



# (In)visibility of International Student Languages in Finnish Higher Education

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**This article discusses language ideologies in Finnish higher education as they relate to international student languages. The paper draws upon data collected from students and lecturers and interprets this vis-à-vis the University of Helsinki language policy.**

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## Language ideologies and language policies

Language ideologies refer to the position of different languages or language varieties in relation to their structure and use. They are influenced by attitudes to or beliefs about culture, economics, politics and society, and typically represent the most powerful people in our societies (Rosa & Burdick, 2017). Language ideologies provide rationales for which, where, when, and how different languages should be used. One way in which these ideologies are manifested is through a language policy.

Language policies can be understood in different ways and operate at different levels (e.g. higher education institutions, multinational companies), yet typically concern three factors: 1) language practices, which refer to the “normal” or “practised” language behaviour of the community in different social domains; 2) beliefs and ideologies about language, or what members of the community think is appropriate or desirable language behaviour; and 3) language management, in other words, how interested parties attempt to influence the practices or beliefs of the community (Spolsky, 2017, p. 5). University language policies are a type of language management tool that are informed by practices, beliefs and ideologies. In Finland, these policies typically focus on the national language(s) and English and overlook international student languages. Nonetheless, language policies do affect international students in that they challenge the value and status of their languages within the institution.

While the language policy of the University of Helsinki (UH) (2014) is mostly concerned with the national languages and English, which indicates the institutional ideology, it also makes reference to wider multilingualism and the need for other global and European languages (p. 50). It is this wider multilingualism, represented by the international student body, that this research is concerned with. The policy asserts a number of beliefs related to this theme and in this paper, I explore four of them (paraphrased from the version written in English):

- multilingualism promotes creative thinking and community spirit (p. 47);
- multilingualism is a strength (p. 48);
- learning and using other languages is valuable (p. 48);
- to support international efforts, the multilingual skills of staff and students are exploited (p. 50).

These policy statements have an encouraging feel towards multilingualism and languages other than English, Finnish and Swedish, and give an impression of linguistic inclusion at the institution. This article will provide some examples of how these policy statements are realised at the university.

## Research methodology

The examples that illustrate how these policy statements have been realised at the UH are drawn from two sets of qualitative data collected in 2018 and 2019. The first data set is drawn from focus group interviews with international students on English-medium instruction master's degree programmes in environmental and biological sciences (EBS), agricultural sciences (AS) and computer sciences (CS). The second data set is semi-structured interview data with lecturers from the environmental and biological sciences (EBS), educational sciences (ED) and arts (ART) faculties.

The focus group interviews involved a task where the students had to place policy statements on a continuum from totally disagree to completely agree depending on their experience of the language policy statements in relation to their own languages at the university (see Clarke, 2020 for further details). The semi-structured interviews with the lecturers centred around their own language practices, their inclusion of the students' languages and their pedagogic practices in connection with international students (see Darling, 2021 for further details). Together, the perspectives of the international students and lecturers who teach international students provide a glimpse of how linguistic inclusion operates at the university.

## Linguistic inclusion at the university

Examining the data from the interviews with students and lecturers pertaining to their use of different languages can indicate the broader language ideologies present at the university. Here, I organise the discourses of the research participants by the four language policy statements

presented in the introductory section of this paper:

## **1. Multilingualism promotes creative thinking and community spirit**

One way of understanding the role of language in fostering community spirit is through a one-nation one-language ideology which is thought to lead to modernity, progress and unity (Rosa & Burdick, 2017, p. 7). Within my data the view that Finnish should be the main priority for international students, especially those staying for an extended period, is supported by many of the participants, but there were also divergent views, for example:

I always believe that when you know more languages your possibilities to understand different people and get along with them is supported in a very special way. (ART lecturer)

While knowledge of a number of languages is not practical for all, this belief conveys a sense of community spirit through developing understanding between people that is not reliant on a one-language ideology.

