positive standing during the participants who had a gap year(s). This also correlates with their motivation in using the language. As a lingua franca, the language is spoken around the world. One can manage well with English be it travelling abroad or talking with foreigners in the home country. A large part of media is also using English as the language of communication as it is a language understood by majority. The motivation to use English drives from the everyday life, according to the students' answers, and as such is in constant use unlike most other foreign languages.

## **4.2 Perception of language skill development**

Of the participants, only ten studied new languages during their first year, and three furthered their skills in one of their already known languages. The new languages mentioned by the students were Spanish, Japanese, German, French, Italian and Finnish sign language. The old languages included German and French through courses and Swedish through optional course books. Most of the respondents, altogether 61%, did not study any languages or furthered their skills during their first year according to their self-evaluation.

While the variety of languages was bigger, the skills did not develop as fast. The new languages were perceived as very basic as the students had started studying them after coming to the university. The already existing skills went through changes too. The participants' English skill average score stayed the same, 4.1, but there were individual differences as some respondents' skills had weakened while some had become even better. The average score slightly decreased in the case of Swedish (from 2.8 to 2.7). The biggest change in language



skills was perceived in the case of German and French. German dropped to 1.8 from 2.4 and French rose from 1.6 to 1.8.

73% of the students stated that their language skills developed positively during their first year while six respondents thought they had degenerated. Those who experienced positive changes spoke of their English skills getting better. They explained their improved skills by their course books which were in English, and the globalizing world where the English language is used as a lingua franca. Of these participants, none mentioned other languages unless they had started studying a new language, giving the impression of continued stasis on their other language skills. Those who evaluated their language skill development negatively spoke in more detail about all of their skills and how difficult it was to uphold their skills without constant use. Interestingly, they also mentioned that their English skills developed but did not see their overall language skills getting better and as such considered the change more negative.

The participants' answers to the open questions were slightly inconsistent with their Likert scale evaluations. The overall Likert scale estimations in Question 8 ("How would you rate your language skills now near the end of your first year on the scale 1-5?") were lower than their estimations in Question 9 (Did your language skills develop or degenerate in general? Why?). 55% did not perceive the change in language skills in their Likert scale estimations. 27% perceived the change as negative while 18% as positive. The ones who experienced the positive change were mostly those who had started learning a new language. The students who had not studied any languages during their first year either estimated their skills not changing as if in stasis or changing for the worse. The answers, as such, are not that surprising. It is not easy to evaluate one's skills if one does not actively use them. In the university, where the survey was done, the respondents' mandatory language courses are recommended for second and/or third year students and as such are not often eligible for first-year students. Language learning is purely voluntary except for a few obligatory courses. The participants' answers to Question 9 were quite positive as the students felt that their English skills were getting better. However, this does not have much of an effect on the Question 8's Likert scale as the students had already considered their English skills as excellent in the first Likert's scale in Question 2 which was about their skills before entering the university.

Only 20 respondents (61%) said that they actively tried to uphold their language skills during their first year. Watching television, using Internet and reading texts in foreign languages seemed to be the main ways to hold up their skills. 15 of them specifically mentioned English rather than just generally mentioning foreign languages like the rest. A few even commented that English is everywhere around them and upholding it is easier than the other known languages.

Example 1. Kuka nykypäivänä selviäisi joutumatta vähintään lukemaan englantia päivittäin?

*Who even manages not to read at least English every day nowadays?*

The voluntary use of languages helps maintain interest and motivation. As VanPatten and Benati (2010: 43) stated, motivated people stick with tasks. This is important in SLA because it takes years for someone to become fluent. When the learners have achieved a skill level high enough to use it in everyday life, maintaining it through their interests is a sure way to upholding their skills. Most of the participants who said that they were doing something to maintain their skills mentioned television and films as a common way to do so. Other interests mentioned were different reading activities from magazines to books to blogs. Studies-related interests were also often mentioned. For example, the students were keen on reading about their areas of study. Again, English was the most common language mentioned related to the interests. The respondents, even though many are competent in foreign languages other than English, seemed to have a higher threshold to cross to use other languages in the same tasks they use English for. They seemed to find it easier to use English but there was also a comment that sometimes it was the only language possible to use. Music was an exception. It was an interest the participants shared that could be enjoyed in different languages regardless of hang-ups or skill levels.

