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9 STUDYING IN COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL WITH LOW SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING PROFICIENCY

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Abstract

In this article, we report a case study on the Finnish as an L2 writing skill of weak writers in grades 7–9 of comprehensive school. The study is based on writing performances of 25 students who each completed four different writing tasks (i.e., 100 texts) and a questionnaire about their background information, self-assessment of writing and literacy practices. First, we discuss target language writing proficiency in the school context from the curriculum and pedagogical point of view. Then we present the results of the questionnaire data and focus on the performances of writers with A1 writing proficiency on the CEFR scale. The findings show that students with low writing proficiency in fact also write in various out-of-school printed and media texts. Further, despite a weak proficiency level the students are at some point able to produce texts and make meanings syntactically and textually. Finally, we discuss some implications concerning migrants and literacy-oriented culture in Finnish schools.

9.1 Introduction

Literacy skills are regarded as necessary skills in a knowledge-society but they are also very important skills in school as they work as a medium of learning, the writing skill particularly also as a medium of demonstrating learning. The

Finnish school³², especially grades 7–9, can be considered to be linear and text-based, thus learning and teaching is mainly constructed through texts and writing, such as in text books and note-taking and completing tasks in written form (e.g. Luukka, Pöyhönen, Huhta, Taalas, Tarnanen & Keränen 2008). For L2 students, particularly with low literacy skills, this is challenging since writing is demanding in their mother tongue, let alone in an L2 (Schoonen, de Kloppe, Hulstijn, Simis, Snellings, & Stevenson 2003; Myles 2002). Although Finnish is both the language of instruction and the target of learning – students with a migrant background are provided with Finnish as L2 classes – the level of Finnish writing proficiency can remain very low throughout the educational system (cf. Asfaha 2009). However, there is very little evidence in Finland as to what kind of texts the migrant students with low literacy skills are able to write and what kind of literacy practices they have in out-of-school contexts. In this article, we look at reported writing practices and Finnish as a second language writing performances of migrant students (n=25) with low writing proficiency in grades 7–9 of the comprehensive school and discuss the linguistic and textual landscape of comprehensive school from a second language learner's point of view. In other words, we are interested in the qualities of the texts at the low proficiency level and the writing practices taking place in different sociocultural contexts.

The importance and relevance of language in teaching various subjects has often been underestimated or overlooked although recently it has become more widely recognized that the language of the subject represents the knowledge structure of that subject and language competence is thus an integral and inseparable part of subject competence (e.g., CoE 2011; Vollmer, Holasová, Kolstø, & Lewis 2007; Vollmer 2009). The language of schooling differs from spoken everyday language by being more specific, explicit, abstract and formal (cf. Karvonen 1995; Vollmer 2009; Saario 2012). Thus, academic skills needed for learning and demonstrating learning in the school require cognitive engagement and maximum identity investment (Cummins 2006). Cummins's academic expertise framework (2001) incorporates and emphasizes critical literacy, active self-regulated learning, deep understanding, and building on students' prior knowledge in order for learning to be able to take place. According to Cummins (2001) the focus of teaching should be firstly on meaning beneath the surface level, secondly on language being understood, not only as a linguistic code but as a power which functions for the achievement of social goals, and thirdly, on instructions which should create opportunities for all students to produce knowledge, create multimodal texts and respond to diverse social realities.

³² Compulsory education in Finland starts in the year when a child has his/her seventh birthday, unless the child requires special needs education. The scope of the basic education syllabus is nine years, and nearly all children subject to compulsory education complete this by attending comprehensive school. Basic education is free of charge for pupils. Textbooks and other materials, tools, etc., are free of charge and pupils are offered a free daily meal. In addition, school health care and other welfare services are free to the pupils.

