

SUMMARY

The advanced syllabus in the Russian language

A total of 150 pupils from 17 Finnish-speaking schools participated in the assessment of learning outcomes for the advanced syllabus (A syllabus) in the Russian language. Boys accounted for 41 per cent (n = 61) and girls for 59 per cent (n = 89) of pupils in the sample. Of these pupils, 93 per cent (n = 138) spoke Finnish and 7 per cent Russian as their mother tongue. For 85 per cent of the pupils (n = 124), Finnish was the main language spoken at home. Other languages were spoken by 7 per cent (n = 11), while 8 per cent (n = 12) had two or more home languages.

Listening comprehension was measured using a total of 24 items containing 13 multiple choice questions and 11 open-ended questions (answers given in Finnish). Reading comprehension was measured using a total of 25 items containing 12 multiple choice questions and 10 open-ended questions (answers given in Finnish). In addition, there were four tasks evaluating speaking skills: one narrative assignment in the form of a monologue, two dialogues involving everyday situations and one conversational assignment. Productive skills in written language were assessed using two tasks of different length.

1. Pupils' language skills by skill set

In listening comprehension, pupils demonstrated **good** achievement of the target proficiency levels. The level of good performance, A2.2 or higher, was achieved by slightly less than three quarters of the pupils (72 per cent). In reading comprehension, the target proficiency level was achieved by 85 per cent of pupils, with 66 per cent exceeding it by at least one step on the proficiency scale. While the multimodal distribution of performance levels deviated greatly from the normal distribution, targets were nevertheless attained to an **excellent** degree. At this level, the pupils understand enough Russian to be able to handle concrete everyday situations.

The spoken language skills in Russian were also unevenly distributed; the actual target level of good performance was attained by only 7 per cent of the pupils. Less than a half of pupils (46 per cent) reached the level of good performance A2.1 or higher, leading to **satisfactory** attainment of the objectives. The majority of pupils were able to tell briefly about themselves and cope with the most simple everyday situations.

In writing, achievement of the learning objectives was **good**, with the majority of pupils achieving the A2.1. target level of good performance. At this level, the pupil can cope with the most routine everyday situations.

Differences in the various skill sets between **genders** were found only in writing, where girls achieved the objectives well but boys only to a satisfactory degree. Pupils whose **parents had a higher level of education** had better comprehension skills. A fifth of pupils, i.e. those who were unaware of their parents' level of education, demonstrated **excellent** achievement of the listening comprehension objectives. Two pupils with parents who had passed the matriculation exam demonstrated **good** achievement of the objectives set for speaking skills.

Differences in reading and listening comprehension were found to correspond to the pupils' **plans for further education**: those who intended to apply to general upper secondary education reached a higher score in the assignments than those who were planning to enter vocational education and training. With listening comprehension, all pupils demonstrated **good** achievement of the target proficiency level and there were no statistically significant differences. Students planning to enter general upper secondary education attained reading comprehension objectives to an **excellent** degree and students planning to enter vocational education and training to a **satisfactory** degree. In speaking skills, the majority of pupils who were planning to enter vocational education and training were at least two steps below the level of good performance on the proficiency scale. This means their attainment of the objectives set for speaking skills was **poor**, while those aiming for general upper secondary education demonstrated **good** achievement. Similar differences were detected in writing skills: those planning to enter vocational education and training showed **poor** achievement of the objectives and those planning to enter general upper secondary education **good** achievement.

The higher the grade the pupils had received for Russian at school, the better they performed in the assessment tasks measuring all skill sets. The level of good performance was attained in **reading comprehension** by students who had received grade 6 (on the scale 4-10). Pupils who had received grade 7 also reached the target level of good performance in **listening** comprehension. With the exception of speaking skills, pupils with grade 8 achieved the objectives in all skills, while pupils with a very good or excellent grade exceeded the level of good performance in all skill sets.

Time spent on completing homework for Russian lessons affected the pupils' performance in listening comprehension and writing assignments. As

long as pupils spent at least some time on homework, their performance improved in comparison to those who did not do their homework at all.

When comparing pupils who speak Finnish and Russian as their **mother tongue**, those with Russian as their mother tongue performed better than those with Finnish as mother tongue, exceeding the target levels for all skill sets by a considerable degree. Pupils with Finnish as their mother tongue demonstrated **good** achievement of objectives in listening comprehension and **excellent** achievement in reading comprehension. With respect to speaking and writing targets, their performance was only satisfactory, although better with writing than speaking.

