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The Proficiency in Swedish of Finnish speaking University Students: Status and Directions for the Future

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All Finnish-speaking students in Finland are obliged to study Swedish at lower and upper secondary school. At university, students taking a degree must obtain a Civil Service Language Proficiency (CSLP) Certificate in Swedish, for which spoken and written proficiency corresponding to at least level B1 on the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) must be demonstrated, along with the proficiency necessary for the professional field in question. This article aims to empirically examine the extent to which university students demonstrate the requested level of written proficiency when entering university, and to discuss potential actions to meet the challenges of the current situation. A total of 490 university students participated in the study, representing seven faculties at a Finnish-speaking university. Those 490 students wrote an essay in Swedish when beginning a course leading to obtaining a CSLP Certificate; three independent raters evaluated all the essays according to the CEFR scale. The results show that 52.9 % of the essays were marked below B1. This article concludes by discussing the need for increased consistency in assessment procedures at all educational stages. Possible actions for improving general level of skills at lower and upper secondary schools are suggested, as is a reconsideration of the need for everyone to obtain the CSLP Certificate as part of university study.

Introduction

The percentage of people living in Finland whose registered mother tongue is Finnish is far higher than the percentage of those whose mother tongue is Swedish (90.95 % vs. 5.44 %; Statistics Finland 2009). Nonetheless, the Constitution of Finland (731/1999 §17) declares that both Finnish and Swedish are national languages, that both are awarded the same status, and that the cultural and social needs of the two language groups shall be met on equal grounds. Finnish-speaking students are obliged to study Swedish at lower and upper secondary school, just as Swedish-speaking students must study Finnish (Basic Education Act 628/1998). At a university level, moreover, "[T]he student must demonstrate in studies included in education for a lower or higher

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university degree or otherwise that he/she has attained... the proficiency in Finnish and Swedish which is required of civil servants ... and which is necessary for their field" (Government Decree on University Degrees 794/2004, 6§). Finnish-speaking students at a polytechnic or university must therefore obtain a Civil Service Language Proficiency (CSLP) Certificate in Swedish (see the Act on the Knowledge of Languages Required of Personnel in Public Bodies 424/2003, 13§ and the Government Decree on the demonstration of proficiency in Finnish and Swedish in state administration 481/2003). To obtain the Certificate, which is referred to below as the CSLP Certificate and is required for certain posts in the Civil Service sector, a certain level of written and spoken proficiency must be demonstrated.

The CSLP Certificate may in principle be obtained by passing an oral and written examination administered by a university. However, the majority of students are urged to attend a course at the university that leads to the certification upon completion. The current study aims to examine if university students enrolled in this course are sufficiently prepared for the course in terms of language proficiency skills. To assess levels of proficiency in Swedish, essays written by 490 Finnish-speaking university students at the beginning of the university course in Swedish were evaluated. This paper presents the results of that evaluation and discusses the results critically from an educational and a societal perspective. The article concludes by suggesting a number of actions to meet the challenges of the current situation.

Swedish in the educational system

School attendance in Finland is free of charge, and the first nine years of study are compulsory (those nine years are referred to as 'basic education' in Figure 1). After Grade 9, students can continue either to general upper secondary school or to a vocational institute specializing in professional training. These two options may also be combined. Tertiary education consists of universities and polytechnics.

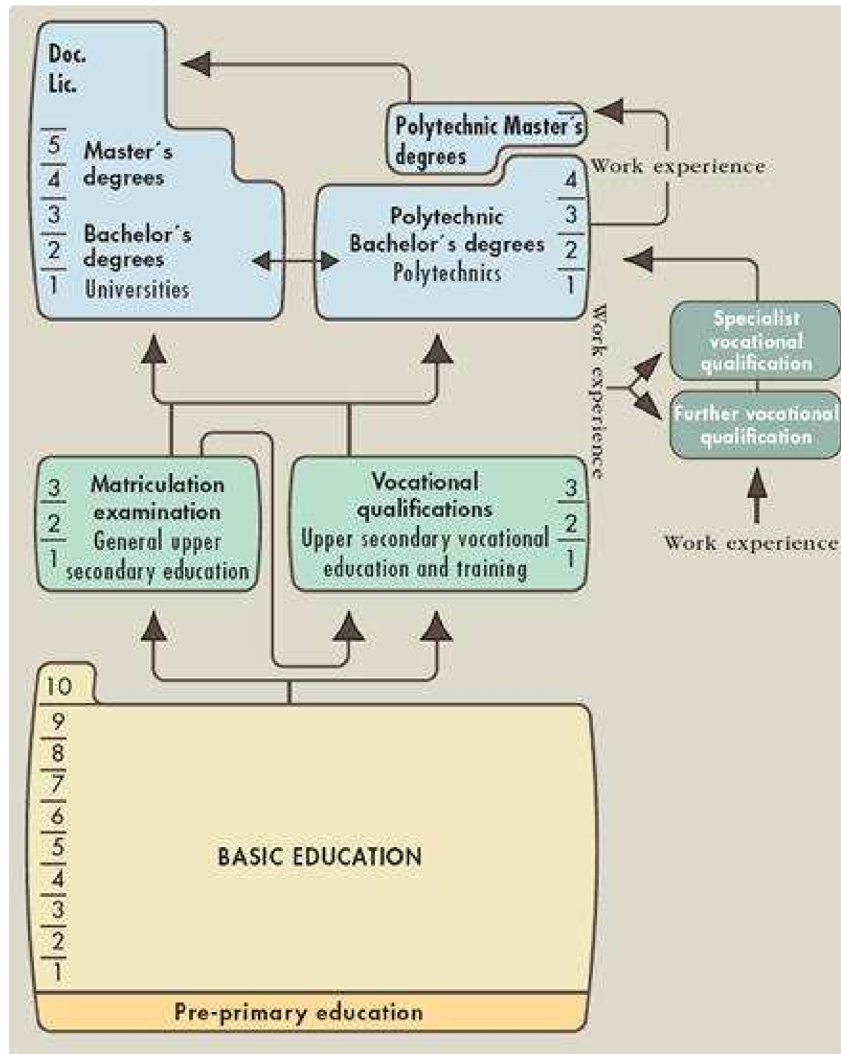

Figure 1. A schematic of the Finnish education system[1]. Reprinted by permission of the Finnish National Board of Education.