Developing academic expertise, however, constitutes a significant challenge for many L2 students as non-language subjects, such as mathematics and history, are considered to be non-linguistic subjects, although the content of these subjects is constructed through language and learning happens through linguistic mediation (e.g., Schleppegrell 2006; Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox 2006; Vollmer 2009), as seen in the following excerpt from the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NBE) describing the History objectives for grades 7–9 (NBE 2004, 222):

The pupils will learn to

- obtain and use historical information
- use a variety of sources, compare them, and form their own justified opinions based on those sources
- understand that historical information can be interpreted in different ways
- explain the purposes and effects of human activity
- assess future alternatives, using information on historical change as an aid.

Most of the objectives are cognitive processes that relate to functional language, such as obtaining and using information, explaining purposes and assessing alternatives, and they demand multiple literacy skills. Consequently, the teacher should be able to support L2 students in developing the academic language and literacy skills they need for their classes. The challenges of supporting L2 students in school seem to relate to the fact that the students are expected to use language presenting knowledge that is formal, technical, and distanced from everyday life (Schleppegrell 2006).

9.2 Second Language Writing and Writing in the School

Second language writing is not only a target of learning but also a medium of learning in the literacy-based school, thus it is an important part of the academic skills needed for learning and demonstrating learning. However, it is presumably mainly taught in the second language classroom, which may impact on the practices and contents of teaching L2 writing (Ferris 2010). If teaching of L2 writing focuses on formal grammar instruction instead of process-oriented or genre-oriented writing instruction, it does not necessarily support the learning of writing, and academic skills (e.g. Truscott 1996). In general, even L1 writing instruction has been criticized as non-authentic and mono-modal in terms of its functions and genres, and as teacher- and accuracy-centred in terms of its assessment and feedback practices (e.g., Kalantzis, Cope & Harvey 2003; Luukka et al. 2008). L2 writing teachers may tend to emphasize grammar instruction and error correction, instead of allowing students to discover their ideas through a recursive process of drafting, receiving feedback,

and redrafting (Truscott 1996; Tarnanen 2002; Ferris 2010), which could support the writing skills and thinking skills needed for studying.

As a whole, the writing processes of both L1 and L2 are complex and based on various subskills (Bereiter & Scardamalia 1987; Purves 1990; Grabe & Kaplan 1996). L1 writing studies have approached writing using different frameworks, such as the textual, process, social and socio-cultural ones (e.g., Hayes & Flower 1980; Reid 1993; Barton 1994). However, in order to understand writing holistically and as a part of academic skills, all of these approaches are needed. Figure 1 illustrates how L2 writing is understood in this article.

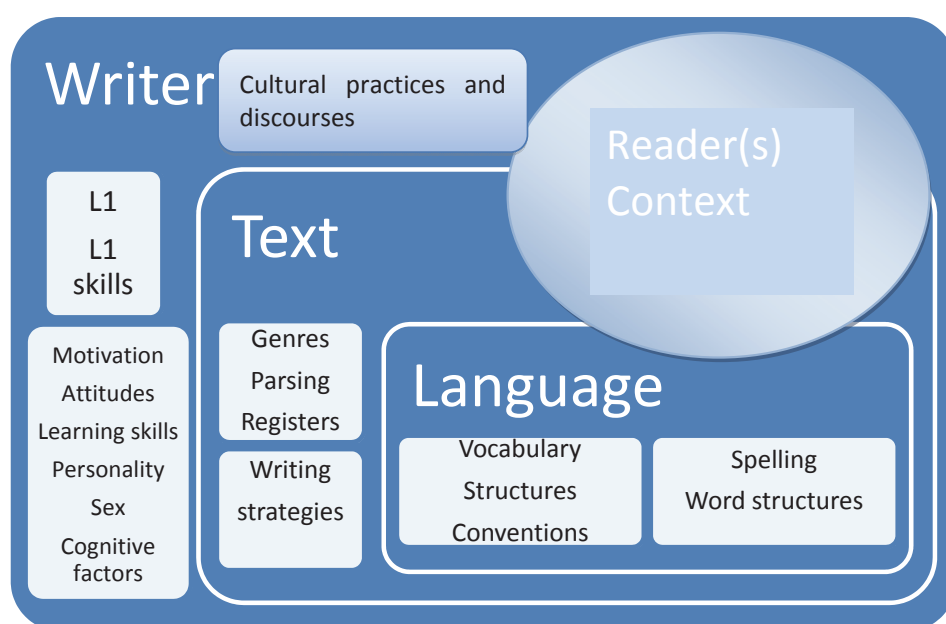


FIGURE 1 L2 writing as a multi-faceted phenomenon.