The pupils could be divided into three categories based on their **home language**: Finnish-speaking, bilingual and Russian-speaking pupils. As expected, children from bilingual and Russian-speaking homes performed better in the tasks measuring language skills than did children from Finnish-speaking homes. Differences were found in all skill sets with the exception of reading, where everyone demonstrated **excellent** achievement regardless of their home language. In listening comprehension, the Finnish-speaking pupils showed **good** attainment of objectives, whereas bilingual pupils and Russian-speaking pupils demonstrated **excellent** achievement. On average, the group of Finnish-speaking students achieved the objectives set for speaking skills to a **satisfactory** degree, the group of bilingual and Russian-speaking pupils to an **excellent** degree.

With writing skills, pupils from Finnish-speaking homes attained the objectives to a **satisfactory** degree, bilingual and Russian-speaking pupils to an **excellent** degree.

Studying of Russian as the first foreign language, in accordance with the advanced syllabus A1 (starting in grade three), was linked to better results in all skill sets except for reading. In listening comprehension, pupils studying in accordance with the A1 syllabus demonstrated **excellent** achievement of objectives and those studying in accordance with the advanced syllabus A2 (starting in grade five) **good** achievement. In speaking and writing, the level of good performance was reached by those studying in accordance with the A1 syllabus to an **excellent** degree; however those studying in accordance with the A2 syllabus reached the level of good performance only to a **satisfactory** degree.

With respect to the level of language proficiency achieved, differences related to **two or more background factors** were found: girls and pupils whose parents had a higher level of education performed better.

2. Practices promoting learning at school and outside school

When compared against the National Core Curriculum, authentic and oral use of the language in lessons (e.g. speaking Russian and following Russian-language media) was at a **poor** level. Independent production of language by pupils was **satisfactory**. Achievement of objectives related to planning and evaluation of one's work, use of ICT and optional tasks was **poor**. On average, use of the Russian language outside school was also at a **poor** level. While pupils completed their homework on a regular basis and felt the teacher had encouraged them, at least on occasion, to use Russian outside the school, they discussed their progress or worked on their language portfolio only rarely. Differences were found in learning practices among the various student groups; those planning to enter general upper secondary education, those speaking Russian as their mother tongue, and those studying in accordance with the A1 syllabus had more varied learning practices.

3. Pupils' opinions of the Russian language and studying of Russian

Pupils had positive opinions on the usefulness of the Russian language and neutral opinions on their own proficiency and how enjoyable Russian is as a subject. Pupils studying in accordance with the A syllabus felt their grades were mostly appropriate with respect to their skills. They had positive views of the school as a learning environment; also, the safer they felt the environment to be, the better their school satisfaction.

Differences were found in the students' views: those planning to enter general upper secondary education, those speaking Russian as their mother tongue, and those studying in accordance with the A1 syllabus held more positive opinions.

4. Connections between language skills, learning practices and opinions

Pupils who planned and evaluated their own work, spoke Russian in authentic situations, wrote and spoke the language independently and used Russian in their free time more than other pupils performed better in **listening and reading comprehension assignments**. Regular completion of homework showed a clear connection to improved results.

In speaking and writing, differences between practices and language proficiency were mostly found in pupils at proficiency levels B2 and A1–A2. While the pupils' experience of the appropriateness of their grade was not connected to their listening or reading comprehension skills, **with speaking and writing** good performance and positive views were positively correlated.

5. School-level results

All schools reached the **reading comprehension** objectives best, with no school having an average result below the target level. On average, there was failure to reach the level of good performance by two schools in listening comprehension and six schools in speaking. The greatest differences in the level of performance between schools were found in **listening** comprehension and the **smallest** in **reading** comprehension. With respect to practices, the greatest differences between schools were found in the use of ICT and independent work. Pupils differed most in their views of their own Russian language skills.

6. Development suggestions

The quality of school instruction and exercises can be improved by integrating the various skill sets, thereby supporting the development of speaking skills in particular. Assignments that inspire pupils to regular study should include authentic material and situations where the language is used, both at school and outside school, alongside the use of ICT and planning of one's own work. Information on the demand for Russian language skills and support for Russian studies should be targeted particularly at boys, pupils whose parents have not completed the matriculation examination, and pupils who are planning to enter vocational education and training. Assessment should be based equally on both spoken and written skills and work, with each component accounting for a clearly defined share of the grade. Opportunities for international cooperation and networking with Russian schools should be available to all Russian teachers and pupils studying Russian. The European Language Portfolio provides help in implementing all of these measures.