### **4.3 Future plans with languages**

The participants' future plans with languages seem optimistic. 26 respondents (79%) had plans to develop their existing language skills more and possibly study new languages. Those planning to start learning new languages were thinking about learning Russian, German and/or Spanish. For developing existing skills, a variety of languages were mentioned but English was the most common language. The students also strongly felt that languages were

needed in their future. 91% were positive that languages would play a part in their future but two students did not agree and one was of the mind that only English would matter on the larger scale.

The respondents were especially concerned with languages and their future working aspect. They mentioned that in the globalizing world knowing different languages was a strength in the labour market where job providers value language proficiency and internationality. Those with history as their major were concerned that they would need languages with travelling, international people and situations and study materials. The latter was mentioned a few times because although the materials are often in English, the original materials can be in different languages and the translation always depends on the person translating. Those with history as their minor and something else as their major were mainly concerned that they would need languages with international work and contacts and also living and working abroad in long term, in addition to their course materials in their immediate future.

Almost all the people participating in the study were more or less linking their future with languages. They were mostly attentive to languages but not overly enthusiastic. They were aware of the importance and necessity of languages in the globalizing world. The students' motivation for studying them or upholding their language skills was mainly instrumental. This means that the respondents noted that their work prospects would look better if they knew more than one foreign language, which is often English. In the globalizing world, the English language has been used as lingua franca and the language of publishing for a long time. Other languages, such as Chinese and Spanish, are gaining more ground around the world as they both have more first language speakers than English has (Ethnologue, 2015). Still, English has remained the most spread language and the language of science. The participants had more interest in learning Russian though than the other languages although German was a close second despite the fact that they were not the most spoken languages of the world. This has a geographical reason since Finland shares a long border and history with Russia, and German has a strong standing in Europe.

It was surprising to find how the history major and minor students had different ideas and attitudes towards languages. They were both very concerned with their working prospects and internationality. It seemed that they understood that Finnish is not a widely spoken language in the world and to be understood by people from other countries languages are needed.

However, the history majors were just thinking of their immediate future rather than long term unlike the history minors. The history majors did not seem to be considering the fact that a lot of the original sources are not in English but rather in other languages. The history minors, whose majors included journalism, political science and languages, were much more considering of the languages' role in their future, be it abroad or in their home country. It is possible that since their major subjects were different, their study and language goals were clearer than those who studied history as their major as they had already given more thought to their minors. Some of the respondents expressed their concerns about the future development of their foreign language skills, suggesting that the university should provide more support (see Example 2).

Example 2. Vihje: yliopisto voisi tukea enemmän, jotta kielikyky kasvaisi vaikkapa ruohonjuuritason opinnoissa.

*Note: the university could support more, so that the language skills would grow, for example, in the grassroots level studies.*