In Figure 1, writing is approached from the point of view of writer, text and language. Interactional and situational aspects of writing are included in Figure 1 although they are not central to this study but crucial when producing text. There are many studies examining the relationship between L1 and L2 writing and their findings have supported the idea of a positive relationship and evidence of transfer (e.g., Cumming 1989; Swain & Lapkin 1995). Writer-specific characteristics, also called individual factors, are categorized on the basis of previous studies such as age, motivation and cognitive factors (e.g. Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991). These characteristics may be important reasons why some L2 writers never achieve appropriate target language proficiency (Hyland 2001) and from a teaching point of view they can be considered pedagogically in teaching materials and feedback practices. Text-related factors might be overlooked in form-oriented teaching, likewise the basic idea of writing:

making meaning. Thus, the students should have opportunities for writing different genres and exercising different styles, using formal and informal registers and vocabularies for different purposes and readers. Finally, L2 writing can be considered as grammatical features of texts, in other words how the text is built up by using linguistic knowledge, vocabulary, syntactic patterns and spelling (cf. Hyland 2001). Grammar-focused teaching may stress the production of well formulated single sentences without paying attention to textual features, characteristics of the writer, context of writing or reader. In this article, we approach writing holistically and we understand it as a multi-faceted phenomenon combining both the cognitive and socio-cultural aspects and situated in terms of the context and purpose of writing (cf. Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič 2000).

9.3 Data and Methods

The study makes use of qualitative data (i.e. writing performances) and quantitative data (i.e. a questionnaire) in order to answer the following research questions: 1) How do learners with low writing proficiency self-assess their writing skill? 2) What kind of free-time writing practices do they report? 3) What are writers' linguistic resources in L2 at the A1 level? The data are part of two larger research projects, Cefling (2007–2009) and Topling (2010–2013), funded by the Academy of Finland. The Cefling project addresses fundamental questions of how second language proficiency develops from one level to the next, whereas the main objective of the Topling project is to compare cross-sectional and longitudinal sequences of the acquisition of writing skills in Finnish, English and Swedish as second languages in the Finnish educational system. In Cefling L2 Finnish and L2 English data were collected from young L2 learners in grades 7–9 by using a set of communicative L2 writing tasks (i.e., an email message to a friend, to a teacher, to an internet store, a story and an opinion). Each student completed from two to four tasks. The Cefling data consist of 527 writing performances completed by 230 students of Finnish as L2. Students' performances were rated by experienced and trained raters who used the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, CoE 2001) scale for writing, which is a compilation of several genre-specific CEFR writing scales (see Appendix 1). Those performances which were rated consistently by at least two out of three raters were included in the project data.

The qualitative data of this study is part of the Cefling data and consist of 100 texts produced by 25 students who each completed four writing tasks. These students were chosen since at least one of their performances was rated at the A1 level on the CEFR scale (see Appendix 1). All performances of seven of the 25 students were rated at the A1 level. Five of the 25 students' proficiency levels varied from A1 to B1.

The questionnaire, which also makes up part of more extensive project data, covers background information such as L1, languages spoken at home,

study years in the comprehensive school and self-assessment of Finnish language proficiency and literacy skills on the Finnish school scale of 4 (weakest) to 10 (strongest), as for example in seeking information, chatting, and also the frequency of writing of different texts during free-time. According to background information 19 of the participants were in grade 7, five in grade 8 and one in grade 9. The participants represented 12 L1s, as follows: Somali (7), Russian (5), Arabic (3), Vietnamese (2) and Albanian, Dari, Hindi, Kurdish, Polish, Thai, Hungarian and Estonian (1). As Figure 2 illustrates, their study years in the comprehensive school varied from under one year to nine years, thus some of the participants had arrived in Finland as teenagers and some of them had studied in a Finnish-speaking school from the beginning.