Finnish students typically begin their first foreign language in Grade 3 at nine years of age. While the possibility exists in theory to choose from a range of languages, the majority start with English; for instance, 95 % of Finnish students in Grade 3 chose English in 2009 (the Finnish National Board of Education, 2010). Students may also begin an optional second foreign language in Grade 5 at eleven years of age. In principle, it is possible to begin studies in Swedish in Grade 3 as well as in Grade 5; however, whether or not teaching is provided depends on the teacher and student and on the financial resources of the particular municipality.

The majority of Finnish students (about 90 % in 2007) begin Swedish in lower secondary school in Grade 7, at thirteen years of age. Therefore, the current study will focus primarily on this group of students. The three years of lower secondary school provide a minimum of 228 hours (1 hour = 45 minutes) of Swedish language instruction. Swedish is also compulsory in general upper secondary school as well as in upper secondary vocational education and training. However, the number of hours of Swedish varies substantially between

the two: in general upper secondary school, students take Swedish courses corresponding to at least 190 hours of teaching, whereas classroom teaching of Swedish in upper secondary vocational education and training varies between 16 to 35 hours in total duration, depending on the school and on the type of program (see Kantelinen to appear). Notably, the number of hours of Swedish taught at lower and upper secondary schools decreased substantially between the national curricula of 1985 and 1994. In lower secondary school, the number of hours decreased by around 33 % and in upper secondary school, the number of hours decreased by 25 %.

In terms of contents, goals, and assessments, the current curricula for language teaching rely to a great extent on the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and assessment (2001). The CEFR scales have six proficiency levels, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2, where A1 represents a 'beginner' and C2 an 'advanced language user.' The curricula make use of an adapted version of the CEFR scale that includes levels A1 to C1 only. Each level is divided into two or three sub-levels (see National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education Intended for Young People, 2003: 234-251). Ten levels exist in the school assessment grades scale at lower and upper secondary school[2]. To receive a grade corresponding to 'good' by the end of Grade 9, a student must have a proficiency level of A1.3 in writing on the language proficiency scale (see the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004: 124, NCCBE). By the end of the student's upper secondary school studies, the objective for writing skills is B1.1 (see National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education Intended for Young People, 2003: 84); however, this achievement is not related to any specific assessment grade in the curriculum.

Towards the end of Swedish studies in a general upper secondary school, a student takes a Matriculation Examination (ME) that aims to assess if the student has assimilated the knowledge and skills required by the curriculum (see The Finnish Matriculation Examination, 2009). Until 2004, Finnish-speaking students had to take a Swedish test as an obligatory part of the ME, whereas since 1.1.2005, the Swedish test has been optional (see the Upper Secondary School Act 766/2004). The test itself is divided into subtests that measure reading and listening comprehension and written language (grammar, vocabulary, and text-writing). The texts of the subtests vary in complexity depending on how many years the student has studied Swedish. Performances in open-ended items or tasks are marked by the teacher and subsequently by the Matriculation Examination Board (The Finnish Matriculation Examination Board 2007). When the scores from the subtests have been totalled, the final grade is given according to a seven-grade scale from I (Improbatur) to L (Laudatur). This scale is relative and approximates normal distribution[3]. In 2008, the format of the Swedish writing test was changed and the evaluation criteria adjusted towards the communicative goals stated in the CEFR and the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education Intended for Young People (by the Finnish Matriculation Examination Board 2007). However, how the goals, as manifested by CEFR proficiency levels, relate to the relative scale of grades used in the examination remains unclear. The underlying idea behind the proficiency levels is to map the achievements of the individual, whereas the relative scale of grades works by comparing student performances; these may well vary over time. In other words, a performance yielding the highest grade (L) in 2009 may not be on a similar level as a performance graded L five or ten years earlier.

The political decision to make the Swedish test optional in the ME has been debated widely. The effects of this change have not yet been evaluated, but the percentage of students who took the Swedish test decreased clearly between 2005 and 2009. In 2005, around 90 % of students took the test; that number fell to seventy-three percent in 2008 and to sixty-eight percent in 2009[4]. A clear difference exists also between boys and girls: 80 % of female students took the Swedish test in 2009, whereas only 51 % of the male students took the test.

All Finnish-speaking students who enter a university or polytechnic are required to obtain the CSLP Certificate in Swedish as part of their studies. The CSLP Certificate is required for certain positions in the Civil Service (Act on the Knowledge of Languages Required of Personnel in Public Bodies 424/2003), a requirement that may be attributed to the purpose of the Language Act (423/2003), namely "to ensure the constitutional right of every person to use his or her own language, either Finnish or Swedish, before the courts and other authorities." Since 1987, universities have been responsible for ascertaining if their students have the skills in Swedish required by the state. To obtain a CSLP Certificate, a student must show that he or she has the skills necessary for the field in question—such as a command of appropriate vocabulary—and must demonstrate proficiency in Swedish that corresponds to at least level B1 on the CEFR scale in speech and writing (see Act on the Knowledge of Languages Required of Personnel in Public Bodies 424/2003, Government Decree 481/2003; Elsinen & Juurakko-Paavola, 2006). The majority of students attend a course at the university that leads to the certification upon completion. The length of the course varies between universities and faculties, but corresponds to at least 2 ECTS (see section 5.1 for a discussion of course contents).

