3 How 15-year-olds learn English in Finland

The OECD visited Finland in May 2023 to explore the question: *how do 15-year-olds learn English*? This chapter presents findings from this case study visit and wider research. It provides key contextual information about learning languages in Finland in formal education and beyond. It also describes the main findings from interviews and short surveys with students, English teachers and school leaders, as well as observations of English lessons. These findings include perspectives on the ways in which 15-year-olds in Finland encounter and use English outside school, insights into the perceived strengths and challenges of English language teaching and learning in schools, and examples of the ways in which digital technologies and other resources support the teaching of English in Finland.

A snapshot of learning English as a 15-year-old in Finland

- **Students, educators and parents in Finland strongly value learning English**. This helps motivate 15-year-olds to do well, more so than for other additional languages[1]. According to some teachers though, regularly encountering English outside school may be leading some students to develop a false sense of mastery.
- **Finland has built up a solid knowledge base of the country's linguistic landscape.** With regards to English, this includes system evaluations which provide insight into language proficiency, and stakeholder surveys and other commissioned research that explores teaching and learning approaches and attitudes towards different additional languages.
- **Many students and English teachers in Finland consider speaking to be the most challenging of the four communicative skills.** According to national evaluations, speaking proficiency is not notably lower than other skill areas; rather, socio-emotional and cultural factors may inform these perceptions. Many students and educators would like to have more authentic opportunities to use English through exchanges or other real-life interactions.
- **Schools in Finland are generally well-equipped with digital technologies and most teachers seem comfortable using them to support English instruction in the classroom.** Digital technologies are seen as facilitating English language teaching and making learning more engaging; however, some teachers and students feel more could be done to realise the full potential of digital technologies in English classrooms.

Learning languages in Finland

Finland is increasingly diverse both linguistically and culturally

Finland has two official national languages – Finnish and Swedish. As of 2022, 86% of around 6 million inhabitants had Finnish as their first language and 5% had Swedish. Neither language is widely spoken internationally. In the Sami homeland, in the northernmost part of Finland, the Sami languages have co-official status; they are spoken by less than 1% of the total population (Statistics Finland, 2023[1]).

In 2021, 8% of Finland's population was foreign-born up from 5% a decade earlier (OECD, 2022[2]). Immigration reached a record high in 2022 and by the end of that year, 9% of the population had a foreign language as a mother tongue, most often Russian but also commonly Estonian, Arabic, English or Somali (Statistics Finland, 2023[1]; Statistics Finland, 2023[3]). In 2018, 15% of Finland's teachers reported working in schools where more than 10% of students were non-native speakers; this share is likely to have grown (OECD, 2019[4]). Non-Finnish speakers tend to be geographically concentrated in the south and south-west regions of the country.

Beyond the linguistic diversity of the population, many people in Finland encounter other languages through tourism. Prior to COVID-19, the tourism industry was growing quickly. In 2019, Finland received 3.3 million international overnight visitors, the equivalent to just over half the total population (OECD, 2022[5]). The leading countries of provenance were Germany, the Russian Federation and Sweden, with important numbers from Estonia, France and the United Kingdom too (Statistics Finland, 2023[6]). At the same time, many people in Finland travel internationally: in 2019, inhabitants made 10.4 million international departures from Finland; Sweden, Estonia and Spain were the most popular destinations (OECD, 2022[5]).

Higher education and employment also expose people in Finland to different languages. In 2017, English was used in over 80% of Finnish companies as a working language; other high-demand languages included Chinese, Estonian, German, Italian and Russian (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2017[7]). Meanwhile, in 2021, 17% of tertiary students in Finland had an exchange period abroad and foreign students accounted for 8% of the total tertiary enrolment domestically (OECD, 2023[8]; EDUFI, n.d.[9]).

Popular culture is also a key source of exposure. English language television and film are typically subtitled in Finland, a measure seen as supporting language development and literacy. Only 0.3% of known websites produce content in Finnish and 0.5% in Swedish, compared to 53% in English, meaning people in Finland are likely to often encounter English language material online (Web Technology Surveys, 2023[10]).