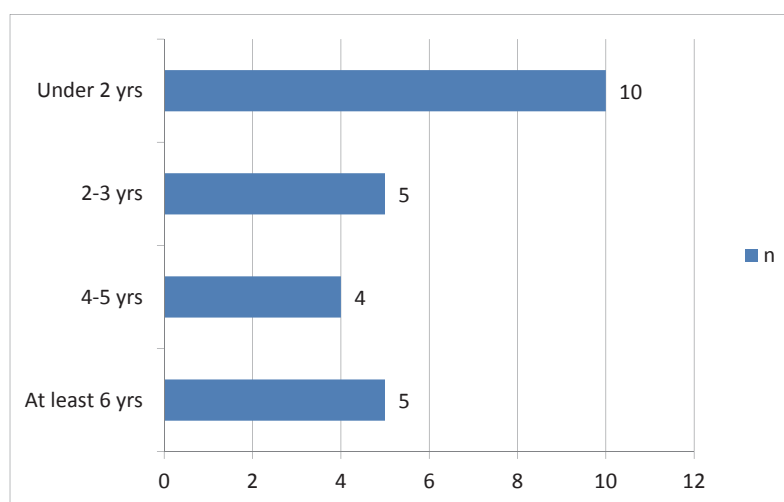


FIGURE 2 Study years of the participants in comprehensive school (n=24).

As the amount of data is limited the questionnaire data will be examined as frequencies. The aim of the qualitative analysis is to analyze the features of the performances in a holistic sense (cf. Heikkinen & Hiidenmaa 1999; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009). The analysis can be characterized as linguistic text analysis, which is understood in this study as an analysis of linguistic form, function and meaning in the particular genre (see also the Figure 1). As mentioned above, the texts written by the participants represent different genres, such as informal and semi-formal messages and opinion. The categories of the analysis are based on Figure 1 according to the nature of the data. The textual features refer, for example, to register, task completion and conventions and linguistic aspects, for example, syntax, morphology and word structures (see Figure 1). The performances were analyzed using the ATLAS.ti program.

9.4 Results

9.4.1 Self-assessments of the Students

Participants in the study were asked to self-assess their language proficiency (i.e., speaking, writing, listening comprehension) on the Finnish school scale, which ranges from four to ten with grade four as the weakest and ten the strongest. Seven out of the 25 self-assessed their speaking skill as excellent (scores 9–10), 13 as good (scores 7–8), five as below average or weak (scores 4–6). Nine participants self-assessed their listening comprehension as excellent, ten as good, six as below average or weak. The participants self-assessed their writing skill most critically, apart from writing in social media, such as chatting, which were assessed as below average or weak by only two participants (see Figure 3). Most of the participants had experience of writing different genres except for four pupils with no experience of filling in forms or questionnaires, two of writing text in their free-time and one of searching for information. On the whole most participants self-assessed their writing skill across genres as excellent or good.

