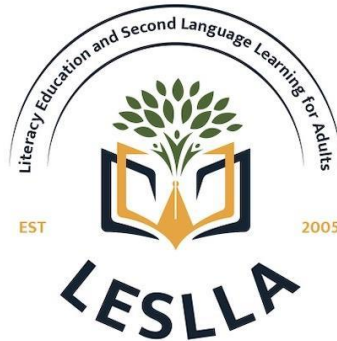


LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



Recommended citation of this article

Tammelin-Laine, T. (2011). Non-Literate Immigrants -- A New Group of Adults in Finland. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 6(1), 67–78.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8004251>

Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2010 Symposium held at University of Cologne in Cologne, Germany. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Schöneberger, C., van de Craats, I., & Kurvers, J. (Eds.) (2011). Low-educated adult second language and literacy Acquisition (LESLLA): Proceedings of the 6th symposium. Centre for Language Studies.

<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/471>

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NON-LITERATE IMMIGRANTS – A NEW GROUP OF ADULTS IN FINLAND

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1 Introduction

Finland has placed at the top in the PISA reading achievement studies year after year (OECD, 2010: 117). The success confirms the impression of the good quality of our public education launched in the 19th century. Literacy has remained close to 100% since records were kept. Even before that, since the 17th century, the church required reading skills. No reading – no marriage! Finnish people are eager to read and Finnish culture and everyday life is based on written language. We could call Finland, as well as other Western countries, a country of papers and texts.

Finnish people have been, for quite a long time, used to taking literacy for granted. However, in the last few years the number of non-literate people in Finland has increased due to immigration. Because of high literacy and society based on written language, non-literate immigrants encounter many difficulties in Finland. The population of Finland in 2010 was 5,375,276 and it is estimated that there are now approximately 1,500 non-literate immigrants living in the country. This number may still increase because a large percentage of refugees and asylum seekers have had little or no opportunity for education in their home country.

In the last few decades, there have been a large number of published studies describing the acquisition of Finnish as a new language by literate learners. Only a limited amount of research describes how non-literate adults acquire Finnish (see *Suomi toisena ja vierana kielenä -alan bibliografia 1967–2010* (2010)). In this paper, I will outline my on-going PhD study as well as the integration environment of the non-literate learner. The paper is organised as follows: First, I will discuss refugees, asylum seekers and the variety of languages in Finland. Then I will describe characteristic features of Finnish language. Section 4 deals with education system of Finland. Finally, in Section 5 I will present my PhD research.

2 Immigrants in Finland

In Finland, refugees and other immigrants are a new and small group of inhabitants when compared with many other Western countries. Only approximately 4.2% of the

population uses other than the traditional languages of Finland as their native language. Of these, just 37,587 persons immigrated as refugees from 1973 to 2010 which is as little as 16.8% of all immigrants living in Finland (Statistics Finland, 2011b). Most immigrants have moved to Finland because of work, studies, marriage or some other reasons.

The first refugees after World War II came to Finland in 1973 from Chile. Since 1986 Finland has accepted a quota of refugees annually (Alanko, 2009: 10). According to Finnish Immigration Service (2011), "Within its refugee quota, Finland accepts for resettlement persons defined as refugees by the UNHCR (refugee organisation of the United Nations) and other aliens who are in need of international protection." In the late 1980's close to all the refugees coming to Finland were quota refugees. However, since 1990 the annual volume of asylum seekers has exceeded the number of quota refugees (Alanko, 2009: 10).

In 2010 Finland accepted 634 quota refugees coming from Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and The Democratic Republic of Congo. There were also urgent quota referrals from different countries. The number of asylum applicants was 5,837 but only 1,784 positive decisions were made, hence the percentage of acceptance was 30.56%. Asylum seekers were for example from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Iran (Finnish Immigration Service, 2011a, b). In all of these countries non-literacy is common. Table 1 shows the statistics on refugees and asylum seekers in 2010.

Table 1: *Asylum seekers (nine most common nationalities) and refugees in 2010 in raw numbers (Finnish Immigration Service, 2011a, b)*

Nationality	Pos. decisions on asylum	Quota refugees
Angola	21	-
Afghanistan	196	153
Egypt		1
Iran	58	-
Iraq	607	144
Myanmar	-	131
Nigeria	22	-
Pakistan		6
Russian Federation	61	-
Somalia	653	-
Sri Lanka	20	10
The Democratic Republic of Congo	21	126
Different nationalities (urgent)	-	63

In 2011 Finland will resettle 200 Myanmar refugees from Thailand, 150 Congolese refugees from Rwanda and 300 Afghans from Iran. Finland is also prepared to take in an additional 100 emergency cases (Ministry of Interior, 2010).