Students in Finland must study both national languages and a foreign language

The education system in Finland has two autonomous strands according to the language of administration and instruction. About 90% of schools in primary and lower secondary education (i.e. basic education in Finland) have Finnish as the language of instruction; 10% have Swedish (EDUFI, 2022[11]). Students living in the Sami homeland who are proficient in the Sami languages are taught primarily in Sami. Some 18% of schools provide some form of bilingual education, mostly Swedish-Finnish but some offer English.

Compulsory education in Finland begins at age 6 and ends at 18. Typically, 15-year-olds are in the final year of basic education, after which they progress to either general or vocational upper secondary institutions. In Finland, over 95% of schools are run by the municipality. Central government steers decision making but schooling decisions are principally the responsibility of local authorities and schools (OECD, 2020[12]). In principle, children attend the nearest comprehensive school. However, municipalities can establish selective classes with a special emphasis (e.g. music, sports, arts or languages) accessed via an aptitude test. This is increasingly typical in larger cities; research suggests this contributes to growing segregation of students by socio-economic status (Berisha and Seppänen, 2016[13]),

In addition to studying their first national language as language of instruction, students in Finland must study two additional languages: the second national language and a foreign language (Figure 3.1). They can study two further languages although it is increasingly uncommon for schools and municipalities to offer these or for students to choose them. Learning English is not compulsory in Finland but since the 1990s, most students choose to study it.

In 2020, it became compulsory for students to begin learning their first additional language in Grade 1, as opposed to Grade 3. Since 2016, students must begin learning their second additional language in Grade 6, at the latest. In Finnish-medium schools, English is almost universally studied as the first additional language from Grade 1, with Swedish typically from Grade 6. Conversely, in Swedish-medium schools, nearly all students learn Finnish from Grade 1 and take English as the second additional language from Grade 4. In 2021, only one in four students in the final year of compulsory education studied a language other than English or their second national language (Statistics Finland, n.d.[14]).

In Finland, it is the teacher's responsibility to assess students' language proficiency based on learning targets described in the national core curriculum. In basic education, there is no national standardised assessment for any additional language. At the end of upper secondary, students can take the matriculation examination which facilitates entry to tertiary education. Students sit examinations in five subjects including the language of instruction and at least one additional language. After mathematics, English is the most commonly selected subject and around 95% of candidates taking it sit the more advanced examination, which is at B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Matriculation Examination Board, 2023[15]). The computer-based examination tests students' reading, writing and listening skills.

Figure 3.1. Typical distribution of lesson hours for languages in Finland in 2023

	Primary						Lower secondary			Upper secondary¹		
Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Finnish / Swedish	14		18				10			12 (6)		
A1²	2		9				7			12 (4)		
A2	12											
B1³						2	2	3		10 (4)		
B2							4			(16)		

1. In upper secondary education, hours indicated in brackets apply as additional hours if the student selects the subject as part of their elective studies.
2. A1 language teaching begins in the spring term of Grade 1 at the latest for at least 0.5 hours per week.
3. The A2 language may replace the B1 language.
Notes: Modal grade and education level for 15-year-olds are outlined in black. Compulsory subjects and hours are presented in shaded boxes. For boxes that cover multiple grade levels, the time allocation must reach the number indicated in total across the relevant years. Students may also choose to begin an optional B3 language in upper secondary education.
Source: European Commission (2023[16]); national information reported to the OECD.