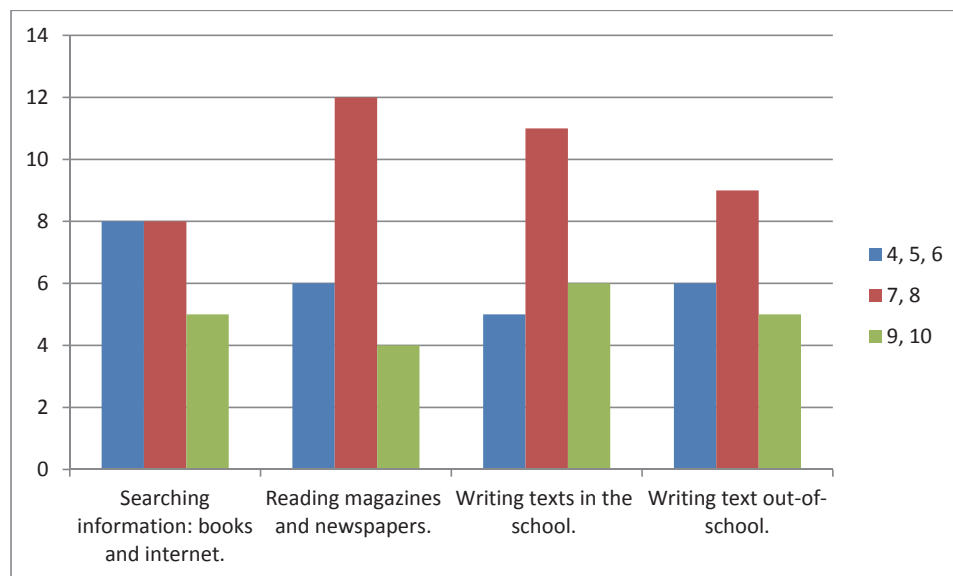


FIGURE 3 Self-assessment of literacy skills on the Finnish school assessment scale (4–10).

Figure 4 illustrates the self-reported writing practices of the participants in out-of-school contexts on a frequency scale (often – sometimes – seldom – never – no answer). One of the 25 participants did not answer this question. According to the self-report, the participants are most likely (often or sometimes) to write media texts (i.e., email messages, chat, text messages) even though they are not

written by two participants, and most unlikely to write diary entries or opinion and criticism, which can be considered school texts.

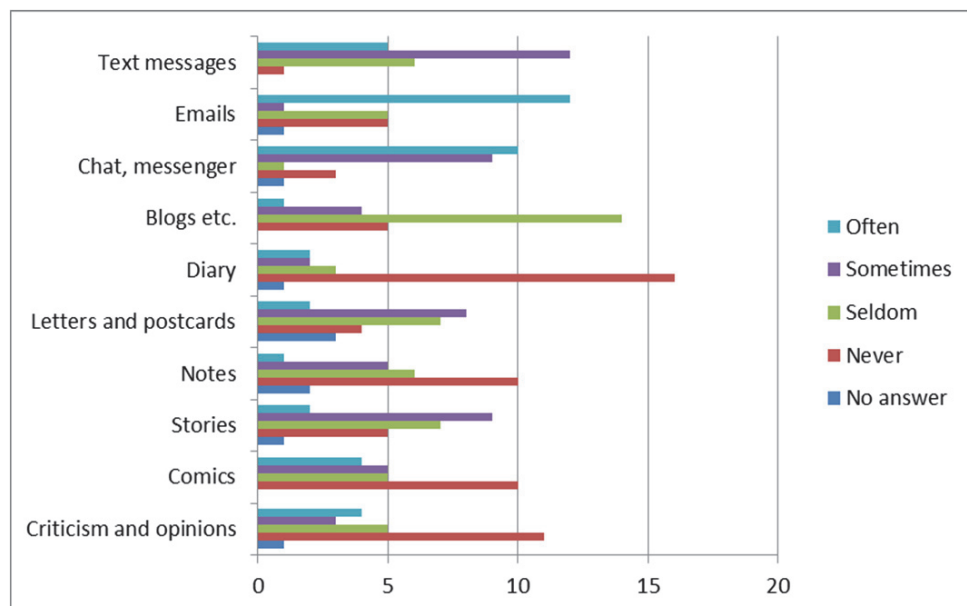


FIGURE 4 Writing in out-of-school contexts.

As Figure 4 shows, all genres are reported to be written often by at least one participant. Thus the participants seem to write also in out-of-school contexts despite their low writing proficiency. However, the participants may have understood the questions in the questionnaire in a different way or their commitment to answering the questions may have varied from one participant to another.