Overall, the participants were aware of the importance of different languages. They evaluated their skills best in English and Swedish. This did not change from before or after entering the university. Schools and education were the most common ways of achieving language proficiency for the students, and they maintained their skills through different types of media and reading in addition to studying, the latter which gained more importance after entering the university. More than a half of the respondents also did not perceive a change in their language skills between the start and end of their first year as if their skills were in a stasis despite the gap years most of them had had and the relatively little effort in maintaining other languages than English. Those that did notice a change contributed the negative effects on not using the foreign languages and positive on using the languages. The attitudes towards languages were, though, mostly positive but some were even dismissive towards languages other than English in all parts of the study. The history students seemed to realize the need for languages, especially through globalization and working prospects, but the minor students were taking it more seriously than the majors. There were plans to continue study languages, new and/or already known. The history majors' instrumental motivation was more lacking but given the right incentive and direction in their studies their skills could prosper more.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The presumptions I had before I conducted the survey were that history students' perceived language skills either stayed close to the same level or degraded during their first year, and that only their English skills would continue developing. I also assumed that they would acknowledge languages as relatively important but that they were likely to be satisfied with their current language skill level. The study found these presumptions correct. No matter how many gap years the respondents had had, they had the idea that their language skills were up to the same standards they were when they used the languages more often, e.g. in upper secondary school. The participants seemed to assume that their skills had not changed and that, despite not using their language skills or actively maintaining them, they would stay the same. This seemed to indicate that the students' idea of their skills was probably slightly distorted. It may have related to the fact that even during their previous education, their motivation for language learning was probably instrumental, for example, based on getting good grades. When they had reached the level where they could no longer easily improve their language skills, the students' motivation dropped. They might have adopted an idea of their skills that if they could not improve anymore, they probably would not weaken much either, and this continued to influence the perception of their skills, hence the slight distortion. This is linked to the concept Dörnyei (2003) developed about the ideal self that represents personal hopes, aspirations and wishes (Ushioda and Dörnyei 2009: 3-4), which was introduced in the theoretical framework of this study.

The globalization also seemed like an old-established idea to the history students. They acknowledged it but, as they hear about it everywhere, they did not think too much of it unless it was a part of their future working prospects. Most of the history students, especially the major students, were satisfied with their language skills and were not interested in expanding them by learning new languages, but only maintaining the old ones. This is worrying as 24% of the participants only knew English and Swedish and the already weakening Swedish skill average score was just 2.7 (between poor and satisfactory in the scale). The acknowledged importance of languages did not seem to match the motivation to study them, even though the primary history sources the students are expected to read and cite are often not in English.

The study is not inclusive. It is based on the respondents' view of their own skills, thus not accurate image of their real language skills which would need further testing of different kinds. The results, as such, were only suggestive. There are a few ways to extend the research, though. One of them is changing some of the questions in the questionnaire and/or adding a few more into it. For example, the third question could be modified by asking the participants to list the languages they knew again, and tell when and where they started to learn those particular languages instead of grouping them all together. The list of places could be added as examples. The respondents could also be asked how long they had studied the languages, and if they studied them currently. Another way to extend the research is that interviews could be added to it for more in-depth answers. The questionnaire offers open questions to elaborate their answers but in face-to-face contact it is easier to go deeper into the discussion and talk about the answers. The third way to continue the research is to do a follow-up survey in a few years' time to see whether the students' answers have changed during their study career, or if they actually could realize the plans they had in their first year. They could be asked if they felt the language learning in university could be improved and, if so, how. They could also explain what was good about it. A comparison of the studies would lead to see how students perceive their skills after a few more years, if they have done anything to uphold their skills, and if the results remain the same.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Kyselytutkimus: historian opiskelijoiden vieraiden kielten osaamisen kehittyminen 1. vuoden aikana

Sukupuoli: Mies Nainen

Ikä:

Pääaine:

Sivuaine:

Äidinkieli:

#### Mennyt

1. Mitä vieraita kieliä osasit ennen yliopistossa aloittamista? Listaa ne.

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2. Listaa kaikki yllämainitsemasi vieraat kielet ja arvioi kielitaitoasi **ennen yliopistoa** kyseisten kielten osalta.

	alkeet	heikko	tydyttävä	hyvä	erinomainen
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5

3. Missä/miten opit tuntemasi kielet? Voit valita useampia vaihtoehtoja

- |                     |                 |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| a. Peruskoulu       | e. Itseopiskelu |
| b. Lukio            | f. Matkailu     |
| c. Kielikurssit     | g. Perhe        |
| d. Opiskelijavaihto | h. Ystävät      |
| i. Muu, mikä? _____ |                 |