Finland has conducted several system-level evaluations of English language proficiency, offering insight into performance in reading, writing, speaking and listening at the end of basic education (i.e. Grade 9 when students are typically 15 years old). In 2021, 53% of students attained the equivalent of B1 or higher on the CEFR for reading, 38% for speaking, 34% for listening, and 29% for writing. However, an important share of students only attained a basic level (A1 on the CEFR): these shares were 9% for reading, 26% for listening, 27% for speaking and 33% for writing (Härmälä and Marjanen, 2022[17]). Nevertheless, the validity of the 2021 results, which show a drop in performance since 2013, has been questioned.[2]

The case study visit to Finland

In May 2023, staff from the OECD Secretariat and a Finnish national expert visited three schools in Finland. The schools were chosen for their diverse characteristics which include offering different specialised tracks, being located in urban or rural areas, and having a large share of students from socio-economically disadvantaged or immigrant backgrounds or a more advantaged or homogenous student cohort (Table 3.1). Nevertheless, all three case study schools are Finnish-medium schools in the south of the country; they are not nationally representative. The study must, therefore, be interpreted as illustrating the experiences of some students and educators in Finland as opposed to being generalised nationally.

The findings presented in the rest of this chapter are based on interviews with school leaders, English teachers and 15-year-old students in the case study schools as well as lesson observations, student activity logs and short surveys administered to interviewees. The analysis is also informed by a country background report and interviews with the English Language Teachers' Association of Finland and the Association of Finnish Language Teachers. For further information on the methodology, see Chapter 1.

Table 3.1. Key characteristics of the case study schools in Finland

		School A	School B	School C
Location		Urban	Urban	Rural
Education level		Lower secondary	Primary, lower secondary	Primary, lower secondary
School type		General education Specialised school (music, dance, design)	General education Specialised school (sports, arts)	General and vocational education
Student cohort	In whole school	500	830	660
	In modal grade for 15-year-olds	163	93	117
	% of socio-economically disadvantaged	Non-significant (0-5%)	20%	Non-significant (0-5%)
	% whose first language is not Finnish	4%	42%	0.4%
Teacher cohort	In whole school	52	100	56
	Teaching English	5	6	4
Interviewees		School principal Two English teachers Six 15-year-olds	School principal Two English teachers Three 15-year-olds	School assistant principal Two English teachers Six 15-year-olds

Source: Based on information reported to the case study team by schools.

How do 15-year-olds in Finland experience English outside school?

In Finland, 15-year-olds encounter English daily and see it as essential for their future

Across the case study schools, all participants agreed that 15-year-olds in Finland today are surrounded by English; all the students reported using English outside school at least sometimes.

> *I think [out-of-school exposure to English] has increased. They play these video games with people all over the world and use English. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *They are raised in an environment where English is always around them. (School leader, School A)*

Beyond formal lessons, participating 15-year-olds reported encountering English in various ways. All use English when engaging with digital technologies, commonly for browsing the Internet, gaming and interacting on social media. Students also mentioned listening to audiobooks and speaking English on videocalls. All students reported watching English language series or films, usually with Finnish subtitles and sometimes with English subtitles or without subtitles. This is consistent with previous research findings that English enters the lives of most people in Finland through media and popular culture, and that the Internet makes using English necessary (Leppänen, Nikula and Kääntä, 2008[18]; Leppänen et al., 2011[19]).

However, English also plays a role in teenagers' lives offline and beyond media consumption. For some, English supports the pursuit of certain hobbies: one teacher reported that students that play basketball and ice hockey often have coaches who speak English. Just over half of the students interviewed reported using English with family and friends and travelling to English-speaking countries; some use English with family members who do not speak Finnish. Teachers in School B, where Finnish is not the first language of many students, emphasised that students commonly use English in multicultural friendship groups or with recently arrived immigrants. A few students mentioned occasionally using English to help tourists.

Among those interviewed, 15-year-olds whose first language is Finnish are also using English with each other and by choice, although not extensively. One teacher observed that although students do not have long English conversations, they may include some English phrases or words in their everyday speech. Some students perceive such language use as playful and fun; others feel it is simply natural. Already in 2007, a large national survey observed that this translanguaging, particularly in speech, was significantly

more common among 15-24 year-olds than older respondents and they tended to view it positively as a creative or emotional outlet (Leppänen et al., 2011[19]).

