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An immigrant mother's thoughts on the use of Finnish in English workbooks

I moved to Finland with my family three and a half years ago from Hungary. My older son (aged 11 then) spent a year in a Finnish preparatory class before he continued his studies in the 5th grade. He chose English as his A1 language because he had learnt it for three years in a Hungarian school. Despite his knowledge, the English home assignments proved to be very difficult for him to solve. The activity book relied greatly on the majority language: the instructions and many of the exercises required Finnish knowledge. We spent a lot of time using an electronic dictionary to do the English homework together. Finnish skills were needed even in the English language tests that he had to take, and it happened not just once that he lost points due to the lack of his proficiency. This personal experience made me curious about the reasons for the presence of the majority language in the English activity books that are used in Finnish basic education. The study is discussed in more detail in a paper published in the electronic journal *Apples* (Háhn 2017).

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Local textbooks and immigrant learners

The English textbooks that are in use in Finnish comprehensive schools are so-called local textbooks because 1) they are published in Finland, 2) they follow the Finnish National Curriculum, 3) their target readers are Finnish children. Local textbooks definitely have several advantages, as pointed out by López-Barrios and de Debat (2014). They help the language learners relate to foreign cultures from a common, shared socio-cultural context. For example, the main characters are of the same nationality and live in the same country as the language learners. Local textbooks can also raise the students' awareness of the similarities and the differences between the learners' first language and the foreign language (López-Barrios & de Debat 2014). However, as soon as the learners do not share the same mother tongue, these beneficial aspects may lose their validity. As a researcher, my aim was to explore whether language teachers and textbook authors in Finland had also noticed and considered this as a problem.

“Textbook” was defined as a collective term in the study to refer to all kinds of educational publications that are used in language teaching, for example, activity books focusing on exercises, textbook readers providing mainly texts, or textbooks including both exercises and texts. The research targeted one type of textbook, the so-called workbook or activity book that supplements a reader-type of textbook with exercises.

What is the role of Finnish in English workbooks?

Before getting answers from the teachers and the authors, I studied the activity books to see what role the Finnish language had in them. My database included six activity books that were widely used in the 3rd, 5th and 9th grades of comprehensive education in 2016, ensuring an equal representation of the two main publishers, Otava and Sanoma Pro. First I examined the structure of the books to explore in what ways Finnish was used in the different sections. As the second step, from each book I took a sample of about 50 pages (which meant 2–5 chapters) and did a qualitative content analysis of the exercises. This means that I coded

each exercise with the help of pre-set categories to describe to what extent the tasks were built on the knowledge of the majority language.

The findings showed that the most important function of the Finnish language was in instructing the children what to do in each exercise. In addition, it was present in the table of contents and in the grammar explanations. In some of the workbooks, the greeting pages were also in Finnish. As for the exercises themselves, only a fifth (20.3%) of them could be solved without any knowledge of Finnish. In these tasks, the solutions did not require either the understanding or the production of Finnish words, sentences or texts, plus there was some sort of prompt (e.g. images, English clues, sample solutions) that helped task comprehension. However, the majority of the exercises (79.7%) were built on the knowledge of Finnish: there was no help given besides the Finnish instructions and often the solution required Finnish reading and/or writing skills (e.g. translation from Finnish to English and vice versa).

Teachers' and an author's views

In addition to the content analysis of the books, in the spring of 2016, I arranged interviews with three English teachers and with a textbook author in a semi-sized town in Central Finland. I wanted to hear their views on the use of Finnish in the activity books and the explanations they had for its presence. It was an interesting experience that the teachers and the author all seemed a bit surprised that I approached them with this topic. They all mentioned that Finnish had been used in the EFL activity books for such a long time that this practice had never been questioned.

The teachers in general did not see it as a problem that the instructions and the tasks themselves made use of the majority language. They pointed out that it was easier for the Finnish children to understand and do the home assignments independently. It was also argued that Finnish had an essential role in case of the grammar explanations and in presenting the linguistic contrasts between English and Finnish. One teacher mentioned that the use of Finnish helped the parents understand the workbook instructions, which could be very useful in case they wanted to assist their child with the homework. Two of the interviewees did not notice that the immigrant children would have difficulties understanding or doing the workbook exercises because neither the students nor their parents had complained about this. One teacher, however, said that in her classes there were immigrant children who could not read or write properly in Finnish. As she found that they were struggling with understanding the Finnish instructions in the books, she ordered the "easy reader" copies, i.e. the activity books with simplified Finnish instructions. She also added that most of the instructions were so long and complex that they meant a challenge even for some Finnish children.

The textbook author emphasized that the most of the exercises in the activity books were meant for independent study, so the children should be able to do them at home. Therefore, it is good that the instructions are in a language that they feel comfortable with. She admitted that immigrant children might face difficulties using these books, but if this should be the case, the teacher could help these students.

What about equality?

Overall, my findings revealed that there was a lack of awareness regarding the potential challenges that immigrant learners might face when using these books. This confirms the

results of Suni and Latomaa (2012) and also those of Voipio-Huovinen and Martin (2012), who conducted research in Finnish schools to explore teachers' awareness of the difficulties the lack of Finnish fluency might cause for immigrant children. The researchers came to the conclusion that principles such as "equality in education" or "the promotion of multilingualism" in most cases remained at policy level discourses and were not realized in everyday teaching practices. Suni and Latomaa (2012) found, for example, that most teachers overestimated the immigrant children's Finnish skills (Suni & Latomaa 2012: 85) and thus they did not adjust their teaching accordingly. The first languages of multilingual students remained invisible and unrecognized in basic education, while the Finnish language seemed to be at the top of an invisible hierarchy (Suni & Latomaa 2012). In line with the argumentation of Voipio-Huovinen and Martin (2012) and Suni and Latomaa (2012) and based on my son's learning experience, I suggest that awareness should be raised regarding the immigrant children's linguistic needs. In case equality and cultural diversity are seen as values in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education 2016: 6), this should be reflected in the EFL teaching practices and learning materials as well.

What could be done?

A solution could be the gradual introduction of English as the language of instruction in the activity books. In the lower grades, the books could have bilingual (Finnish and English) instructions, and then, in the upper grades, they could be only in English. This way the foreign language would be used in meaningful communication (see Tomlinson 2008), which would be beneficial for all learners, regardless of their first language. Moreover, the children could acquire vocabulary items and formulaic phrases from the English instructions.

Alternatively, the activity books could be designed to take into account linguistically more heterogeneous groups by integrating all the first languages that are present in the English classroom. This means, for example, that the teaching materials would not be solely connected to a majority language; instead, they would allow for the integration of more languages. This practice of translanguaging (García & Wei 2014) would lead to learning materials that equally cater for the needs of all students, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic backgrounds.

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