

Helsinki

Information on Finnish as a second language (S2) education for guardians of comprehensive school pupils



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Introduction

This guide offers information on Finnish as a second language education in comprehensive school to guardians of pupils in schools in Helsinki. It provides answers to the following questions, among others:

- What is Finnish as a second language (S2) education?
- What are the grounds for recommending S2 education to a pupil?
- How is S2 education organised in schools?
- How can guardians support the linguistic development of their children?

The same practices and information also pertain to Swedish as a second language in schools in Helsinki to a large degree, with the exception that S2 education is provided in Swedish.

Education supporting language proficiency development

The Finnish- and Swedish-language comprehensive schools in Helsinki offer education that focuses on the educational needs of multilingual and immigrant pupils. This includes preparatory education, mother tongue instruction and Finnish as a second language, which this guidebook is primarily focused on. Learning languages is also promoted in the instruction of different subjects by expanding the vocabulary of children and practising various reading and writing skills.

Preparatory education

Pupils whose Finnish or Swedish language proficiency is below elementary language proficiency (skill level A1) are directed to preparatory education. Pupils who have only just moved to Finland or children born in Finland who need extra attention due to their language skills are directed to preparatory education. The extent of preparatory education corresponds to the syllabus of one school year. It is used to learn the Finnish language and other skills needed for attending school. The pupil may move on to preschool or basic education even before the school year has come to an end, if they are ready.

Mother tongue studies

Mother tongue studies complement comprehensive education and are available to pupils whose mother tongue is not Finnish or Swedish. The purpose of mother tongue studies is to strengthen proficiency in the pupil's mother tongue so that the pupil is able to study using it and use it in a versatile manner elsewhere. The guardian should speak their own stronger language with their child and encourage and support the child in learning all languages.

S2 education

The Finnish as a second language and literature syllabus (S2) is part of the mother tongue and literature syllabus. Pupils whose Finnish language skills are developed, but who cannot yet take part in Finnish as a mother tongue education, are directed to S2 education. In S2 education, pupils develop their Finnish language proficiency to be able to work and learn with others from an equal starting point. S2 education encourages pupils to use other languages they know in learning Finnish and other subjects.

The following will provide more detailed information on the Finnish as a second language and literature syllabus and matters related to multilingualism at school.

Selection of the Finnish as a second language and literature syllabus

All pupils must study the subject mother tongue and literature. The subject contains different syllabi. One of them is Finnish language and literature (S1) and the other is Finnish as a second language and literature (S2). The Sign Language and literature syllabus is also taught in Helsinki. Usually, pupils study the S1 or the S2 syllabus.

Who is S2 intended for?

Finnish as a second language and literature (S2) is intended for pupils:

- 1) whose mother tongue is not Finnish, Swedish or a Sami language or who have a multilingual background
- 2) whose Finnish language proficiency is not sufficient to study the Finnish language and literature syllabus
- 3) whose language proficiency is clearly lacking in some area (understanding speech, speaking, writing and understanding text).

The teachers instructing the pupil decide together whether the Finnish as a second language syllabus is recommended for the pupil. However, the guardian makes the decision on the syllabus.

What are the factors influencing the recommendation and selection of S2 education?

Only a pupil's Finnish language proficiency needed for learning at school in relation to that of pupils of the same age affects the selection of the syllabus. The syllabus selection is not affected by participation in mother tongue education or the language specified as the pupil's mother tongue in the Population Information System. Even if a pupil's mother tongue is marked as Finnish, choosing the S2 syllabus may be recommended for the pupil based on their language skills. Similarly, the S1 syllabus may be recommended based on language proficiency, even if the pupil's mother tongue is not marked as Finnish.

Examples of situations where the S2 syllabus would be recommended:

- The pupil is unable to communicate fluently in Finnish in everyday situations at school.
- The pupil has difficulty following in class in different subjects and participating in school activities in Finnish.
- The pupil speaks Finnish fluently in everyday situations, but their language proficiency is not yet sufficient for understanding and producing text in various subjects.
- The pupil cannot yet read and/or write sufficiently well in Finnish for their age to be able to study and participate in school activities independently.

The pupil speaks Finnish fluently, why are they being referred to S2 education?

The answer usually lies in the differences between communicative and academic language required for school. Communicative language skills are used in everyday interaction when the speaker is usually talking about tangible things and using simple sentences. Communicative language skills can be learned in a few years.

The further the pupil advances in their studies, the better their command of more demanding, subject-specific language and language in different contexts must be. Older pupils will need language that contains plenty of abstract expressions, text skills, and concepts and text types related to different subjects. Learning academic school language skills usually takes five to seven years.