Previous research into proficiency in Swedish

Nationwide evaluations of the proficiency in Swedish of Finnish-speaking students in Grade 9 (15-year-olds) were carried out by the National Institute for Educational Research (KTL) in the 1970s and 1980s, and have since been carried out at regular intervals by the Ministry of Education (see for instance Tuokko 2002). In the latest evaluation in 2008 (Tuokko 2009), student scores were related to language proficiency levels (the adapted version of the CEFR scales given in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004: 278-295). Fifty-one percent of the 15-year-olds taking the test reached at least proficiency level A1.3 in writing, a result that corresponds to "Functional elementary language proficiency." Notably, 14 % of the student population tested produced texts below level A1.1; in other words, their texts were so poor that they could not be evaluated. In fact, every fifth boy (and approximately one girl out of ten) displayed this weak performance.

At the secondary educational level, Kantelinen (to appear) asked 63 Swedish teachers at upper secondary vocational programs to estimate the language proficiency of students at the beginning of and after the compulsory Swedish course. At the beginning of the course, 79 % of students were at level A1, 19 % were at level A2, and approximately 2 % were at level B1 or higher. By the end of the course, the percentage of students at level B1 (or higher) increased to 24 %. In relation to general upper secondary schools, ME scores are provided annually by the Matriculation Examination Board. However, no specific

information is made available on the quality of these performances. As reported by Hildén (2009), Takala compared the grades received by students in the ME to CEFR levels and found that cum laude approbatur (C) corresponded roughly to a 'strong' A2 or a 'low' B1, whereas magna cum laude approbatur (M) represented a clear B1. By Takala's estimations (see Fiilin 2007: 106), barely 40 % of the students who took the ME in Swedish showed a proficiency corresponding to level B1, while 60 % reach level A2. Along the same lines, Hildén (2009) surveyed grades achieved in MEs by all students beginning their studies at Finnish-speaking universities in the autumn of 2008. Hildén found that 25 % of the students received a grade lower than C, and that 44 % received a grade lower than M. Conclusions should be drawn with caution, but as Hildén points out, these figures indicate that at least 25 % of students and possibly more were below level B1 when starting their university studies.

Both Juurakko-Paavola (2008) and Jaatinen and Juuso (2008) examined the language skills of students at polytechnics. In the study by Juurakko-Paavola (2008), 116 Swedish teachers at polytechnics responded to a questionnaire in which one question concerned the estimated skill levels of students before and after the Swedish course that leads to obtaining the CSLP Certificate. According to teacher estimations, 75 % of students were at level A1 (19 %) or level A2 (56 %) at the beginning of the course, whereas by the end of the course the numbers of those below level B1 decreased to 22 %. Juurakko-Paavola (2008: 7) states that, in the estimation of their teachers, the students as a group made remarkable progress during the course. On the other hand, Juurakko-Paavola asks how such a large group of students below level B1 at the start of the course managed to pass earlier stages in school, considering that upper secondary studies aim at proficiency level B1 (2008: 8).

Jaatinen and Juuso (2008) report on the Swedish skills of 832 polytechnic students who initiated their studies in 2007. Before starting any language courses, these students passed parts of the Dialang test (Alderson 2005) to discover any potential need for preparatory courses before entering the Swedish course that leads to a CSLP Certificate. The results showed large differences between those with a vocational upper secondary qualification (n = 213) and those who had passed a ME in an upper secondary school (n = 588). Only 2.5 % of the former group of students were found to qualify for entering the course, as were only 20 % of students in the group who had passed a ME. Therefore, independent of prior degrees, the majority of students needed preparatory courses before starting the studies that lead to a CSLP Certificate.

Niemi (2008) conducted a nationwide e-mail survey of university teachers (n=24) and teachers at polytechnics (n=19). Eight teachers were also interviewed. The teachers stated that around 20 % of students who pass the examinations for the courses do not in reality have a B1 proficiency level. Niemi suggested that the results confirm the claims that increasing numbers of secondary school graduates passing their Swedish courses have such low language skills that they are unable to reach the proficiency level stipulated by the civil service examination.

Irrespective of the method used, the findings suggest that, for a considerably large group of students, a gap exists between the Swedish skills they possess and the demands of the CSLP Certificate (CEFR level B1). Moreover, previous studies of Swedish language proficiency in higher education have focused first and foremost on students at polytechnics; few studies of the proficiency of university students exist. While polytechnics and universities both deal with

higher education, certain differences between the two are of interest in the current study. Firstly, in comparison to students at polytechnics, more students at a university have a ME from an upper secondary school. Secondly, in comparison with programs at polytechnics, more programs at a university aim at positions in the state civil service that require the CSLP Certificate and Swedish skills.

The proficiency in Swedish of university students

Aim of the study

Up to this point, no large-scale study on the proficiency in Swedish of Finnish-speaking university students has been carried out. The study presented in this paper aims to examine the levels of proficiency in Swedish of 490 Finnish-speaking university students who have just started the Swedish course leading to a CSLP Certificate. More specifically, the aim is to discover if the students are sufficiently prepared for the course in terms of language skills. As explained above, by the end of the course, the students must show a proficiency corresponding to at least CEFR level B1. This level, B1, is also the goal for Swedish studies at general upper secondary schools. As university courses in Swedish are in general very short in duration, sometimes 2 ECTS only—therein limiting the possibility to advance from one CEFR level to another during the course—it is desirable that the students begin their university Swedish language study at level B1.