9.4.2 Outlining Writing Skills at the A1 Level

The findings of this study indicate that the writing profiles of A1-level writers vary a lot (see also Martin, Mustonen, Reiman, & Seilonen 2010). Due to space limitations, we shall describe this variation with two illustrative examples written by Pham and Khalil (examples 1 and 2 below). As examples 1 and 2 show, Pham seems to have a mastery of more complicated structures, e.g., using the conditional mood in the past perfect (*jos minulla olisi ollut* 'if I had had' - - *pistisin sen kiinni* 'I would switch it off'), whereas Khalil inflects words less and, overall, uses simpler structures. They both make efforts to tie the ideas together and make the writing coherent, Pham using the conjunction *vaikka* 'although' and Khalil *sitten* 'then'. As a whole, Pham's text consists of separate sentences and the overall idea remains vague while Khalil's text, despite its morphological deficiencies and limited connective means, is colloquial, quite

fluent and completely comprehensible. They are both in the 7th grade at school and, interestingly, Pham was born in Finland and has thus experienced his entire schooling in Finnish, whereas Khalil has studied Finnish for less than two years.

en tuo kännyköitä vaikka minulla ei ole
kännykää. vaikka en halua kännyköitä.
jos minulla olisi ollut taskussa kännykää.
pistisin sen kiinni.

*i do not bring mobiles although I don't have
a mobil. although I don't want mobs.
if i had had a mobile in the pocket.
i would switch it off.*

EXAMPLE 1 Pham's opinion on the topic *Mobiles out of school!*³³

Kännykät pois koulusta. Koska
kun sinä opiskelut. Sitten puhelen
soittanut. Sitten sinä vastat puhel-
in soitin. Ja sitten sinä puhut
pitkää aikaa. Ja et opiskella mitään.
Vanhemmat antaa loppaa lapsille
vai lähte internetiin vain viikko-
loppuna.

*Mobiles out of school. Because
when you did studied. Then phone
did rang. Then you answr the phone
ring. And then you speak
a long time. And you don't stuidy anything.
Parents gives children the permission
or leav the internet only in the weeksende.*

EXAMPLE 2 Khalil's opinion on the topic *Mobiles out of the school!*

³³ The English translations attempts to show the grammatical and orthographic errors present in the original Finnish.

Generally, it can be said that the A1-level writers have a sense of sentence and they produce whole sentences but the text may consist of separate sentences and often the task is only partly completed. The typical strengths and weaknesses of the A1-level performances are summarized in Table 1. It is notable that already at the A1 level writers use rather sophisticated and also rather abstract vocabulary, e.g., *hätätapaus* 'emergency', *muistikortti* 'memory card' and collocations and other constructions, e.g., *rahat takaisin* '[get] money back', *toimi huonosti* 'malfunction', *kännykät äänettömänä* 'mobiles on mute', *anna lopaa* 'give permission', *tarvi korjata* 'needs repairing'. Mastery of the features of Finnish's rich system of verb and nominal inflection is naturally limited but is not solely restricted to the morphologically simplest forms, e.g., *osti* 'bought', *kännyköitä* 'mobiles', *pistisin* 'I would put', *vanhempia, vanhemmat* 'inflected forms of the noun parents'.

It is noteworthy that despite the limited resources for text coherence a range of connective means is applied at the A1 level. The writers of our data use both subordinating and co-ordinating conjunctions, e.g., *että* 'that', *koska* 'because', *when* 'kun', *jos* 'if', *vaikka* 'although'; *mutta* 'but', *ja* 'and', *tai* 'or', *sen takia* 'therefore'. The reader is guided with metatext through expressions like *no mitä* 'well', *ja vielä muuta* 'and so on' and *sitten* 'then'. The writers are also sensitive to the situation as they vary their language use by applying the conditional mood, questions and compliments when appropriate, e.g., *anteeksi* 'sorry', *olisin kiitollinen* 'I would be grateful'. Most writers seem to be aware of the conventions in beginning and ending a message, although often one or the other is missing.