The B syllabus in the Russian language

A total of 854 pupils from 85 Finnish-speaking schools and four Swedish-speaking schools participated in the assessment of learning outcomes for the elective B2 syllabus in the Russian language. The smallest numbers of pupils participating in the assessment per school was two pupils and the largest 28 pupils. Boys accounted for 34 per cent ($n = 286$) and girls for 66 per cent ($n = 566$) of pupils in the sample. Among the pupils, 92 per cent ($n = 789$) spoke Finnish as their mother tongue, 3 per cent spoke Swedish, and 4 per cent were bilingual or had some other language as their mother tongue. Finnish was the main language spoken at home for 90 per cent ($n = 767$) of the pupils, while 3 per cent ($n = 25$) had a language other than Finnish or Swedish as their home language. The majority of pupils in the sample were from southern Finland (37 per cent) or eastern Finland (25 per cent). A total of 79 teachers of the B syllabus in Russian and 47 principals from 89 schools responded to the teacher and principal surveys.

Listening comprehension was measured using a total of 25 items containing 14 multiple choice questions and 11 open-ended questions. Replies were given in the school's language of instruction (Finnish). Reading comprehension was measured using a total of 25 sections containing 12 multiple choice questions and 13 open-ended questions, with answers given in the school's language of instruction. In addition, there were four tasks evaluating speaking skills: one narrative assignment in the form of a monologue, two dialogues involving everyday situations and one conversational assignment. Productive skills in written language were assessed with two tasks of different length.

1. Pupils' language skills by skill set

Pupils demonstrated **good** achievement of the **listening comprehension objectives** specified in the National Core Curriculum. The majority (87 per cent) reached the upper target level, A1.3., and 40 per cent exceeded it by at least one level. The majority of pupils were able to understand simple utterances in routine conversations when supported by the context, as well as follow simple conversations directly related to the situation or their own experiences. At this level, understanding of even simple messages requires slower than usual speech, using standard language and directing the speech at the listener.

The upper target level for **reading comprehension**, A1.3, was reached by 87 per cent of pupils, with 58 per cent exceeding this level by one or more steps on the proficiency scale. This demonstrates **excellent** achievement of the objectives. The majority of pupils attained the level A2.1, where they are able to understand the main ideas and some details in simple texts that contain the most common vocabulary.

For **speaking**, pupils demonstrated **good** achievement of objectives, based on the assessment. A total of 56 per cent of the pupils attained both target levels, i.e. they were able to respond to simple questions when supported in the interaction and to communicate some immediate needs in a limited manner.

All in all, achievement of the objectives set for **writing** was **good**. The majority, 79 per cent, reached at least the lower target level A1.1, while 36.7 per cent exceeded the upper target level A1.2. They were able to communicate immediate needs in short sentences by writing a few sentences and phrases about themselves and their close friends and family.

Girls performed better than boys in all skill sets. The results achieved in the various skills correlated positively with the parents' educational background: the higher the parents' education, the better the results. When examining the

results by mother tongue, pupils speaking a language other than Finnish or Swedish at home performed the best. Pupils who were planning to apply to general upper secondary education performed better in the assignments than pupils planning to enter vocational education and training. In addition, the better their grade was in Russian, the better the results in the language skills assessment. However, grades were not a particularly clear indicator of how well students would reach the target levels set for language proficiency. Reading comprehension was emphasised in the grade. When time spent on homework in Russian was less than half an hour, completion of homework was most likely to lead to an improvement in all skills.

In regional terms, the best results in all skill sets were achieved in southern and eastern Finland. However, statistically significant differences were found only in listening comprehension and speaking. **By type of municipality**, the best results were achieved in urban municipalities, where the pupils' listening comprehension skills and speaking skills were better than those of pupils living in other types of municipalities (the difference was statistically significant). When comparing the results by the schools' language of instruction, it was found that the pupils in Swedish-speaking schools achieved somewhat better results than pupils in Finnish-speaking schools, in all skill sets.

The most common **teaching practices used by teachers** included versatile assessment and feedback, while independent work was employed most rarely. Teachers made little use of ICT tools, and the same applies to the use of authentic Russian films, songs and magazines in teaching. However, nearly three quarters of the teachers encouraged their pupils to use the Russian language outside school. A most commonly employed teaching practice that promotes self-regulated learning was discussing the pupil's progress with the pupil. It was extremely rare for pupils to plan their own work and monitor and assess their own learning process. Authentic use of the language in teaching was most efficient in improving the students' language skills. In addition, the use of modern teaching tools improved their comprehension skills, while independent use of the language and speaking improved their writing skills.