3 Languages of Finland

3.1 National languages and new languages

There are two official languages in Finland, Finnish and Swedish, while Finnish Sign Language, Romany and Sami have the status of official minority languages. Table 2 shows the languages and the number of native language users in 2010.

Table 2: *National languages of Finland in 2010**

Language	Native language users	
Finnish	4,857,903	90.375%
Swedish	291,153	5.417%
Finnish Sign Language	~5,000	~0.093%
Romany	~4,500	~0.084%
Sami	1,832	0.034%

*) Statistics based on Statistics Finland (2011a); suomi.fi One address for citizens' services (2010); Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (2007b).

As can be seen in Table 3, the most common new language is Russian. It is significant that all the ten most common new languages have larger groups of native language users than the official minority languages.

Table 3: *Ten most common new languages in Finland in 2010 (Statistics Finland, 2011a)*

Language	Native language users	
Russian	54,559	1.015%
Estonian	28,493	0.530%
Somali	12,985	0.242%
English	12,855	0.239%
Arabic	10,415	0.194%
Kurdish	8,032	0.149%
Chinese	7,546	0.140%
Albanian	7,113	0.132%
Thai	5,722	0.106%
Vietnamese	5,637	0.105%

Among people living in Finland, altogether more than 140 different languages are spoken. 76 new languages have over 100 native speakers, while 41 languages have 10 or less users (Statistics Finland, 2011a).

3.2 The characteristic features of Finnish

Almost all the languages spoken in Europe are related to each other, because they belong to the same Indo-European family of languages. Finnish, however, is a Finno-

Ugric language like Estonian, Sami languages¹ and Hungarian. Finnish is known as an inflected language with many suffixes and many stem changes. Due to the extensive possibilities of derivation and compounding, Finnish words are often quite long. These features may make Finnish a challenging language for non-literate learners who have little support from the written form. However, if someone can speak Finnish, reading is quite easy because of the almost perfectly regular phoneme-grapheme correlation.

Structure

The basic characteristic of Finnish is the use of suffixes instead of prepositions or other free morphemes to express different meanings or grammatical relations. Therefore the information necessary to understand Finnish expressions is in most cases at the end of the word. In Finnish both verbs and nouns may have several suffixes. Verbs gain personal suffixes for each person. These suffixes are grammatically more important than pronouns, which may be dropped. Verbs have present, imperfect (simple past), perfect and pluperfect tenses in four moods (indicative, imperative, conditional, potential). Present corresponds to English present and future tenses. Finnish verbs have two verb voices: active and passive. As well as the tenses, voices and moods are expressed by suffixes. The examples in (1), of *istuisimme* and *istuttaisiin*, are to demonstrate the verb inflection.

- (1) a *istu-isi-mme*
sit-COND-1PL (COND = conditional, 1PL = first person plural)
'we would sit'
- b *istu-tta-isi-in*
sit-PASS-COND-AGR (PASS = passive, AGR = agreement)
'would be sat'

There are no articles or grammatical genders in Finnish nouns – even the personal pronoun 'hän' (meaning (s)he) refers to both genders. Nouns may have suffixes with the markers for a case, plural and possessive. There are also many enclitics and derivational suffixes. Finnish has fifteen noun cases: four grammatical cases, six locative cases, essive, translative and three marginal cases. It is possible and common to have more than one suffix in a single word. Pronouns have suffixes like other nouns. The examples in (2) are to demonstrate the inflection of nouns.

¹ According to Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (2007a), "There are ten known Saami languages. The Western Saami group includes South, Ume, Pite, Lule and North Saami, while the Eastern group consists of Inari, Skolt, Akkala, Kildin and Ter Saami. Only a few dozen people speak Ume, Pite and Ter Saami as their native language. Akkala Saami recently became an extinct language. Saami languages are spoken in four countries: Finland, Sweden, Norway and Russia. Depending on how 'Saami' is defined, the Saami population numbers between 60,000 and 100,000, of whom 6,000-7,000 live in Finland. Saami is spoken by no more than half of the Saami population. Three Saami languages are spoken in Finland: Inari, Skolt and North Saami. Each has its own standard written form and orthography, and they are not mutually intelligible."