> *English is something normal used in daily life among young people. (Teacher, School B)*
>
> *We mix English words into Finnish discussions during recess. (Student, School C)*

Nevertheless, the students interviewed for this case study are not likely to be representative of all students across the country, particularly as two schools are based in highly urban and relatively touristic areas. Exposure to English has previously been shown to vary significantly across Finland, including by region and urban and rural locations (Leppänen et al., 2011[19]).

As well as being ever-present, English was consistently viewed by the interviewees as being very important or essential for leading a successful life in Finland. This included for personal motives, such as facilitating travel or study exchanges abroad, as well as for professional ones, including pursuing careers in the medical or business sectors. Perhaps as a result, all but one of the students thought that they would continue learning English even after finishing school.

> *English brings more opportunities. (Student, School A)*
>
> *English is needed in Finland; Finnish is not enough for many jobs. (School leader, School B)*

However, while English is a highly desired skill, the idea that English is required to get a job in Finland does not reflect the entire job market. Recent analysis of online job vacancies across Europe indicates that the share of jobs in Finland advertised on line in 2021 that implicitly or explicitly required at least some knowledge of English is relatively low at 20% compared to an OECD average of 33% (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[20]). The case study participants' universal belief in the importance of English for future employment may reflect the higher demand for English skills in urban centres and in managerial or professional occupations in Finland (Marconi, Vergolini and Borgonovi, 2023[20]).

High exposure and perceived value may support teaching and learning, up to a point

Teachers and students alike see high levels of exposure and motivation as having a positive impact on students' English proficiency, both directly by enhancing linguistic knowledge and skills and indirectly by boosting confidence and motivation. For example, students mentioned that watching series and movies, playing video games, and listening to music in English can help them develop vocabulary. Students and teachers noted that in some cases, and particularly with regards to digital technologies, students are more up to date on English terminology than their teachers or their textbooks and may acquire a wider vocabulary thanks to this kind of exposure. One teacher added that frequently listening to English outside school helps students become familiar with what sounds right.

> *The English language skills of all students have been improving during recent years especially the last decade. This is because they listen to or hear English every day. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *Helping tourists on the street in English gives you self-confidence. (Student, School A)*

However, high exposure outside school also causes challenges according to some participants. Activity logs completed by 12 of the participating students indicate that while students may spend a lot of time listening to and reading English outside school, there is less opportunity to practice writing and speaking. Writing tasks were limited to occasional social media messaging or posting, and chat threads during gaming. One teacher identified this as causing a lag in writing proficiency.

At the same time, some see high exposure as having a potentially demotivating effect on students. A few students remarked that the English learnt outside school is more relevant to their lives than that learnt inside school. Some teachers explained that students feel they already know English well, do not

necessarily attribute this to their schooling and therefore find formal lessons frustrating or boring. This challenge has also been raised in previous research: growing familiarity with English outside formal learning environments may lead to the misconception that making an effort to study it is redundant (Vaarala et al., 2021[21]).

> *It is challenging that kids think they know the English already. They think they know it better than I do because they use it in computer games and it's present in their lives all the time. They think they don't have to listen to me in English classes, I feel that is a challenge. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *The students say, "We don't learn things at school because we heard this already"…[but]…it's still important to teach them academic English in terms of the grammar and correct sentence structures. (Teacher, School B)*

The narrowing effect of English on students' language repertoire worries some Finns

The growing dominance of English as a global lingua franca is raising concerns in Finland for the country's official languages. In 2019, the government published a new National Language Policy to safeguard and reinforce the position of the official languages in the face of the increased presence of English in sectors such as science, research, business and education, and English's strong position, especially in youth, popular and digital cultures (Finnish Government, 2021[22]). The government has recently commissioned two studies on English's (and other foreign languages') impact on domestic science and research and on the official languages, respectively. However, initial findings from the latter do not corroborate the view that English is endangering the national languages (Laitinen et al., 2023[23]).

At the same time, the practical implementation of Swedish as an official language is seen to be increasingly challenging. Among the case study participants, learners are perceived to be often reluctant or demotivated to learn Swedish. This is particularly true in comparison to English, which they typically find more relevant, more enjoyable, and easier to both learn and teach.