2. Practices promoting learning at school and outside school

Use of authentic material for learning and pupils' use of Russian during their free time were, on average, at a poor level. Planning and assessment of one's own work and the use of ICT tools was rare. However, pupils generally practised their speaking skills, while teachers commonly spoke Russian in class and encouraged pupils to use Russian outside school. Pupils also completed their homework in Russian on a highly regular basis, girls with more regularity than boys. When

comparing by mother tongue, pupils with a mother tongue other than Finnish or Swedish used Russian most frequently in their free time. Pupils planning to apply for general upper secondary education completed their homework more regularly than those planning to apply for vocational education and training, as well as otherwise practising Russian in a more versatile manner. Those with a higher grade in Russian completed their homework more regularly than pupils with a poorer grade, and also used more versatile learning practices.

Taken as a whole, regional differences in learning practices were small, but in western and central Finland pupils used somewhat more versatile practices than elsewhere. By type of municipality, differences in favour of densely populated municipalities were detected, both in the use of various types of practices and regular completion of homework. When comparing replies given by teachers and pupils, it was noted that for most practices, teachers reported more frequent use than students.

Regular completion of homework, use of Russian outside the school and speaking and otherwise independently using the language during lessons had the greatest impact on language skills.

3. Pupils' opinions of the Russian language and studying of Russian

On average, the pupils had neutral opinions of their proficiency in the Russian language, despite the majority of pupils finding Russian at least a somewhat difficult subject. When it comes to liking Russian as a subject, the pupils' opinions were neutral on average. However, they expressed positive opinions on the usefulness of Russian. Overall the pupils' school satisfaction was at a good level. On average, they found their grade in Russian to be appropriate for their skill level.

Girls, pupils planning to enter general upper secondary education, and pupils who spent more time on homework in Russian expressed the most positive views.

In regional comparisons, Russian was liked the most and thought to be most useful in western and central Finland. By municipality type, Russian as a subject was most liked by pupils living in population centres.

4. Connections between language skills, learning practices and opinions

Russian language skills, and written skills in particular, were most likely to improve with regular completion of homework. Using Russian in one's free time, speaking Russian and using it independently during lessons improved all skill sets the most on average. Opinions and ideas related to international coopera-

tion opportunities and school satisfaction were also linked to language skills. Regular completion of home work was connected to positive views. The pupils' opinion on the appropriateness of their grade was linked, to some degree, to versatile learning practices.

5. Explanation models

Differences in listening and reading comprehension skills between those planning to enter general upper secondary education and those planning to enter vocational education and training were statistically significant in both boys and girls, with those planning for general upper secondary education performing better. Daughters of parents who had passed the matriculation examination performed better in reading comprehension and speaking assignments than the daughters of parents who had not taken the matriculation examination. For both girls and boys, the grade received in Russian correlated positively with proficiency demonstrated in all skill sets in the assessment. However, grades in Russian were not a particularly good indicator of the various levels of language proficiency among both girls and boys. With both girls and boys, listening comprehension and speaking skills improved with more time spent on homework, as did the boys' listening comprehension skills and girls' writing skills. Girls living in cities had better listening comprehension and speaking skills than girls in other types of municipalities.

6. School-level results

On average the schools achieved, and to some degree exceeded, the target levels for good language proficiency in all skill sets. Among the poorest-performing schools, the average proficiency levels were one proficiency level below the target set in the National Core Curriculum. With the best schools, the target levels were exceeded by two or more proficiency levels. Differences between schools explained 18–24 per cent of the differences in performance between students in each skill set. Of the skill sets, speaking was explained to the greatest and writing to the smallest degree by variation between schools. The parents' educational background was another significant factor explaining variation in performance among students.

7. Development suggestions

Resources that should be used more in developing teaching and learning include school satisfaction, the perceived usefulness of the Russian language, regular completion of homework and established use of spoken language practice at school. The quality of school instruction and exercises can be improved by integrating the various skill sets, thereby supporting the development of speaking skills in particular. Assignments that inspire pupils to

regular study should include authentic material and situations where the language is used, both at school and outside school, alongside the use of ICT and planning of one's own work. Information on the demand for Russian language skills and support for Russian studies should be particularly targeted at boys, pupils whose parents have not completed the matriculation examination, and pupils who are planning to enter vocational education and training.

There should be one target level connected to a certain grade. Assessment should be based both on spoken and written skills and work, with each accounting for a clearly defined share of the grade. The European Language Portfolio provides help in implementing all of these measures.