Methods and data

The data consisted of 490 essays collected as a part of a larger survey project from 2006 to 2007, a project in which 776 students at a Finnish-speaking university participated (see Nordqvist Palviainen & Jauhojärvi-Koskelo 2009). The students, representing all seven faculties at the university, attended the course in Swedish arranged by the university language centre that leads to a CSLP Certificate. Data collection took place in two steps. Firstly, researchers visited classes during introductions to the course. Students (N=776) filled out a questionnaire providing the researchers with individual background data, and responded to 19 statements concerning motivation and attitudes towards learning Swedish using a Likert scale. Secondly, during the following class, all the students wrote an essay in Swedish on the topic, "The good and bad sides of university life" (in Swedish 'Universitetslivets ljusa och mörka sidor'). The students were asked to use thirty minutes to compose the text, and were told that the length of the text should be approximately 150 words. The students gave their consent that the material be used for research purposes. A total of 666 hand-written essays were made available via this process.

A sample of seventy texts from each of the seven faculties was collected for assessment in the current study. The writers of the 490 texts represented all fields of study and displayed the same distributions of sex as the entire population of the university at the time: 37 % of the students were male and 63 % were female. The average age was 24 years. Of the 490 students, 22 reported having a previous university degree, and 42 reported having a degree from a

polytechnic. 417 reported the ME as their highest qualification, and 9 students had an upper secondary vocational qualification only. A total of 479 students (97.8 %) had taken the ME test in Swedish. The high percentage is explained by the fact that the Swedish examination was still compulsory in the ME until as late as 2004.

Three experienced teachers of Swedish, representing an upper secondary school, a polytechnic, and a university, evaluated the texts using The Language Proficiency Scale, a Finnish application of the CEFR scales included in the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education Intended for Young People (2003: 234-250). All three teachers had extensive experience of assessing texts written by Finnish students in Swedish as a foreign language, and were trained in using the scale of assessment. Only the scale concerning written proficiency was applied, and the proficiency levels referred to were A1, A2, B1, B2, and C1. The subscales of proficiency levels were not applied, and functioned only as an aid to the evaluation process. No personal information about the writer was given to the teachers. In the first session, the three teachers met and discussed the interpretation of the scales under the supervision of an external expert on assessment procedures. A subset of the texts was assessed by each teacher individually, following which the texts were compared and discussed in order to define benchmarks. After this session, all three teachers worked individually, evaluating all 490 texts. An acceptable level of inter-rater reliability was reached (Cronbach's Alpha .834), and the final score (CEFR level) allocated to each individual text was the mean of the scores given by the three teachers.

The assessments of proficiency relied therefore on subjective evaluations using the CEFR scale by three individual teachers, on a single task—free writing—concerning a certain text-type—expository—with a limited length of 150 words. Certain risks are certainly connected with this type of method and the extent to which it can assess language proficiency (particularly, its limited generalisability). Importantly, no consideration is given to speaking skills or to listening or reading comprehension, all of which are crucial to language competence. Even for testing proficiency in writing, one written sample of 150 words from an individual may not adequately reflect the skill of that individual. However, the number of texts analysed was large, and agreement among the teachers evaluating them was fairly high, so the general picture of written proficiency of Swedish in the group of university students studied can claim a fair degree of validity.

Results

Figure 2 shows the results of the assessment process. Twenty-one texts (4.3 %) were marked A1, 238 texts (48.6 %) A2, 195 texts (39.8 %) B1, and 36 texts (7.3 %) B2. No essays in the sample were marked level C1.

A total 52.9 % of essays were marked levels A1 and A2. Therefore, over half of the texts written at the beginning of the course were marked as below level B1, the level required to pass the course and obtain the CSLP Certificate.

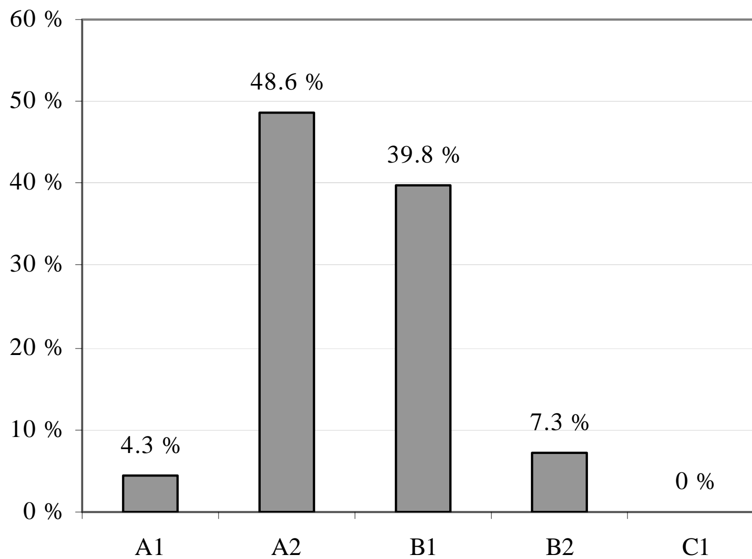

Figure 2. The distribution of proficiency levels (CEFR) of Swedish texts written by Finnish-speaking university students (n=490) as evaluated by three experts.

The data suggests that differences exist in proficiency between female and male students as well as between faculties. A statistical analysis was carried out to examine these differences, based on a multinominal logistic regression model with the proficiency level as the response and sex and faculty as the explanatory variables. The statistical significances of the effects of sex and faculty were determined by likelihood ratio tests. According to the results of those ratio tests, both the effects of sex ($p=0.006$) and of faculty ($p<0.001$) were clearly significant. The interaction of sex and faculty also proved significant ($p=0.043$). Since the data set is a sample from a rather limited population—students entering a specific course in Swedish at one university—we cannot claim that these findings are strictly universal. Nonetheless, we believe that the results more or less reflect the true differences between female and male students as well as the differences between students of different disciplines at Finnish universities.