> *English is easier than Swedish because you hear it in many places. (Student, School C)*
>
> *Some teachers teach both English and Swedish, they say it is easier to teach English…because the attitudes are much better towards it. [Students] think that the English language is maybe…the most important language for them. (School leader, School B).*

Although it is recommended that the first additional language studied from Grade 1 be the second national language, in Finnish-medium schools in 2021, it was English for over 96% of children (Vipunen, n.d.[24]). This is either due to parental preference or, increasingly, because municipalities only offer English at Grade 1 (Finnish Government, 2021[22]). At the same time, fewer students in Finnish-medium schools choose to take the matriculation examination for Swedish. This leads to a reduction in skills supply, further complicating the practical implementation of Swedish as an official language and the teaching of Swedish.

The wider foreign language repertoire is also seen to be narrowing. Increasingly, children in Finland only study the two compulsory additional languages. In the case study interviews, two school leaders shared that while parents and students sometimes question the need to learn other languages or may request to stop studying one to focus attention elsewhere, there was no example of this happening for English.

Finally, research indicates that access to other foreign languages in Finland is increasingly unequal. As many smaller or more rural municipalities only offer English as the first additional language, and as language availability motivates parents to choose a school beyond the one closest to them, foreign language skills are increasingly modified by socio-economic and educational background and location (Bernelius and Huilla, 2021[25]). School A, located in an affluent urban area, reflects this situation.

> *There is nothing special about language teaching here except that a lot of students, about 60%, study two foreign languages. In addition to English, they take French, German or Spanish. And they all take Swedish. [However] when they choose French or German…it is more the parents' choice…and sometimes they apply to quit them in the Grade 7 or 8. (School leader, School A)*

A linguistic narrowing in education contrasts the growing cultural and linguistic diversity of Finnish society. Half of the students interviewed for the case study regularly spoke a language other than Finnish outside school, keeping in mind that two schools were in an urban centre, one in a particularly multicultural area. Nevertheless, growing multiculturalism has been identified more generally as one of the biggest challenges facing Finland's education system as students with an immigrant background have lower educational and well-being outcomes (Helakorpi, Holm and Liu, 2023[26]). In the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) 2022, even after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status, performance differences in Finland for students with an immigrant background were among the highest in the OECD. On average, these students scored 69 points lower than their non-immigrant peers in reading and 42 points lower in mathematics (OECD, 2023[27]).

Cultural diversity can enrich educational experiences, particularly in language classrooms. This is recognised in Finland's national core curriculum for basic education, which calls for all teachers to have linguistic awareness and to use students' whole linguistic repertoire as a resource for learning (EDUFI, 2014[28]). Although the Finnish curriculum can be seen as something of a global leader in terms of its language-related values, evidence of implementation indicates that linguistically responsive teaching is not a common feature of Finnish teacher training nor classroom practice (Vorstman, Szõnyi and Siarova, 2020[29]). Such an approach was not evident in the case study schools.

How do 15-year-olds in Finland experience English in schools and classrooms?

Students like English lessons but want authentic opportunities to use the language

The students interviewed for this case study generally like their English lessons often finding them easier and more enjoyable than other subjects. Some named English among their favourite subjects. They are also satisfied with their learning in English: of the 14 students interviewed, 13 reported being happy with how much English they had learnt at school so far.

> *English classes are perhaps more relaxed than other classes and we use more diverse methods – we listen, we write and do different exercises. (Student, School C)*
>
> *It is gratifying to be an English teacher because kids mostly like English. (Teacher, School C)*

Nevertheless, increasing the opportunity for students to use the language in authentic situations commonly arose as an area for improvement. Despite being exposed to English in many ways outside school, when asked to identify something that would enhance their English learning, several students wished for more opportunities to go on trips to English-speaking countries and to receive international visitors in school. Educators also identified this as an area for improvement, recognising that it would be valuable for students' learning if schools provided more opportunities for them to apply their English.