In terms of deficiencies the texts are comprehensible on the sentence level but the subject matter is typically sparse and content-wise incomplete. There are weaknesses in the use of vocabulary and collocations and word inflection. The register can be commanding in situations where requesting would be generally more predictable, e.g., *anna* 'give!', *haluan* 'I want'. Sometimes the text consists of separate sentences without any metatext. Spelling is unsystematic but the words are recognizable by the word form, e.g., *puuhelin* instead of *puhelin* 'telephone', *opelaas* instead of *oppilas* 'student', *tijäda* instead of *tiedä* 'know' and *äinä* instead of *aina* 'always'. However, only minor parts of the texts are difficult to understand, e.g., *han teit sale apua koe* 'he do secratly help test', *puhelin olo kädessä* 'telephone being in the hand'.

TABLE 1 Features of A1-level performances

Strengths in writing on level A1: Linguistic and textual features	Deficiencies in writing on level A1: Linguistic and textual weaknesses
Metatext & coherence <i>no mitä 'well', ja vielä muuta 'and so on', sitten 'then'</i> Conjunctions both subordinating and co-ordinating: <i>että 'that', koska 'because', when 'kun', jos 'if', vaikka 'although'; mutta 'but', ja 'and', tai 'or', sen takia 'therefore'</i>	Lack of coherence Limited means for coherence Separate sentences Sparse content Incomplete task
Vocabulary and collocations, constructions and language functions Idiomatic expressions E.g., <i>toimi huonosti 'malfunction', hätätapaus 'emergency', muistikortti 'memorycard', download documents, kännykät äänettömänä 'mobiles on mute'</i>	Unidiomatic and incomprehensible use of vocabulary and collocations A large variety of spelling mistakes
Declension and conjugation: Past tense forms of verbs, yes-no questions Large variety of nominal endings in singular and plural	Problems in declension and conjugation A large variety of mistakes in inflection at both morphological and syntactic levels
Register and style Interrogative sentences, conditional mood, compliments Conventions of messages	Register and style Requests formulated as orders in messages: <i>haluan 'I want', anna 'give!'</i> Lack of conventions in messages

It is noteworthy that descriptors of the A1 level in CEFR (CoE 2001) do not cover subordinate clauses and co-ordinate main clauses, which participants in our study use fairly frequently. Consequently, our data suggest that crucial factors in defining A1 skills range from deficiencies in textual coherence and contents to unintelligibility of the text and incomplete task. Major weaknesses in those skills determine the grade as A1, despite the characteristics of a higher level. Thus, from the very beginning the learner language contains in parallel both idiomatic and complex constructions and instability in basic structures (see also Reiman & Mustonen 2010). Our findings are in line with those reported by Martin et al. (2010) who through several sub-studies have discovered that many, even complex structures (e.g., subordination and transitive and passive constructions in Finnish) emerge earlier than is often thought to be the case and they are present already at level A1. Accuracy and flexibility in the use of structures develops, naturally, gradually step by step.

9.5 Conclusions

Finnish school culture tends to be very academic and text-centered, and most of the school texts are cognitively and linguistically demanding. It is evident that school tasks pose a considerable challenge for writers at the A1 level and need for guidance and support is obvious. The role of language skills is not fully recognized in school culture in general, and more specifically in various subjects. However, even native speakers of Finnish face linguistic difficulties in learning, not least because of academic skills needed for learning (cf. Cummins 2001). Actually, L2 learners are doing the school a favor since they force teachers, material writers and curriculum designers to become aware of the written nature of school culture and the linguistic challenges embedded in subject learning and, optimally, lead them to develop pedagogical culture and re-evaluate customary practices and core contents (cf. Vollmer et al. 2007; Vollmer 2009; Saario 2012). This is essential in developing literacies and effective learning and teaching for all learners.