Table 1 compares the distributions of the proficiency levels of female and male students. Clearly, female students show a high level of proficiency more often than male students: 54.8 % of the female students and 33.7 % of the male students were at level B1 or higher.

Table 1. The distribution of proficiency levels (CEFR ¬levels A1, A2, B1, and B2) in relation to sex (female vs. male).

		Sex				Total	
		Female		Male		Female	
		Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Proficiency levels	A1	4	1.3%	17	9.6%	21	4.3%
	A2	137	43.9%	101	56.7%	238	48.6%
	B1	138	44.2%	57	32.0%	195	39.8%
	B2	33	10.6%	3	1.7%	36	7.3%
Total		312	100.0%	178	100.0%	490	100.0%

Table 2 shows the distributions related to faculty affiliation. An examination of those distributions reveals—among other notable findings—that 61.4 % of the students at the faculty of Social Sciences were at proficiency level B1 or higher, whereas only 14.3 % of the students at the Faculty of Information Technology were at level B1 or higher. Notably, the Faculty of Information Technology is the only faculty at which the majority of students in the sample are male (83 %). In the other faculties, the proportion of male students lies between 43 % (the Faculty of Business and Economics) and 14 % (the Faculty of Education). Faculty-related differences are therefore confounded to some extent by differences in sex. The origin of the interaction between sex and faculty can be found by comparing the faculties with respect to the differences between female and male students. These comparisons, which are not shown here, reveal that in two faculties—the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Business and Economics—female students perform remarkably better than male students. In the other faculties the difference between women and men is negligible.

Discussion of the results

Assessment of student proficiency levels showed that 52.9 % of the texts were marked at a level lower than B1 at the beginning of Swedish studies at the university level; these figures are in line with the percentages Takala (see Fiilin 2007) arrived at by evaluating performances in the ME and by relating those performances to the CEFR. The results of this study confirm that a large number of students do not, evidently, reach the goal of level B1 in written proficiency upon completion of upper secondary school. As a consequence, those students encounter problems when facing university requirements.

Data collection was performed at the beginning of the course, when the students may not have used their Swedish actively for some time, not even passively (cross-reference Nordqvist Palviainen & Jauhojärvi-Koskelo 2009). The latent skills of this group of students may therefore be re-activated during the course and these students may show proficiency corresponding to at least B1 by the end of the course (cross-reference the findings of Juurakko-Paavola 2008). However, the low performance of these students in the current study is indeed

Table 2. The distribution of proficiency levels (CEFR levels A1, A2, B1, and B2) in relation to faculty affiliation.

		Faculties														Total	
		Humanities		Social Sciences		Mathematics and Science		Sports and Health Sciences		Education		Business & Economics		Information Technology			
		Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Proficiency levels	A1	2	2.9%	0	.0%	2	2.9%	0	.0%	0	.0%	4	5.7%	13	18.6%	21	4.3%
	A2	33	47.1%	27	38.6%	33	47.1%	34	48.6%	29	41.4%	35	50.0%	47	67.1%	238	48.6%
	B1	29	41.4%	27	38.6%	33	47.1%	34	48.6%	36	51.4%	27	38.6%	9	12.9%	195	39.8%
	B2	6	8.6%	16	22.9%	2	2.9%	2	2.9%	5	7.1%	4	5.7%	1	1.4%	36	7.3%
Total		70	100.0%	70	100.0%	70	100.0%	70	100.0%	70	100.0%	70	100.0%	70	100.0%	490	100.0%

an indicator that the skills of Swedish students finishing upper secondary school are weak.

As the statistical analyses demonstrate, differences in performance can be related to both sex and to faculty affiliations. The differences between female and male students were most clearly visible at the faculties of Social Sciences and Business and Economics, where female students performed remarkably better than male students. Another clear finding was that students at the Faculty of Information Technology performed worse than other students. A previous study (Nordqvist Palviainen & Jauhojärvi-Koskelo 2009) discovered that students at the Faculty of Information Technology had a more negative attitude towards Swedish than students at other faculties, and were less motivated to study Swedish at university. Low proficiency in Swedish is connected therefore to low motivation and to negative attitudes; students displaying those characteristics must work very hard to pass the Swedish course and obtain a CSLP Certificate.

The group under examination (N=490) was very homogeneous. Ninety-two point seven percent of the students examined were under 30 years of age, while 82.4 % reported that they had studied Swedish for 6 to 8 years; 97.8 % had taken the Swedish test in the ME. Only nine students in total reported that their highest degree was an upper secondary vocational qualification: a finding in sharp contrast to the polytechnics (cross-reference section 3 above). The vast majority of the participants in this study represent a generation affected by a change of curriculum in 1994, following which the number of hours of Swedish classroom teaching decreased substantially in lower and upper secondary school. Moreover, most participants represent the last generation of students for whom the Swedish test in the ME was compulsory. Figure 2 presents results that may be said therefore to reflect the skills of that generation. A new generation of students is currently entering the university; this is a generation of students who have been able to choose whether or not to take Swedish in the ME. The proficiency of Swedish of this new group of students has not been evaluated yet.

Directions for the future

The study presented here shows a considerable gap between the proficiency that students possess when finishing upper secondary school and the proficiency requirements at university level: a finding that in turn reflects the demands of the official decrees. What solutions are available, then, in such an awkward situation? The status of Swedish as the second national language in the Constitution of Finland (731/1999, 17§) will not presumably change in the foreseeable future and the state will continue to be required to see to it that Swedish-speaking citizens can use their mother tongue in contact with the authorities. Whether or not Swedish should continue to be compulsory in schools is currently under heavy political debate, debate that is likely to increase in the period before the upcoming Finnish Parliament elections of 2011. Taking for granted, however, that Swedish will continue to be a compulsory subject in lower and upper secondary school, possible actions might be taken in relation to any of the following three institutions: university courses as a resource for improving language skills, the system of obtaining the CSLP Certificate as part of higher education, and teaching in lower and upper secondary schools.