> *It would be good to have more chances to practice speaking in real-life situations to get more confidence. (Student, School C)*

However, they also acknowledged related challenges. According to school leaders, such activities rely on teachers' willingness to dedicate additional time and effort. One teacher explained that although organising them has a clear added value, time, financial and other structural constraints prevent it. Moreover, some international links were lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, one of the schools appointed a teacher to co-ordinate Erasmus programmes as part of their formal workload. Another provides financial compensation to a teacher co-ordinating an eTwinning project. One teacher acknowledged that schools could also seek solutions in digital technologies noting that, with the right resources, technology could support students to visit English-speaking countries virtually, including through augmented reality (see Chapter 2 for more on how digital technologies can support virtual exchanges).

Teachers and students alike perceive spoken English to be particularly challenging

Several of the 15-year-olds participating in the Finnish case study identified speaking as the hardest of the four communicative skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing) to learn. They gave reasons related to linguistic aspects, such as pronunciation and vocabulary, as well as socio-emotional aspects, such as the speed of oral communication and finding it intimidating.

> *When you speak you have to react fast and also pronunciation is difficult. (Student, School C)*

> *If somebody asks me something, I cannot answer. I understand the question, but I don't have enough English words to answer. (Student, School B)*

Likewise, many of the participating teachers highlighted speaking as a particularly challenging skill to teach and for students to learn. Some cited pedagogical challenges, such as a lack of class time dedicated to speaking in general and to extended speaking tasks specifically, as well as the time involved for providing individual feedback on speaking skills and a lack of assessment opportunities.

> *The [biggest challenge] is increasing the students' speaking time in the lesson…I always have this problem. (Teacher, School B)*

However, teachers more commonly cited socio-emotional obstacles. Several noted that students are shy when speaking English. One felt that teenagers in Finland are particularly concerned about what other people think of them and this seemed to increase during COVID-19. Another found self-consciousness to be strongest from Grade 7. Indeed, a participant who teaches in primary and lower secondary education noted that both the time dedicated to speaking in class and learners' related confidence diminish with age.

> *They never speak in front of the class. (Teacher, School C,)*

Another teacher emphasised that attitudes towards speaking English depend on the individual student or group. In one school, when asked directly, the students denied finding spoken English particularly embarrassing and described their class as supportive although all these students self-assessed their English proficiency in comparison to that of their classmates as either average or above-average.

In the interviews, teachers and students identified potential strategies for overcoming challenges related to speaking, including pair or small-group work, project-based speaking tasks or requiring more assessment of spoken English. Some students wished for more speaking in class as well as explicit pronunciation practice. The desire for more authentic opportunities to speak English, including with native speakers (see above), was also connected to a desire to enhance confidence in speaking.

National data indicate that there is room to enhance students' speaking skills in Finland. In 2021 and 2013, large-scale assessments of English proficiency found that 15-year-olds' receptive skills (reading and listening) are generally stronger than their productive skills (speaking and writing). In speaking, in 2013, around one-third (36%) of students did not achieve target proficiency (i.e. B1 on the CEFR, equivalent to Level 8 in Finland) (Hildén et al., 2013[30]); in 2021, the share was close to two-thirds (62%), although these later results should be interpreted with caution[3] (Härmälä and Marjanen, 2022[17]). Nevertheless, in both instances, the shares were smaller than those underachieving in writing and similar to those for listening.

A wider cultural phenomenon may explain some of the concerns. Finnish people can be particularly self-deprecating or critical of each other when speaking English. The term "Rally English" (*tankeroenglanti* or r*allienglanti*), derived from the strong accent of some Finnish racing drivers when speaking English, is both widely used and a common source of humour. Meanwhile, high-profile individuals that speak English fluently with a British accent are commonly praised and admired (Peterson, 2022[31]).

English language curricula in Finland have placed growing emphasis on oral communication in recent years. For the first time, the national core curriculum for upper secondary (2019) includes a dedicated

section on the evaluation of oral skills. However, teachers are not provided with practical examples or pedagogical guidance on how to implement these changes (Hamm, 2020[32]).