The creative thinking aspect of the policy statement is perhaps demonstrated by this student who describes a memory technique for learning biochemical pathways:

so I'm doing biochemistry and they have a lot of pathways in it just to remember how the shortcuts are I use Marathi a lot but it's only in my brain and er very rarely in written form and yeah that's the one way how I try to remember stuff (...) (EBS student)

The data rarely implies a creative component as a consequence of multilingualism, but this example is clearly creative thinking because an alternative language to the official course language is used for learning content knowledge.

## **2. Multilingualism is a strength**

The concept of multilingualism being a strength, somewhat unsurprisingly, created a disciplinary divide in the data with EBS lecturers seeing a very limited role for languages other than English. This statement can be considered typical:

in the more scientifically inclined text er it's seldom published in any other language other than English so it's [drawing on texts in other languages] kind of discouraged if you really do like a scientific study (EBS lecturer)

This attitude, again somewhat unsurprisingly, contrasts with those seen among the ART lecturers, for instance:

if it's an assignment that a student just returns to me then I if they ask me whether I can submit it in Finnish or Swedish or even German or French or whatever language that I read that's completely fine with me (ART lecturer)

Within the interview data with lecturers, this accommodation of different languages was not uncommon. The students from other faculties also reported occasional opportunities to write non-assessed and assessed coursework in other languages. The problem here is that it is not possible for all students to submit assessed work in other languages since this is limited to the most powerful mostly European languages, as signalled by the above extract.

### ***3. Learning and using other languages is valuable***

Reflecting the main message of the language policy, the value of learning and using other languages is mostly limited to the national languages, English and a handful of other languages. Consequently, most of the students did not feel that their own languages were valued (see Clarke, 2020 for the student profiles); for instance one student exclaims:

in this case for my language [Greek] NO! hah totally disagree (EBS student)  
they kind of think Chinese is valuable because I know that they have this kind of Chinese language lessons and they have this kind of Confucius department so yeah I guess they kind of think it's valuable but I don't know much about it when it comes to like research or study yeah I don't think so (CS student)

Students whose languages include small or medium-sized languages did not feel that their languages were valued. Interestingly, as suggested by the above extract, even Chinese students who could see that their languages are valued could not see a legitimate use for them in formal student contexts beyond language learning courses (which are plentiful at the UH).

### ***4. To support international efforts, the multilingual skills of staff and student are exploited***

Another way in which the value of international students' different languages can be expressed is how the university makes use of their languages institutionally. This is discussed by three students in one of the focus groups:

S1: well at least in my case they are they always call me when they need someone that speaks Spanish so I have been working with the university like for a year already like with Finnish and Swedish speakers that they want to learn Spanish or the embassy in Mexico as like a translator so (AS student)

(...)

S2: honestly it's not even like I have promoted myself to be like oh my god I know Hindi and you know let's get rolling its I haven't done that so (EBS student)

S3: no I haven't said let's get rolling [with Turkish] either (EBS student)

Their discussion presents a mixed picture which implies that the extent to which the university engages with their languages is dependent on how desirable their language is. In fact, S2 and S3 acknowledge this themselves later in their discussion where they point out that Spanish is a powerful global language. They also reflect on their own attitudes and how they have not promoted themselves as speakers of their languages. It could be argued that if S2 and S3 had approached the university, an opportunity to use their languages as part of the university's internationalisation efforts may well have been made possible and meaningful.

## Conclusions and implications

The data provides some evidence of linguistic inclusion at the University of Helsinki (UH) which is stronger in the Faculty of Arts compared with other faculties represented in the study. The UH provides language courses and degree programmes in a great many languages, but when it comes to the international students legitimately using their languages as part of their studies, the picture is somewhat mixed. Ideologically-powerful languages are clearly favoured.

To be more faithful to the language policy, a more widespread inclusive attitude to languages beyond the national languages and the ideologically-powerful languages including English and other "big" European and global languages would be necessary. This does not mean institutionalising a number of different languages, but raising awareness of the linguistic landscape of the university and openly discussing language and ideas about how languages can be drawn on pedagogically. This, I believe, could promote the creative thinking and multilingual community spirit that the language policy mentions.

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## Artikkeliin viittaaminen

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