- (2) a *kirja-lla-ni*
book-ADES-1POSS (ADES = adessive, 1POSS = first person possessive)
'on my book'
- b *kirja-sto-i-ssa-kin*
book-DER-PL-INES=TOO (DER = derivational marker, PL = plural, INES = inessive)
'in libraries, too'

Since Finnish is an inflected language, word order within sentence can be comparatively free, the function of a word being indicated by its ending. The most usual neutral order, however, is subject-verb-object.

Derivation and compounding are the most important methods of creating new words. One method of assessment claims that as much as 44% of Finnish words are derived and another 44% of words are combined (Brown, Lepämaa & Silfverberg 1996: 12). However, the more complex compounds and derivatives are on average not used as much as more simple basic words.

In derivation, a new word is derived by attaching suffix(es) to the word stem. Derivation is possible in nouns, verbs and adverbs and it is also possible that the word class changes after derivation (e.g. *pyytää* > *pyyntö*, 'to ask > a request'). Derivation makes Finnish in some ways an effective language because it is possible to express many implications in just a one word. The example in (3) is taken from Brown, Lepämaa & Silfverberg (1996: 14) to show the idea of effectiveness.

- (3) *perhee-lli-syys*
family-DER-DER
'the fact whether a person has a family or not'

Compounding is easier than deriving words because the combined words of a compound are quite easy to recognise as lexemes and there are few restrictions for compounding. The most important compounding rule is that the combined words must make an intelligible and semantically logical entity. It is possible to form compounds by using basic words, derivatives, compounds and open compounds. Besides, the combined words do not have to be from the same word class. Most of the compounds are substantives or adjectives but words to combine may be from any word class. (Brown, Lepämaa & Silfverberg, 1996: 12). The examples of *turvapaikanhakija* and *turvapaikkapäätös* in (4) show the idea of compounds and their possible length.

- (4) a *turva-paika-n-haki-ja*
shelter-place-GEN-seek-AGT (GEN = genitive, AGT = agentive ending)
'asylum seeker'
- b *turva-paikka-päätös*
shelter-place-decision
'decision on asylum'

Orthography

Finnish has an almost purely phonemic alphabetic orthography. The grapheme-phoneme correspondences are regular and the number of phonemes is relatively small. Each phoneme is marked with a corresponding single letter, except velar nasal [ŋ]. It is marked with *nk* when short and *ng* when long (e.g. *kenkä*, *kengät* 'a shoe, shoes'). The number of standard Finnish vowel phonemes is 8 and the number of consonant phonemes is 13. Furthermore, there are three consonant phonemes used only in loan words. Lexical and grammatical role of the vowels is highly important. Almost all consonants and all vowels can be short (written with one letter) or long (written with two letters). The length is distinctive, and there are a lot of words differing only in the length of a sound. For instance, *lakk*i (cap) is pronounced with a geminate *k* to distinguish it from *laki* (law) and *tulli* (wind) with prolonged *u* to separate it from *tuli* (fire).

Holopainen (2002) has studied the development of reading skills by Finnish speaking children. According to her, just after pre-primary education at age of seven, approximately 16% of the children could read pseudo-words completely without errors and 25% with some errors. Two other studies show that approximately one third of Finnish speaking children can read when starting the basic education and most of the children recognise the letters very well (Aro, 2004; Lerkkanen, 2003). Finally, the findings of the study by Leppänen et al. (2004) indicate that 10% of their participants could read in the beginning of pre-primary education. In the end of pre-primary education the number had increased to 26% and in the beginning of basic education it was 40%. Close to all children learn the basic reading skills during the first year of basic education (Aro, 2004; Holopainen, 2002; Lerkkanen, 2003). Basic reading skills mean here both decoding and understanding the text.

In older studies, Somerkivi (1958) and Röman (1962) suggest that when starting the school, approximately 48% of children know the letters, 10–13% can read words fluently and 4–6% can read uncomplicated text fluently. Somerkivi (1958: 35, 46) also brings up 45% of children reading fluently in the end of the first school year. After the second school year the percentage is 68. When compared to the recent studies mentioned above, the children of 1950's and 1960's acquired reading skills much slower than the children of present-day.