Mixed-ability language classrooms create multiple challenges for English teachers

When asked about the biggest challenges they or their school faces with regards to developing students' English language proficiency, most teachers and school leaders cited adequately responding to students' different needs. The challenge was expressed either in terms of the range of English language proficiencies within a class, which can extend from beginner to native speaker, or a general increase in different needs such as learning difficulties, declining literacy levels, growing mental health challenges, high dropout rates, behavioural challenges and rising numbers of students with an immigrant background.

> *Nowadays there are so many students in different [proficiency] levels of the language. Some are in basic level and need some support, some are really talented in English because they watch the television in English and use English on social media and maybe use English for their hobbies as well. (School leader, School A)*
>
> *[The] biggest challenge is that the learning skills of the students are quite heterogeneous, they vary a lot. We have many students with very high and very low results, less on the average level. (School leader, School B)*

When asked about the supports offered to low-performing students in English, teachers gave different examples of adaptations to their teaching. This included providing differentiated tasks or tailored resources (either prepared by the teacher or provided with the textbook), better scaffolding learning activities by including extra steps, or spending more one-to-one time with target students in class.

> *The teachers have to know how to diversify teaching methods according to each student, the teaching has to be tailor-made to the learning skills of the students. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *I spend more time with them and choose the easier test and easier exercises. (Teacher, School B)*

Participating students recognised that if they or their peers are struggling in English, they might receive more individualised support from the teacher and different or easier activities. In lesson observations, teachers adopted implicit support measures, such as switching to Finnish, providing one-to-one explanations and checking for understanding with certain students. However, but there was no evidence of explicit efforts to adapt the demands or accessibility of tasks for less proficient students.

In terms of school-level supports, teachers and school leaders described following the official model introduced in 2014, which envisages three levels of support across all subjects. In the first instance, the teacher gives extra support to students outside lesson time, such as providing additional tasks or one-to-one and small group support. This might not be included in teachers' official working time. If that does not suffice, students are referred to the special needs teacher(s), who provide(s) more regular support based on an individual learning plan. The third tier relates to long-term supports assigned to students according to diagnosed needs. The case study participants focused on the second tier as a key support for low-performing students in English. In one school, teaching assistants provide extra support in some lessons or for certain students. However, as is also true of special needs teachers, these assistants are not English language specialists and may not have the language skills to adequately support students.

With regards to supporting high-performing students, reported strategies varied more between schools but were generally considered less comprehensive. Teachers explained that these students may be encouraged to read more in English or may receive more advanced tasks such as formal or creative writing pieces. School leaders noted that occasionally there are field trips, conferences or international exchange programmes. One school offers the chance to participate in advanced courses for two extra lessons a week, but English is not commonly selected or included in this offer.

Some interviewees referred to a growing though somewhat hidden trend of creating "fast-track" groups for English in primary education despite the fact that ability grouping is not allowed in Finnish schools. Among

the teachers and school leaders interviewed, there were differing opinions regarding ability grouping, with some suggesting that it would help solve the challenge of heterogeneity and others feeling it would be politically or ethically unacceptable.

Several interviewees felt that the supports provided for students with different needs in English are not sufficient citing various obstacles. With regards to low-performing students, teachers find it difficult to encourage students to attend extra support sessions and some report not having sufficient time to provide them. Special education teachers are a finite resource typically in high demand: in one case study school there was one per grade (around 170 students); in another, around a quarter of all students received their support. In addition, to adequately support English language learning, the special education teacher often needs to collaborate with the English teacher but time for this is not included in work schedules.

Supporting high-performing students was seen as even more challenging. Supports are seen as time intensive as extended assignments require further explanation, evaluation and feedback. In addition, these students may not see the need to extend their English, particularly in comparison to other subjects. One teacher explained that the lack of consistency in approaches across teachers adds to the challenge. Finally, a few teachers also raised cultural barriers: the Finnish education system is built on a philosophy of equality and providing extra supports to these students may be perceived as unfair.