The guardian makes the decision on the choice of syllabus based on the information provided

The guardian and the teacher will work together in choosing the syllabus (S2 or S1) of the mother tongue and literature subject. Teachers will determine the best syllabus for each pupil and recommend it to the guardians. However, the guardian makes the decision. The determination of the right syllabus is based on the pupil's language proficiency and the linguistic requirements for pupils their age. The pupil's skills are examined in all areas of language proficiency.

The choice of syllabus is semi-permanent, but as the pupil's skills develop sufficiently they can and should move on to the S1 syllabus. This requires a re-examination of the pupil's linguistic skills in different areas of language. Teachers will explain the objectives of S2 education to the guardians, how the pupils are taught and why it would be beneficial to the pupil.

Finnish as a second language education is not a form of remedial teaching. The same number of hours has been allocated for the S1 and S2 syllabi. Similarly to pupils studying the S1 syllabus, pupils in S2 education may receive remedial teaching in different subjects after the school day, if necessary. Teachers can support pupils in their efforts to achieve the objectives of the curriculum through remedial teaching.

The S2 syllabus and further studies

Students in vocational schools and upper secondary schools may also study Finnish as a second language. If the student's language proficiency is insufficient for vocational studies or upper secondary education, the student may apply for preparatory education for programmes leading to an upper secondary qualification (TUVA education starting from autumn 2022), which aims at improving language proficiency and other necessary study skills. Students may take the Finnish as a second language matriculation examination at the end of their upper secondary school studies.

The Finnish National Board of Education recommends that institutes of higher education treat students who have completed S2 and S1 studies equally during the application process. The objective is to eliminate any differences between these two educational paths. The scoring practices of institutes of higher education vary, meaning that the current situation should be verified by contacting a guidance counsellor, for example.

Teaching, monitoring language proficiency and changing syllabi

It is important that information accumulated on the pupil's linguistic development is transferred to new teachers when the pupil starts a new school, changes groups or schools or gets a new teacher. When teachers have the necessary information concerning a new pupil's linguistic skills, strengths and any need for support from the start, they are able to plan education so that it best suits the pupil. It is essential that the pupil's uninterrupted linguistic development is ensured through information transfers.

The S2 teacher and the class teacher or tutor familiarise themselves with the documents concerning a new pupil, such as the language proficiency assessment recorded in the education plan, and evaluate the pupil's language skills, if necessary. They also monitor the pupil's linguistic development during basic education. The development of the various areas of language skills is also monitored to ensure that the pupil's mother tongue and literature syllabus (S1 or S2) is suitable for the pupil. The syllabus will be changed, if necessary.

If the teachers decide, based on their observations, to recommend that the pupil change their syllabus, the matter will be discussed with the pupil and the guardian. The guardian must sign a form concerning the change of syllabus, if they agree. The guardian may ask for grounds for why a certain syllabus has been recommended for their child. The guardian may also ask that the teachers check the suitability of the syllabus and weigh in on whether they recommend changing the syllabus.

Syllabus changes are possible during basic education, with the exception of the ninth grade. Syllabi are primarily selected for the long term to ensure that the development of language proficiency forms a harmonious continuum. The assessment of the mother tongue and literature subject is based on the objectives of the syllabus that the pupil has studied.

The school may organise the S2 syllabus education differently depending on the developmental phase of the pupil's language skills and the linguistic support they need. For example, a pupil studying the S2 syllabus may more or less study in the same group as pupils studying the S1 syllabus. Schools have different practices in how they arrange teaching. Below you will find a description of how S2 education is usually implemented.

The S2 syllabus in the curriculum

The objectives of the Finnish as a second language and literature syllabus in the curriculum are partly the same or similar to those of the Finnish language and literature syllabus. However, pupils studying the S2 syllabus are not expected to accumulate all of the same skills as pupils studying the S1 syllabus.

The special task of the S2 syllabus is to develop language skills in relation to the pupil's language proficiency and support the pupil's multilingual identity and competence. The objective is to help the pupil in achieving sufficient language proficiency for different subjects and to prepare them for further studies (vocational, upper secondary and higher education). The syllabus provides the pupil with tools to continue developing their own language skills later in life, as well.

The S2 syllabus strengthens the pupil's positive image of themselves as a communicator and helps them in identifying their own strengths as well as using language fearlessly. The texts in the S2 syllabus are selected to accommodate for the pupil's language proficiency. In S2 classes, pupils systematically expand their vocabulary and discuss the meaning and the differences in meaning of words and phrases, as well as compare manners of expression in various languages.

