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Abstract

The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) assessed the learning outcomes of grade 9 pupils in English in spring 2021. This was the second stage of a longitudinal assessment, the first stage of which was conducted in autumn 2018 when the students started grade 7. The assessment in spring 2021 sought to find out to what extent the students had achieved the criteria for school grades 5, 7 and 8 set out in the National Core Curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014) as well as which background factors (including the students' gender and plans for further studies and their guardians' educational backgrounds) and characteristics of the learning environment (such as the geographical location of the school, type of municipality, language of instruction) are linked to students' knowledge and skills. The assessment data included the students' answers in assignments measuring language proficiency as well as surveys addressed to pupils, teachers and principals.

The evolving language proficiency scale was used to assess the level of the students' language skills (Appendix 2). On this scale, good proficiency level B1.1 (school grade 8) in English means functional basic proficiency that enables the student to cope independently in an English-speaking environment. School grade 7 (proficiency level A2.2) is characterised by coping reasonably well in everyday situations and increasingly participating in communication. The typical feature of school grade 5 (proficiency level A1.3) is that the student participates in many routine communication situations but often needs to use aids because of their limited language proficiency.

The content areas of the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014) in which the students' English proficiency was measured were text interpretation skills, text production skills and interaction skills. Text interpretation skills were measured in listening and reading comprehension assignments, and the text production and interaction skills through speaking and writing assignments. In addition to the assignments measuring language proficiency, the students responded to a survey that examined their ideas about learning English, their personal competence and the usefulness of English. The survey also included statements about working methods used in English lessons and the students' use of English in their leisure time. The student data were collected in FINEEC's digital system, whereas teachers and principals responded to Webropol surveys. The assessment took place in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is why approximately one half of the students were attending contact teaching, while the other half relied on distance learning.

In total, 5,021 students from 130 schools participated in the assessment. Of these schools, 16 were Swedish speaking. The sample was representative, as the number of students corresponded to approx. 9% of the entire cohort in school year 2020–2021. The number of schools equalled 15% to 17% of all schools with grade 9. Girls accounted for 2,467 and boys for 2,545 of the pupils. No gender information was obtained for nine students. Of the students, 4,353 attended a Finnish-speaking and 669 a Swedish-speaking school. Examined by Regional State Administrative Agency area, students from Southern Finland (43%) accounted for the largest group participating in the assessment, followed by Western Finland (20%) and Lapland (5%). Of these students, 2,416 relied on distance learning and 2,324 attended contact teaching when the

assessment was conducted. For 281 students, there is no information on where the assignments were completed. Most of those who did the assignments while engaged in distance learning were students in urban schools (n = 1,822).

Less than a half (45%) of the students reached **good proficiency level B1.1** (school grade 8) in interpretation skills, whereas 27% achieved this level in production skills. **Satisfactory proficiency (A2.2)** corresponding to school grade 7 was reached by 55% of the students in interpretation skills and 48% in production skills. No more than **adequate proficiency A1.3** (school grade 5) in interpretation skills was achieved by 14% and in production skills by 29% of the students.

When examining knowledge and skills by competence area, the students' strongest skill was reading comprehension, in which 52% of them achieved proficiency level B1.1. Proficiency level B1.1 was reached by 34% of the students in listening comprehension, 38% in speaking and 29% in writing, while 29% did not achieve good proficiency level B1.1 (school grade 8) in any of the competence areas. In proportion to the criteria for good proficiency set out in the curriculum, the linguistic goals were achieved well in reading comprehension, to a satisfactory degree in listening comprehension, and fairly well in writing.

When investigating the **link between the students' background information** and their language proficiency, little or no differences were found between girls and boys. However, there was a clear link between the students' plans for further studies and their language proficiency: those who intended to continue their studies in general upper secondary school showed better language proficiency than those planning to go to vocational education and training in all areas. Itemised by plans for further studies, there were some differences in proficiency between girls and boys. Tentative conclusions only can be made on the link between the guardians' educational background and students' language proficiency due to gaps in the background information. However, it would appear that the children of guardians with a university background have a better proficiency in English than the children of guardians who have completed basic or secondary education. It was also found that Swedish-speaking schools obtained somewhat better results than Finnish-speaking schools, and that differences in the English proficiency between students studying Finnish or Swedish as a second language and other students were minor.

Regarding the **features of the learning environment**, the geographical location of the school, municipality type and the place where the student completed the assessment assignments were linked to knowledge and skills. The best results were achieved in urban schools in Southern Finland, whereas the poorest results were recorded for students in rural areas, Eastern Finland and Lapland. In the urban schools in Southern Finland that achieved the best results, more than a half of the students relied on distance learning at the time of the assessment, while in rural schools most students were attending contact teaching. Students who completed the assessment assignments in distance learning had better results than those who did them while attending contact teaching. However, the link between the location where the assignments were completed (contact teaching vs. distance learning) and the results could only be speculated on, as the English grades of the students who took part in the assessment while relying on distance learning were better than those of the students attending contact teaching; additionally, the former group of students came from Southern Finland cities, in which the best results have also been achieved in previous assessments of foreign language proficiency (Härmälä et al. 2013 and 2018).

The findings of the student survey did not indicate a clear link between **the working methods used in English lessons** and proficiency. A textbook (digital or printed) remains the most important learning material for the lessons, and the opportunities offered by modern technology are not used for such purposes as improving the student's ability to speak the language confidently. Use of English in free time explained the students' competence more than the working methods in lessons. Students who used English

to watch films, videos and similar, listen to music, game or follow social media showed better competence in both interpretation and production skills than students who rarely used English outside school.

The students' ideas of the usefulness of English and their own proficiency were positive. They also liked their English lessons. Above all, English is considered a useful subject, and students have strong confidence in their proficiency. The factor that has the strongest links to results in different areas of language proficiency is, specifically, the students' perception of their English skills.

The **individual background factors with the strongest links to the students' proficiency** were their perceptions of their proficiency (coefficient of determination 36% in interpretation skills and 33% in production skills), the time spent on completing the assessment assignments (23% and 17%), and language use focusing on understanding English in free time (20% and 21%). Altogether, liking English, considering English useful, using English in leisure time and the time spent on completing the assessment explained 41% of the differences between the students and schools in interpretation skills and 39% in production skills.

When the assessment results were examined in relation to school grades, it was found that on average, there were major disparities between the grades of students in different schools who received the same assessment result. The difference between some schools could be as high as one grade. When interpreting this finding, however, it should be remembered that the assessment only focused on some of the curriculum contents, and such factors as the impact of the student's work in class on the grade were consequently excluded from the assessment.

Development recommendations for teaching and learning English were formulated based on the results. The key recommendations concern slowing down the trend towards differentiation in proficiency, diversifying the contents and working methods of English lessons, and supporting the introduction of final assessment criteria. It is also important to offer all students a peaceful working environment regardless of the location of the school and the available resources.