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What is 9th graders' linguistic competence like? – Learning outcomes in Finnish language and literature in the final stage of basic education in 2019

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In spring 2019, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) organised an evaluation of grade 9 pupils' learning outcomes in Finnish language and literature in basic education. The evaluation was based on the National core curriculum for basic education 2014 and FINEEC's framework for Finnish language and literature. The evaluation covered different content areas of the syllabus in Finnish language and literature: Interpreting texts (S2), Producing texts (S3) and Understanding language, literature, and culture (S4). Many types of texts were used in the assignments, including those which combine images and words as well as an audio file. To complete the assignments, the pupils needed skills in interpreting and producing texts at a number of different levels.

A total of 6,044 grade 9 pupils from 118 schools participated in the evaluation. The sample covered approximately 11% of all grade 9 pupils in school year 2018–2019. Background information was collected through surveys addressed to the pupils, teachers and principals. The surveys were used to investigate factors linked to competence that explained variations in learning outcomes. They also provided information on study practices and the way the subject is taught.

The evaluation was carried out using FINEEC's digital evaluation system. In addition to containing the set of assignments, it also covered an automatic scoring system, validation of scores and school and pupil data. The assignment pages comprised a learning environment in which the pupils could develop their linguistic competence. Young people's everyday environment was taken into account when setting the assignments and selecting the materials, and the evaluation site was designed to be as easy and pleasant to use as possible.

The results were given on a scale of school grades, which was formed by comparing the results to the average of final grades. The average produced by this method was 7.9. For example, the grades were used to determine which proportion of the pupils, grouped by region or gender, achieved a result corresponding to school grade 8 in different content areas.

9th-graders' competence in Finnish language and literature was highly consistent in different operating environments (urban, densely populated and rural municipalities). While differences in competence between the Regional State Administrative Agency areas were minor, the competence of pupils in Eastern Finland was somewhat below the national average. Within pupil groups, however, major differences were found regarding competence in this subject. The differences in Finnish language and literature competence were more obvious between girls and boys than between geographical areas. The school the pupils attended was also relevant to their competence.

The gender gap in competence was obvious and similar in all content areas. On average, girls' competence was one school grade better than boys'. The greatest gender differences were found in writing skills (between 0.8 and 1 in terms of grades). In linguistic knowledge and interpretation of literature, the difference was 0.8 grades, whereas the smallest difference of all content areas, or 0.6 grades, was found in interpretation of media texts.

The media text interpretation skills of pupils in Southern Finland were better than the national average to a statistically significant degree. In all Regional State Administrative Agency areas, girls had better skills in interpreting media texts than boys. Approximately one boy out of five scored 6- or lower in interpreting both media texts and literature, whereas only 5% of the girls were graded 6- or lower in literature assignments.

While the average variation in text production skills between different parts of the country were minor, the results in Eastern Finland were below the national average. The writing skills of almost one out of four 9th-graders in Eastern Finland corresponded to the grade 6- or lower. Nearly two out of three girls but fewer than one out of three boys achieved a score corresponding to the grade 8 in producing texts. On average girls turned out to have good skills in producing both argumentative and reflective texts. Almost two out of three girls reached a level corresponding to the grade 8 in producing both text types, whereas this level was achieved by approximately one out of three boys.

The pupils' competence in linguistic knowledge was fairly consistent between the Regional State Administrative Agency areas, however again with major variations within pupil groups. The difference in competence between girls and boys was clear. As few as 8% of girls remained at a level corresponding to grade 6- or lower in linguistic knowledge assignments, whereas for boys this proportion was almost one out of four.

Skills in interpreting and producing interaction were assessed through assignments in other content areas. While interaction skills were very consistent between the Regional State Administrative Agency areas, great variation was found within pupil groups. The difference in competence between girls and boys was once again significant, as girls' results were approximately one grade higher than boys'.

Looking at background variables specific to each pupil, attitudes towards the subject and studying it were clearly linked to competence. Whereas 9th-graders' perceptions concerning the usefulness of Finnish language and literature were positive on average, their attitudes towards studying this subject were neutral. Girls had consistently more positive attitudes towards studying the subject

than boys, and this had a strong positive correlation to competence. Attitudes to writing were also linked to competence in the subject. There was a difference of almost one grade in the t results between pupils who had the most negative and the most positive attitudes towards writing.

The guardians' education, the pupil's familial history of dyslexia and his or her further education plans showed strong correlation to the evaluation results. In addition, studying in a special class and the pupil's home language played a role. Of the factors describing the pupil's linguistic practices, reading as a pastime and using the library correlated positively with the evaluation results. While the link to time spent on the media was clear, this time did not have a linear connection to accumulating competence.

Doing homework had strong correlation to better competence, as did independent goal-setting and self-assessment in studies. Making an effort and taking trouble to do well in the evaluation (the time spent on the evaluation and the number of words in the text produced by the pupil) were linked to the results. In particular, boys' shorter than average time spent on the evaluation and smaller number of words explained the gender gap in competence. In fact, as much as 42% of the pupils' overall competence in Finnish and literature could be explained by the impact of the pupil's attitudes, reading as a pastime, doing their homework and using digital media. A small positive correlation was found between the extent of continuing education the teachers had had and the competence demonstrated by the pupils in the evaluation.

Pupil assessment in schools did not prove to be equal in Finnish language and literature, as the final grade in the subject varied according to the pupils' gender, school and plans for further studies.

Assessed on the basis of a few assignments, no significant changes have taken place in the pupils' Finnish language and literature competence in the 2000s. However, the pupils' attitudes towards the subject are slightly more positive. Measured by the number of books grade 9 pupils read, reading as a pastime had continued to decline.

On the basis of the evaluation, attention is drawn to the fact that each pupil should have opportunities for demonstrating their linguistic competence and their strengths in working with texts in different situations and subjects. Competence acquired in today's diverse language environments is not necessarily recognised in the school's established study practices. The evaluation found multiple links between the pupils' attitudes and their competence, which is why the importance of the mother tongue and the benefits of linguistic skills should be made visible both at school and in leisure time. The development of flexible teaching solutions of various types to provide linguistic support for pupils in schools, municipalities and nationally is also recommended. The evaluation showed clearly that support for reading and writing understandable texts is still needed in higher comprehensive school. Decision-makers are urged to use different methods to guarantee equal learning opportunities, especially in areas where the pupils' average level of linguistic competence remained low.

Equality of learning regardless of the area the pupils live in and the school they attend has been one of the cornerstones of Finnish basic education. The fact that differences between schools came up in Finnish language and literature indicates that monitoring of equal learning opportunities will also be needed in the future.

Keywords: attitudes, linguistic knowledge, teaching of literature, writing, reading, learning outcomes, basic education, Finnish language and literature