Topics in the S2 syllabus include texts in different subjects and media, personal life, everyday life at school and living as a member of society. This will expand the way in which pupils are able to use the Finnish language outside of school, too. Pupils are instructed to express their own opinions and feelings in a manner suitable for the situation at hand and read different types of text, such as books.

Methods of implementing the S2 syllabus

S2 teachers and other teachers work together in teaching the different syllabi within the mother tongue and literature subject. The S2 syllabus is often taught at the same time as the S1 syllabus, i.e. during mother tongue and literature classes. Pupils studying the two syllabi may study together.

If the syllabi are taught by one teacher, they plan their teaching methods, materials, assignments and assessments for the objectives of the S2 and the S1 syllabus and according to the language proficiency of the pupils. Two teachers, e.g. the class teacher and the S2 teacher, may teach in the same classroom at times. In this event, the S2 teacher will focus on pupils studying the S2 syllabus.

Sometimes it is also appropriate to have the S2 teacher teach some of the S2 syllabus in a separate group, allowing for the instruction to be focused on the areas of language that the pupils most need help with. Regardless of which group the pupil received their S2 syllabus education in, their skills and progress are assessed in relation to the S2 syllabus objectives in the curriculum. The teachers who have taught the pupil will draft the assessment together.

The following is a list of examples of how S2 education is implemented in schools. The pupil participates in education arranged in varying ways during their time at school, based on their learning requirements.

1.) **Individual assignments in mother tongue and literature classes**

One teacher teaches according to both the S1 and the S2 objectives during class. The pupil will be provided with learning materials and assignments suitable for their level.

2.) **Co-teaching**

The S2 teacher and the class/S1 teacher teach the entire group at the same time and take into consideration the S1 and S2 syllabi and the pupils' different skill levels in their teaching.

3.) **Partly separate group**

Some of the education consists of individual assignments in shared mother tongue and literature class and some of the education consists of teaching in a separate S2 group. One teacher observes both syllabi in the shared class.

4.) **Separate S2 group**

Pupils studying the S2 syllabus are taught in their own group for the duration of one evaluation period or academic year.

5.) **Co-teaching with linguistic support in different subjects**

In addition to the class or subject teacher, the S2 teacher may also participate in subject lessons.

In this event, the objectives of the education include both S2 syllabus and school subject objectives, such as subject text skills.

Multilingualism in school

According to the Basic Education Act, the language used in basic education must be Finnish or Swedish (in Swedish-speaking education). A strong command of the Finnish or Swedish language is an important objective in terms of all learning. Other languages may also be utilised in teaching. When pupils are able to use and develop the languages they know at home, in school and in their leisure time in a versatile manner, it supports the learning of languages as well as other subjects.

Multilingual pupils may use the languages they know in support of what they learn at school. Pupils may search for information and the core concept of the subject at hand in various languages in a dictionary during different subject lessons or discuss the topic of the class in languages other than Finnish. Guardians may also use the languages spoken at home when discussing the different school subjects with their children.

The ability to communicate fluently in two or more languages in different situations is called functional multilingualism. Functionally multilingual pupils do not separate the languages entirely, so that one language is spoken at home and the other in school and in society, instead, a mix of the languages can be used in different situations. The objective of education is to strengthen the pupil's functional multilingualism.

Learning about different languages and comparing them develops the ability to identify and learn language-related things. Learning about different variations of the same language will also do the same. By talking about languages and their variants as equals, we are actively dismantling prejudices against languages/ variants and their speakers (e.g. British English, American English or different variations of the mother tongue).

It is important for pupils to continuously develop their language skills in Finnish as well as other languages they may use at home or in their free time. It is important to participate in instruction in one's own mother tongue. Using a language only at home will not develop a pupil's language proficiency sufficiently. When a pupil studies using the different languages they know, their confidence in their own abilities increases.

The role of the guardians in supporting language proficiency

Maintaining mother tongue proficiency

The development and maintenance of the mother tongue is primarily the responsibility of the guardians. In families where the guardians have different mother tongues, each guardian may use their own language.

Pointing out mistakes or forcing someone to speak a certain language will not benefit the development of language skills, especially in small children. Small children are not yet aware of their own language use in this way. Adults only need to repeat what the child has said in the correct form and systematically speak their own language.