4. Kuinka ylläpidit osaamistasi? Voit valita useampia vaihtoehtoja.

- |                     |                      |                         |
|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Televisio        | e. Sosiaalinen media | i. Luova kirjoittaminen |
| b. Matkustelu       | f. Pelit             | j. Perhe                |
| c. Kielikurssit     | g. Kirjat            | k. Ystävät              |
| d. Internet         | h. Sarjakuvat        | l. Opiskelu             |
| m. Muu, mikä? _____ |                      |                         |



5. Piditkö väli vuoden/vuosia opintojesi välissä tai opiskelitko muualla ennen yliopistoa?

Kyllä Ei

6. Jos vastasit kyllä, vaikuttiko se kielitaitoosi? Kyllä Ei

Miten?

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### Nykyisyys

7. Oletko opiskellut uusia kieliä 1. vuotesi aikana? Kyllä Ei

Jos vastasit kyllä, listaa ne:

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8. Millaiseksi arvioisit tuntemiesi kielten osaamistasosi **nyt ensimmäisen vuotesi loppupuolella**? Listaa sekä jo ennestään tuntemasi että uudet kielet.

	alkeet	heikko	tydyttävä	hyvä	erinomainen
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5

9. Kehittyikö vai huonontuiko kielitaitosi yleisesti? Kehittyi Huonontui

Miksi?

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Teitkö mitään ylläpitääksesi kielitaitoasi? Kyllä Ei

Jos vastasit kyllä, kuinka ylläpidit osaamistasi?

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**Tuleva**

10. Onko sinulla suunnitelmia opiskella enemmän kieliä tulevaisuudessa (tiettyä kieltä tai mitä tahansa)? Kyllä Ei

Miksi/miksi ei?

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Uskotko tarvitsevasi kieliä jatkossa? Kyllä Ei

Miksi/miksi ei?

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Kiitos vastauksistasi.

## APPENDIX 2

### Questionnaire: 1st year history students' foreign language skills development based on self-evaluation

Gender:    Male            Female

Age:

Major:

Minor:

Mother tongue:

#### Past

1. What languages did you know before the university?

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2. Please list all the foreign languages from the above answer and rate your fluency with regard to your knowledge **before you entered the university**.

	very basic	poor	satisfactory	good	excellent
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5

3. Where/how did you learn the languages? You can choose multiple answers.

- |                           |               |
|---------------------------|---------------|
| a. Comprehensive school   | e. Self-study |
| b. Upper secondary school | f. Travelling |
| c. Language courses       | g. Family     |
| d. Student exchange       | h. Friends    |
| i. Other? _____           |               |

4. How did you uphold your skills? You can choose multiple answers.

- |                     |                 |                     |
|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| a. Television       | e. Social media | i. Creative Writing |
| b. Travelling       | f. Games        | j. Family           |
| c. Language courses | g. Books        | k. Friends          |
| d. Internet         | h. Comics       | l. Studying         |
| m. Other? _____     |                 |                     |

5. Did you have a gap year/s between your studies or previous studies before university?

Yes      No

6. If yes, did it affect your language skills?      Yes      No

Please explain how.

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**Present**

7. Have you started learning new languages in the university?      Yes      No

If yes, please list the languages:

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8. How would you rate your language skills **now near the end of your first year** on the scale 1-5? Please list the old and new languages and rate your knowledge.

	very basic	poor	satisfactory	good	excellent
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5
_____	1	2	3	4	5

9. Did your language skills develop or degenerate in general?      Develop      Degenerate

Why?

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Did you do anything to uphold your language skills?      Yes      No

If yes, how did you uphold your skills?

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**Future**

10. Do you have plans to study more languages in the future (specific language or any)?  
Yes      No

Why/why not?

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Do you believe you will need them in the future?      Yes      No

Why?

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Thank you for your answers.