The university courses

The course in Swedish taken by the majority of students is provided by the University Language Centre and has as its main objectives to prepare the student for professional working life in a certain field, and that the student will acquire the skills required for work in the Civil Service (as stated in Government Decree on University Degrees 794/2004). Students are to display these skills through the examination and by obtaining the CSLP Certificate upon completion of the course. Problems arise however when students' entry skills in Swedish are low and the course length is restricted, meaning that classroom time must be re-allocated from focusing on skills necessary for their professional field to remedial teaching of basic grammar. As a consequence, teaching addresses aspects that should have been acquired previously in upper secondary school, instead of skills related to professional working life.

Ways around this problem exist, such as the establishment of diagnostic language level tests before entering the Swedish course (see for instance Jaatinen & Juuso 2008), or the establishment of preparatory courses (Nordqvist Palviainen & Jauhojärvi-Koskelo 2009). In this method, if a student receives a low score on a diagnostic test, that student is recommended to take a preparatory course. In fact, many universities implement this test procedure nowadays, although it is typically not compulsory. Similarly, most universities offer preparatory courses. At least three problematic areas can be distinguished, however. Firstly, providing preparatory courses for students requires resources, both time and money. The students taking those preparatory courses must invest their time at the expense of courses in their major or minor subjects; also, additional teacher resources are necessary in addition to those required for the compulsory courses. Secondly, the question arises whether it is the task of the university to provide courses in—for example—basic grammar. Thirdly, neither diagnostic level tests before the course nor participation in preparatory courses are compulsory. While students with low skills need to take a test and attend preparatory courses as a simple practical matter of fact, they typically do not take a test or attend preparatory courses. Low motivation is associated with low skills and vice-versa (cross-reference the above discussion). The challenge is to motivate such students to take a preparatory course before the compulsory course.

Another solution to the problem might be to extend the duration of the Swedish course, increasing the number of hours and the number of ECTS credits. Again, however, this would require more money, time, and teacher resources, and the resulting studies would be carried out at the expense of other courses. The question is would universities and students accept such a development? The teachers interviewed by Niemi (2008) contended that around 20 % of students who pass the course do not in reality possess the required skills. To a teacher with an overload of work resulting from the low skills of students who need to improve those skills in a short period of time, it may seem pragmatic and tempting to let students pass and obtain a CSLP Certificate even if their skills are insufficient. Such a solution is against the law and therefore not ethically defensible.

Obtaining the Civil Service Language Proficiency (CSLP) Certificate

While in theory, only the obtaining of a CSLP Certificate is compulsory, students at most universities are strongly recommended to attend the Swedish course that leads to a CSLP Certificate. In fact, the course is often referred to as the compulsory course in Swedish. Some universities have clearly separated the examination and Swedish courses. In those universities, the student has the principle responsibility to acquire sufficient skills to succeed in the certification test; for example, by participating in courses of his or her own choice. The advantage of such an approach is certainly that the individual student has a greater freedom to choose whether or not to take a course. However, individual studies may lead to difficulties in acquiring language skills related to the specific professional area tested in the examination for the CSLP Certificate. While this system—in which the certification is compulsory, while participation in Swedish courses is voluntary—probably increases the motivation of some students, it is doubtful whether the system increases their general level of proficiency in Swedish. Indeed, a risk exists that students with weak skills will avoid the Swedish courses altogether and run into significant problems later, in the examination.

One path might be for universities to offer students the opportunity to attend courses and to obtain the certification, but to make neither compulsory in obtaining a university degree. Such a change in the legal system is possible in principle, but the consequences cannot be foreseen. Motivated students will probably take the courses anyway, and will find it a bonus to obtain the CSLP Certificate as a part of the university degree, at no extra cost. However, of the 490 students who participated in the study described in this article, only 33 % agreed with the statement I would take the Swedish university course, even if it wasn't compulsory, whereas 45 % disagreed and 22 % responded I cannot say. These results indicate that about half of university students would not take the course. Moreover, two thirds of those who disagreed with the statement were male students, suggesting that more women than men would obtain the CSLP Certificate. This type of solution would clearly make university studies easier for very unmotivated students with weak skills in Swedish, students who do not see a personal need for Swedish skills in their future professional life. Such a reform would however most likely result in a decrease in the general level of Swedish language skills of highly educated people in Finland, or rather in fewer people manifesting competencies in Swedish of at least level B1.

Moving its perspective beyond the individual student, the Universities Act (558/2009, §2) declares that "The mission of the universities is to promote free research and academic and artistic education, to provide higher education based on research, and to educate students to serve their country and humanity…" [author's italics]. One important idea behind university studies in Finland is therefore to educate individuals to work in and to serve society. To make the obtaining of a CSLP Certificate non-mandatory at Finnish universities would incur an overwhelming risk that the number of highly-educated Finns with demonstrated Swedish language skills would be small, and that bilingual authorities would encounter considerable difficulties in finding qualified personnel for positions in civil service. This would collide in turn with the Constitution of Finland, which states that Swedish-speaking and Finnish-speaking inhabitants have equal rights in social services.

A solution in which the obtaining of a CSLP Certificate is not compulsory in university studies should offer students the opportunity to take the test even after their university studies are finished—for instance, if a person applies for a position that requires a CSLP Certificate. Test procedures are already available for obtaining the civil service's language examination and a National Certificate of Language Proficiency. These procedures are administered by the Finnish National Board of Education (see Tarnanen & Huhta 2008). However, a separation in the mandatory obtaining of the CSLP Certificate at universities would probably result in a considerable increase in the number of such examinees; the system must be able to handle the ensuing situation. Moreover, language training within specific professional areas should be made available as preparation for the examination. The university system has developed competencies for this type of training and examination for many years, and it would be a waste of resources if those competencies were not used in the future.