In terms of language development, it is of no great consequence which language the child first learns to read in, for example. The most important thing is that they learn to read and practise reading. Children should be offered a variety of stimuli (books, music, videos, activities) in their own language. If there is no material available, material in other languages may also be used (e.g. Finnish). This will give the child the opportunity to compare and be aware of different languages. It is natural that multilingual families speak different languages at the same time.

Language proficiency in the home language may be stunted, unless language skill development is invested in. Participating in instruction in the child's own mother tongue is an important opportunity to develop vocabulary and the ability to express oneself along with linguistic skills.

Tips on supporting mother tongue development

- Enrol your child in their mother tongue education, if possible.
- Utilise material in the family language found in the [Helmet library](#) and the [Multilingual Library](#).
- Watch programmes together with your child and discuss the events on screen while you are watching as well as afterwards.
- Play games, sing, play and rhyme in your own mother tongue. Playing with language, jokes and wordplay, in particular, develop language skills.
- Discuss the activities that your child participated in when they were elsewhere in your own language. You should talk about school, in particular, to help the child learn vocabulary connected to life at school.
- Try to find families and people using the same language and organise activities that you can do together, e.g. meetings at the library. The City of Helsinki has many facilities that can be reserved free of charge on the [Varaamo website](#).
- Today, children can also participate in remote learning, and many countries organise remote language classes free of charge. Check to see if any are available to you.
- Try to find hobbies in your language. A hobby teacher, instructor or coach may speak the same language as you.
- Teach by example that multilingualism can be an asset that can be utilised in many ways.

Tips on supporting Finnish language skills

Guardians can support and encourage their child in studies regardless of their own Finnish language skill level. By showing interest in and respect for Finnish language studies and studying in Finnish, guardians can express how important the matter is. Additionally, guardians may guide their child to participate in activities that improve Finnish skills in their free time. This chapter contains some tips.

It is very important that the guardian teaches the child by example that new languages should be developed and used fearlessly, because the only way to improve language skills is to use the language. This means that when studying languages, you should practise using the language in different situations and not wait until you think your skills are 'good enough.'

The child should be encouraged to read in Finnish. Reading develops language skills efficiently, and the ability to read fluently is key in all learning. If the guardians are worried about their child's language proficiency, they should contact the school for advice.

It is beneficial for children in terms of learning Finnish to have Finnish-speaking friends. The friends do not need to speak Finnish as their first language. Finnish-language hobby groups (sports, reading, music, scouts, etc.) can be beneficial in learning the language.

You can also participate in free-of-charge hobby activities.

- You can search for hobbies using the [Harrastushaku website](#). There is also a good selection of free-of-charge hobbies. Some associations, such as [Save the Children](#), offer support for hobbies.
- [Youth centres](#) managed by the City of Helsinki and various activity facilities are listed on the Harrastustoiminta website. Youth Centres offer facilities where children and young people can engage in activities and spend time with other children and young people in a safe environment.
- [Playgrounds](#) organise various summer activities and free-of-charge lunch for children under the age of 16.
- [The Summer camps](#) website is a joint service offered by organisations offering camps in Finland for children and young people.
- [You can volunteer](#) yourself or together with your child.
- Free-of-charge sports clubs for people of different ages: [Easysport](#).

You can learn Finnish through TV (including shows online) in a fun way

- [Yle Areena \(Lasten Areena, Pikku Kakkonen, Yle Galaxi\)](#).
- Use Finnish subtitles in services and films offered by Yle.
- Children can learn about the varied use of Finnish and other languages on social media (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, blogs).
- Children can use Finnish on gaming platforms with online friends.

Libraries and literature:

- [Books in easy language](#) can help all language learners, because they are written in simple language. Other literature should also be read. The same book can be read both in the mother tongue and in Finnish.
- Libraries also offer [many types of summer activities](#).
- Various diplomas (such as the [Finnish as a second language reading diploma](#)) encourage children to read.

Online learning materials to support Finnish language proficiency

Elementary and basic level exercises for children and young people

- the Puhutaan website
- [Papumarket](#)
- [Tähtijengi - kielen supersankarit](#) (printable material).

Elementary and basic level exercises for young people and adults

- [the suomitaskussa.eu website](#)
- [the Osaan suomea website](#)
- [the Supisuomea website](#)
- [Asiointisuomea on Yle](#)
- [the Ymmärrä suomea website](#)
- [Exercises for Finnish National Certificates of Language Proficiency](#)
- [library online courses available with the library card](#)
- [the Käts – Käytännön suomea learning material, includes listening comprehension exercises](#)
- [listening to the Suomen mestari books](#) (requires registration)
- [Moninet](#)
- [Finnish Phrases](#).

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