It seems that the regularity of the language, simple phonological structure, almost perfect phoneme-grapheme correlation and small number of phonemes facilitate acquiring literacy in Finnish if the learner can speak Finnish. When discussing the development of reading skills by Finnish children, it must still be emphasized the meaning and influence of books and reading habits at their homes and reading instruction given at home and during pre-primary and basic education.

4 Education in Finland

This section will deal with both public education and adult education in Finland. National curriculum guidelines guarantee the quality of public education. At the same time, there is only a recommended curriculum for education of adult immigrants. This situation is changing along with the new law of improving the integration.

4.1 Public Education

In Finland, legislation provides for compulsory schooling and the right to free pre-primary and basic education, altogether 10 years. Normally, children start the basic education in the same year they turn seven years of age. Pre-primary education of one year is not compulsory but most of the children go there at six years. Most other qualifying education is also free for the students, including the universities. There are approximately 3,000 comprehensive schools in Finland and only 60 of them are private schools.

4.2 Adult education

Some 800 Finnish institutions arrange a great variety of courses and programmes for adults at all levels of formal education, and the provision of non-credit-learning is extensive. There are also many private commercial companies providing for example labour market training for the unemployed. According to Finnish National Board of Education (2010a) "The annual number of participants in adult education and training is 1.7 million, which makes half of the working age population [...]. The aim of the adult education is to

1. enhance the knowledge and skills of the adult population,
2. increase educational opportunities for groups that are under-represented in adult learning, and to promote equality and active citizenship."

In Finland, the basic right to education and culture is recorded in the Constitution. Public authorities must secure equal opportunities for every resident in Finland to get education also after compulsory schooling and to develop themselves, irrespective of their financial standing.

Language courses for immigrants

The law on the integration of immigrants has been recently reformed. The new law of improving the integration will become valid on September the 1st 2011. According to the Ministry of the Interior (2011), its aim is to ensure that immigrants can take part in Finnish society and its activities in the same way as anyone else living in the country. Learning Finnish or Swedish is an essential requirement for integration.

The current educational system for immigrants was developed when immigration to Finland was less common than it is now. Language education is divided into two separate types of courses, integration training for literate adults and literacy education for non-literate adults. Both of them are provided by adult education centres and other educational institutions. The length of integration training may vary with basic training, skills and goals of each student. For a student starting with Finnish basics, it is provided an average of 1,400 hours (40 credit units) of integration training (Opetushallitus, 2007: 5).

Quality of the courses varies considerably because adult education is not strictly supervised or legislated. Furthermore, the existing education system does not sufficiently accommodate different educational backgrounds of the students, including

non-literacy. Language education for adults is mainly financed as labour force training and the main aim for working-age immigrants is to find employment, thus allowing the whole of society to benefit from their skills and qualifications. In Finland, asylum seekers and refugees are allowed to get employment without any restrictions after six months of living in the country.

Employment and Economic Development Offices as well municipal officials dealing with immigration matters help people moving to Finland get started in their new home country. In order to implement integration measures, the Ministry of the Interior guides the work of the immigration units of the Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, which are responsible for immigration and integration matters at regional level. They also guide the local Employment and Economic Development Offices in providing immigrants who have registered as jobseekers with labour market services that promote and support integration. The individual municipalities have responsibility for developing, planning and monitoring the integration of immigrants within their areas. Municipalities organise measures and services promoting and supporting the integration of immigrants. However, the system excludes for example housewives and the elderly who are not registered job-seekers. For them municipalities, associations and the church provide Finnish language groups if they have the financial and human resources for that kind of activity. These groups are often led by volunteers who are not qualified teachers.

Literacy education

Thus far, there has been only recommended curriculum in adult literacy education and no obligation for education providers to comply with it. According to the recommended curriculum, literacy courses consist of 1,400 hours (40 credit units) of education. The courses continue approximately 10 months. (Opetushallitus, 2006: 13.) In the new law, it is stated that literacy education must be provided according to the curriculum guidelines for literacy education provided by the Finnish National Board of Education (Finlex, 2010). Curriculum guidelines is a decree to insure educational basic rights, legal protection and equality as well quality and consistence of the education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2011). It remains to be seen how this change will affect the literacy education.