Finally, a proposal is sometimes made to offer students at upper secondary school level the opportunity to take the test that leads to the certification; for instance, in connection with the ME. Currently, the receipt of one of the two highest grades in the ME by a student who began Swedish in Grade 7 counts as sufficient skills in oral and written comprehension for certain occupational positions. However, the receipt of one of these two grades is insufficient to obtain a CSLP Certificate, which requires sufficient skills in oral and written production as well as professionally-oriented language skills. In order to connect the ME to the obtaining of a CLSP Certificate, the following must be considered. Firstly, training in specific professional areas should be offered in lower and upper secondary schools, meaning that Swedish teachers at that level would have to be trained to specialise in certain areas and to teach Swedish for specific purposes. Secondly, students often do not know what their future professional fields will be. Finally, the examination for the certificate demands the testing of oral skills. Oral communication is not necessarily trained to a great extent at the upper secondary school, as the ME does not include an oral test. Additionally, oral examinations of large groups of students demand extensive resources that the system cannot currently offer. In conclusion, the option to offer upper secondary school students the opportunity to obtain the certification is not recommended.

Lower and upper secondary school and the matriculation examination (ME)

The ME in Finland has a tradition of more than 150 years, and high grades in the examination provide students with a solid basis for subsequent studies. Moreover, good results from students also enhance school reputations, particularly since the Finnish media began publishing "league tables." The ME has a high prestige value therefore, and as a consequence, language teaching—particularly in upper secondary school— functions to a great extent as preparation for the ME; students are trained in areas tested specifically in the examination. The ME Swedish test, compulsory for Finnish-speaking pupils until 2004, is compulsory no longer. Nonetheless, the contents of the Swedish courses rely to a great extent on what can be expected to be tested in the examination. If a student decides at an early stage not to take the Swedish test in the ME, the motivation of that student to study Swedish is likely to be low.

Indeed, teachers report (Salo, 2009) that some students make the least effort possible—are merely physically present in the classroom—to obtain a note stating that they have attended the compulsory courses. The situation, including the fact that an increasing number of students do not take the Swedish test in the ME, is awkward for Swedish teachers in Finland. On one hand, teachers should encourage their students to take the test and guide them towards the examination. On the other, they should be able to motivate their students to study Swedish, irrespective of whether those students take the test or not.

The decision to make the Swedish test voluntary in the ME has had its advocates as well as its opponents. Advocates have maintained that with no compulsory test, student motivation to study Swedish is increasing, whereas opponents have feared that general student proficiency in Swedish will worsen. The precise effects of changes to the ME are yet to be evaluated. However, the results of the current study—in which nearly 98 % of the students involved had taken the Swedish test—show that even passing the test does not mean that a student has acquired the level of skills required at university per se. A notable additional effect of changes to the ME is that only half of the male students in Finland in 2009 chose to take the Swedish test, compared to 80 % of female students taking the test. What consequences will this difference in choice between the sexes have in the future?

Most of the students examined by the current study were affected by the substantial reduction of teaching hours that occurred in 1994. Indeed, among other factors, the number of hours of classroom teaching to which a student has been exposed is likely to play a role in the success of his or her acquisition of a language (see for example Collins et al 1999). A reduced number of courses and hours causes stress for language teachers at all levels, and requires that a wide range of topics be covered in a short period of time. At an upper secondary school particularly, that time will likely be devoted primarily to themes important to the ME. As a consequence, written proficiency—for example—may be trained at the expense of oral proficiency. The lack of a speaking test in the ME may send signals to the student that oral skills are unimportant (Tarnanen & Huhta 2008), and a student beginning the Swedish courses at the university may be shocked by the fact that much of his or her time is devoted to participating in oral discussions, and that oral skills are tested separately in the examination for the CSLP Certificate. Typically, oral exercises are the component of the university courses that students seem to fear and appreciate the most. An amendment of the Upper Secondary School Act (478/2003) states that one of the compulsory courses at upper secondary school beginning in autumn 2010 must be an oral course. This type of change, consistent with the national curricula and with the CEFR framework, has strongly influenced the curricula because both the curricula and the framework advocate proficiency in speaking and listening in addition to reading and writing. However, at least in the near future, the ME will include tests of written production and tests of reading and listening comprehension, but not a speech production test.

Conclusions

The current study aimed principally to examine whether university students enrolled in a Swedish course leading to the compulsory acquirement of the CSLP Certificate were sufficiently prepared for the course in terms of language proficiency skills. An examination of 490 texts written by university students at the beginning of their Swedish studies showed that over half of those texts were marked at below CEFR level B1. These findings are alarming, considering that proficiency level B1 is the goal of compulsory studies in Swedish at upper secondary school and for obtaining a CSLP Certificate at university. A considerable gap exists therefore between the skills requested by state decrees and the actual skills of many young university students today. Sajavaara, Luukka, and Pöyhönen (2007: 17) have pointed out the risks of isolated decisions made in relation to different levels of language education without accounting for the effects such decisions will have at later stages. Sajavaara et al. (2007) give as an example the decision to decrease the number of hours of Swedish language teaching in lower and upper secondary schools in the early 1990s. Indeed, the results presented in this paper indicate clearly that this decision has had negative effects on the skills of today's university students, which in turn has consequences for the needs of the civil service sector.

Several actions should be considered to improve the situation, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. In conclusion, this article emphasises three necessities: the need for consistency in assessment procedures at all educational stages, the need for action to improve the general level of skills at school, and the need to reconsider the requirement that all university students obtain the CSLP Certificate as part of their university studies.