Multilingual and multicultural learner groups demand more language sensitivity from the school culture. Language sensitivity poses a dual challenge: firstly, how to support those with limited skills in the language of schooling and secondly, how to promote plurilingualism and enhance learners' multilayered language repertoires. Overall, language skills should be more systematically identified and manifested across the curriculum in schools. At present, writing seems to be considered as an isolated technical skill or even as a command of target language structures and vocabulary rather than as a resource for learning and developing students' thinking (cf. Truscott 1996; Hyland 2001; Luukka et al. 2008; Ferris 2010). Lack of familiarity with the school genre and untrained learning skills are revealed as problems in writing and in ways of proving one's knowledge and skills (see e.g., Cummins 2001; Saario 2009; Rapatti 2009; Aalto & Tukia 2009). Language and contents cannot be meaningfully learnt in separation, but collaboration between school subjects and the teachers involved is essential, particularly for students with weak writing proficiency (see also Vollmer et al. 2007). The development of the core curriculum for basic education seems to follow similar tendencies in many European countries and also globally (see e.g. Hufeisen 2011). The raising of language awareness among all teachers and across disciplines is a central thread in developing pedagogical culture and teaching practices in a way that empowers students to fulfil their potential in school. In terms of writing skills this challenges our notion of text: instead of focusing on separate texts as products and end-results produced by individual students, we are encouraged to support the process of writing as a situated and social practice which binds students together and promotes the collaborative nature of knowledge construction.

On the basis of the self-evaluations, the participants in this study have confidence in their writing skills, as most of them considered themselves good

writers of school texts. They also write *often* or *sometimes* in their free-time. The results of the questionnaire are to some extent debatable as it is not self-evident that students have fully understood the questions and taken them seriously. Nevertheless, the results emphasize the notion of how important it is to expand the research focus from text analysis to writer-specific characteristics in order to take into account the hidden power of e.g., attitudes and self-confidence in learning, as well as the socio-cultural context of writing and the situated nature of it (Barton et al. 2000). Thus, these results raise the question of whether out-of-school writing could be used as a resource for school writing (cf. Kalantzis et al. 2003; Luukka et al. 2008). Students' expertise in writing might develop in a more meaningful way if the practices studied at school prepared them more directly for acting in out-of-school settings.

Support for learning is not first and foremost a question of resources but rather a question of how to use the resources flexibly and get the best out of them. Investment in the core processes of learning provides utility value throughout life as they socialize learners into the skills applicable outside school and enable them to use the skills developed in informal environments.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

CEFLING rating scale (based on the CEFR levels)

	OVERALL WRITTEN PRODUCTION	WRITTEN INTERACTION	CORRESPONDENCE & NOTES, MESSAGES, FORMS	CREATIVE WRITING & THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT
A1	Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences.	Can ask for or pass on personal details in written form.	Can write a short simple postcard. Can write numbers and dates, own name, nationality, address, age, date of birth or arrival in the country, etc. such as on a hotel registration form.	Can write simple phrases and sentences about themselves and imaginary people, where they live and what they do.
A2	Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like 'and', 'but' and 'because'.	Can write short, simple formulaic notes relating to matters in areas of immediate need.	Can write very simple personal letters expressing thanks and apology. Can take a short, simple message provided he/she can ask for repetition and reformulation. Can write short, simple notes and messages relating to matters in areas of immediate need.	Can write about everyday aspects of his/her environment, e.g. people, places, a job or study experience in linked sentences. Can write very short, basic descriptions of events, past activities and personal experiences. Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences about their family, living conditions, educational background, present or most recent job. Can write short, simple imaginary biographies and simple poems about people. Can tell a story or describe something in a simple list of points.
B1	Can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within his field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.	Can convey information and ideas on abstract as well as concrete topics, check information and ask about or explain problems with reasonable precision. Can write personal letters and notes asking for or conveying simple information of immediate relevance, getting across the point he/she feels to be important.	Can write personal letters giving news and expressing thoughts about abstract or cultural topics such as music, films. Can write personal letters describing experiences, feelings and events in some detail. Can write notes conveying simple information of immediate relevance to friends, service people, teachers and others who feature in his/her everyday life, getting across comprehensibly the points he/she feels are important. Can take messages communicating enquiries, explaining problems.	Can write straightforward, detailed descriptions on a range of familiar subjects within his/her field of interest. Can write accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions in simple connected text. Can write a description of an event, a recent trip – real or imagined. Can narrate a story. Can reasonably fluently relate a straightforward narrative or description as a linear sequence of points.