5 *A case study of five immigrant Finnish learners*

5.1 *Research themes*

The focus of this study is on vocabulary, phrases and constructions the subjects do or do not acquire during the data collection period, and their acquisition of some elements of the reading and writing system. The main themes for the research are:

- How does the learning process begin?
- What kinds of language constructions are typical in the beginning of learning Finnish?
- What kind of strategies do the subjects use when communicating with their teacher, with each other and with the researcher?

One of my expectations is that concrete everyday phrases such as 'food and family related words' are rather easy to acquire.

5.2 *Setting of the study*

My PhD study is a qualitative longitudinal case study. The framework of the study is the sociocultural view of acquiring a new language. Sociocultural view is based on Vygotskian psychology and according to it human interaction is the basis of all learning. (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006.) The aim of this research is thus not only to add to the knowledge of second language acquisition by non-literate adults but also to provide information for improving their teaching and the education of their teachers.

5.3 *Participants and their Finnish learning environment*

The study includes five women with no literacy skills or schooling in their native or any other language. In the beginning of the data collecting period they had lived in Finland for no more than 18 months and have been attending their first language course in Finnish in two adult education centres in two towns. Asra and Jamiila are students in town A and Amina, Husna and Rana in town B. The participants are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: *Participants of the research*

Name	age*)	Home country	Native language	Other languages	Months in Finland*)
Asra	24	Afghanistan	Dari	Farsi	18
Jamiila	31	Somaha	Somah	-	8
Amina	45	Afghanistan	Dari	Russian	15
Husna	45	Afghanistan	Dari	-	16
Rana	28	Iran	Kurdish	Farsi	12

Note: *) in August 2010

The two adult education centres are located in two of the larger cities in Finland. In the centres, teaching methods and goals of learning differ from each other to a surprising degree, even if the teachers are equally experienced in teaching non-literate adults and the number of students in the single course is close to the same. In town A, language teaching and learning is functional with many kinds of learning activities. The teacher uses a lot of visual material (i.e. theme-related photographs and realia and authentic materials) during the lessons, and learning-by-doing is a very often used method. The main goal is to acquire vocabulary and oral language skills for everyday life. Reading and writing skills come along with acquisition of vocabulary. The language course of ten months is split in two study modules with a test between them. The new streaming is determined by the students' success in the test. It is also possible to change the learning group at another time if one makes progress faster or slower than the other students of the group. If the student does not succeed in the test (s)he may take the same five-month course again. In the classroom, there is always at least one

person helping the students (and the teacher) during the lessons. If there is more than one helper, at least one of them has immigrant background and speaks at least one language of the learners. Close to all the helpers are working as a participants in employment procedure.

At the same time in town B, teaching is very reading-oriented. The teacher uses some visual material but most of the teaching is dependent on the textbook and most of the time is spent learning how to read and write. The main learning goal according to the teacher is to acquire reading and writing skills, while vocabulary is something the students either acquire or not. Furthermore, the ten-month course is single entity with only one literacy learning group at a time and therefore no possibility to change the group or to start over. During the lessons the teacher is working alone with no help.

5.4 Methods for collecting and analysing data

I began collecting data for my research in August 2010 and the data collecting period extended to ten months. In town A, I collected data approximately one day of five hours per month and in town B approximately one day of five hours per week. Because of the long distance between my hometown and town A, it was not possible to go there as often as to town B which is close to my hometown.

The data collecting methods were mostly ethnographical: observing, taking notes and recording the Finnish lessons. Furthermore, data was collected by interviewing the participants and utilising the tests and tasks they did before and during the Finnish course as well the language and memory tests prepared for this research.

The verbal data will be analysed in light of Construction Grammar (Tomasello, 2005). As a usage-based theory, Construction Grammar approves all the constructions and details of a natural language. A usage-based theory coheres with analysing the language constructions of preliminary language learning where at least some of the constructions are learned from memory without analysing them (see Myles 1998; 1999; 2004). The diversity of language constructions is emphasised particularly in the early stages of acquiring Finnish as a new language when so called language norms have not yet become evident to the learners.

6 Conclusion

Adult non-literacy is a new phenomenon in Finland. Furthermore, there is only limited research of how non-literate adults acquire Finnish, and hence educators and decision makers have no research-based knowledge to support their teaching methods or decisions on education of non-literate adults. My on-going PhD research is to add to the knowledge of second language acquisition by non-literate adults and to provide information for improving their teaching and the education of their teachers as well as the decision making on language education of non-literate adults.

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