As has been noted elsewhere (see for example Pöyhönen & Luukka 2007; Sajavaara & Takala 2004), a general lack of coherence exists in language-in-education planning in Finland. This is true particularly of the assessment of students' language skills. At present, what skills Swedish students who finish upper secondary school actually possess remains unclear. In terms of course content, the CEFR framework is to a large extent integrated into the curricula of the Finnish lower and upper secondary school; however, the CEFR is underdeveloped as a tool for assessment.

In the curriculum of lower secondary schools, final assessment criteria are given only for assessment grade 8 (good) where the level of performance should be A1.3 (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2004: 124). The assessment criteria for upper secondary schools are even less transparent. Although the intention is probably that a proficiency level of B1.1 in writing refers to assessment grade 8 (good), that intention is not stated explicitly. Rather, level B1.1 in writing is given only as a general "objective ... for students to achieve" (see National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education Intended for Young People , 2003: 84). Notably, neither curricula state explicitly the level of proficiency a student must reach to pass the courses; the individual teacher must make such decisions in practice. This procedure may in turn prove problematic, as teachers in Finland have not yet been trained to use CEFR to assess proficiency (Tarnanen and Huhta 2008). The assessment procedures for the Swedish tests in the ME exhibit the same type of problems as explained above. Despite such problems, the individual subtests are evaluated and assessed according to criteria related loosely to the CEFR, and the final overall grade is given according to a relative scale of grades with no reference to proficiency

levels. A more transparent, detailed, and consistent use of principles based on the assessment scales in the NCCUSS and CEFR would provide a clearer picture of skills on an individual and societal level; it would also make comparisons between certificates in different language studies more viable.

Considering the stages of the educational system, a clear lack of consistency presents itself. Courses in Swedish at lower and upper secondary schools and the obtaining of a CSLP Certificate at a polytechnic or a university are compulsory, while taking the Swedish test in the ME is not mandatory. The problem is not only one of inconsistency: as the current study indicates, a pass mark in the Swedish test of the ME does not guarantee skills that are sufficient according to university requirements.

If a system in which obtaining a CSLP Certificate is compulsory for all university students is to persist, we must acknowledge the clear need to improve general Swedish skills at schools. The teaching of Swedish at schools may be reformed either quantitatively or qualitatively or both quantitatively and qualitatively. By a quantitative change is meant an increase in the number of hours of classroom teaching of Swedish in the curricula. The number of hours provided at school by the current system is obviously insufficient for many students to achieve proficiency level B1. This is true particularly of upper secondary vocational education and training. 'Qualitative reforms' on the other hand mean a reconsideration of the content and focus of school Swedish language teaching. For example, teachers might focus less on what might be expected to be tested in the ME, so as to engage students who do not plan to take the Swedish test. Moreover, teaching could to a greater extent focus on communicative skills, oral skills, and skills necessary for future working life. These objectives are also characteristic of the CEFR framework, the framework that forms a basis for the latest curricula of 2003 and 2004. A re-orientation from a focus on form to a focus on function will also require a re-conceptualisation from teachers and teachers-to-be.

The study of Swedish in lower and upper secondary schools may be regarded as part of the general education of an individual living in a bilingual country, and university Swedish courses might be said to serve the same purpose, with a particular focus on working life. The CSLP Certification process aims in turn to ensure the level of proficiency required for state civil servants (Act on the Knowledge of Languages Required of Personnel in Public Bodies 424/2003). Students likely to apply in future for positions that may require a CSLP Certificate include—among others—law students, students taking a medical degree, and students within social sciences, most of whom attend university programs rather than programs at polytechnics. A second group of students, namely business, teaching, or history students, may not require the CSLP Certificate itself, but will clearly benefit from Swedish language skills in their professional lives. A third group consists of students neither likely to use a CSLP Certificate nor advanced Swedish language skills in their everyday professional lives. Students of computer technology, a typical example of this latter group, were discovered in this study to have particularly low skills in Swedish; they also demonstrated a low level of motivation. Despite the obvious differences in needs and entry skills, the requirements for obtaining a university degree are the same for all students. A student must obtain a CSLP Certificate, thereby demonstrating the "proficiency in Finnish and Swedish which is required of civil servants ... and which is necessary for their field" (Government Decree on University Degrees 794/2004, 6§). A reform of the system such that

obtaining a CSLP Certificate—and perhaps the taking of Swedish courses—become optional at universities and polytechnics would certainly have significant consequences. It is impossible to predict what proportion of the students would still attend the university Swedish courses and sit the examination to acquire the CSLP Certificate, should the examination and courses become optional. A risk certainly exists that many students would discard Swedish altogether (cross-reference the negative trend in the number of students taking the Swedish test in the ME). However, students representing the needs of the two first groups described would still benefit from the opportunity to study Swedish for their professional fields and to acquire a CSLP Certificate with their university degree. Therefore, making Swedish language studies optional at a university level would most likely result in worse general Swedish language skills in Finland than at present. It would also result in a loss of Swedish language skills in specific fields such as information technology. However, such a solution would engender better consistency in the current system, in which the Swedish test in the ME is also optional.

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Endnotes

1. http://www.oph.fi/english/education/overview_of_the_education_system

2. The levels are A1.1, A1.2, A1.3, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, B1.2, B2.1, B2.2, and C1.1.

3. Grade distribution: 0 = I (Improbatur) - 5%, 2 = A (Approbatur) - 11%, 3 = B (Lubenter approbatur) - 20%, 4 = C (Cum laude approbatur) - 24%, 5 = M (Magna cum laude approbatur) - 20%, 6 = E (Eximia cum laude approbatur) - 15%, and 7 = L (Laudatur) - 5%.

4. The Matriculation Examination Board does not offer official statistics on this (see however The Finnish Matriculation Examination Board 2008). These percentages are provided by MTV3, which commissioned them from the company that handles all the statistical data.

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