> *[Supporting high-performing students] is much more difficult because if you give them assignments, they also require more debriefing. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *Part of the students might be annoyed by not getting to improve their English to a more advanced level. (Student, School C)*

A national survey of language teachers and school leaders in basic education revealed similar issues. Insufficient resources, whether financial or time-related, were by far the biggest obstacles to providing adequate support to students, impacting class sizes and shortages of qualified personnel. Meanwhile, student motivation and the heterogeneity and number of needs were seen to further exacerbate resource issues. Language teachers also felt that the allocation of resources for such supports favours other subjects over languages and diminishes with age, just as class sizes grow (Hilden et al., 2019[33]). Case study participants had some clear ideas as to how they could be supported to better meet students' different needs in relation to English learning (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. Strategies to better support English language learners with different needs in Finland

According to teacher and school leader responses in case study interviews

Note: The strategies included in the figure are not exhaustive; they refer only to those observed or reported during the case study visit.
Source: Based on case study research conducted in three schools in Finland.

What resources support English teaching and learning in schools in Finland?

English teachers in Finland are multilingual and generally enjoy their work

Of the six teachers interviewed, five had Finnish as their first language. All reported using English outside school at least sometimes, with half reporting using it very often and two using English at home alongside other languages. All reported sometimes travelling to English-speaking countries and four had spent time working in one. In addition, all the teachers reported speaking other additional languages, typically Swedish, but also German, Spanish and Turkish; five taught one of these languages in school.

The participating teachers joined the profession for various reasons, including being good at English, liking the language and having a family member who taught English.

> *After high school I was good at English and liked it so it felt a natural and easier choice than law school. So I did two years of English and then decided to do teaching. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *One of the English teachers gave me a 10 and it really motivated me. Since then, I've been really interested in languages. (Teacher, School B)*

The teachers were generally satisfied with their work. Most feel that their initial training prepared them well. One teacher described being very engaged in professional development, visiting other schools and classrooms and undertaking research as part of their doctoral studies. Another felt that initial teacher training had not adequately prepared them for the challenges of the classroom, although these challenges were not specific to being an English teacher. In Finland, all teachers in municipal schools are entitled to three days of planning and training annually. In recent years, English teachers have received more in-service training due to major reforms, such as the change in the age of introduction of the first additional language.

The school leaders participating in the case study generally felt that there is a good supply of well-qualified English language teachers in Finland. Nevertheless, one school leader working in an affluent urban area noted a diminishing pool of applicants to English language teaching roles and one of the teachers felt the profession was increasingly less attractive both economically and socially, as the perceived social value and respect for the profession seem to be falling.

> *There are quite a lot of qualified English teachers on the market. There's no problem with recruitment in our school or other schools either as far as I know. (School leader, School B)*
>
> *All our English teachers are qualified teachers with permanent contracts…regarding English language teaching, we're in a good situation. (School leader, School C)*

Teachers use digital technologies, mainly to facilitate traditional language pedagogies

Classrooms in all three schools were well-equipped with digital tools, typically having a laptop or desktop for the teacher, an interactive whiteboard and/or standard whiteboard and projector, and audio equipment. In one school, all students had a laptop for use in lessons and at home, provided by the municipality; another school was preparing to provide all students with one. One classroom had a phone park for students to hand in their phones at the beginning of the lesson, although this was not strictly enforced.

Interviewees gave various examples of the digital technologies used in English lessons. This includes game-based platforms and applications accessed via mobile phones and used for vocabulary or grammar practice (e.g. Kahoot!, Quizlet, Wordwall); tools for classroom management (e.g. Google Classroom, One Drive); digital textbooks and their additional online resources; and online media such as images, video and audio material to stimulate discussions. During the lesson observations, teachers and, to a much lesser extent, students used digital technologies in varying ways (Box 3.1). However, students were not generally active users and the activities that integrated technology tended to replicate traditional pedagogical

approaches rather than taking advantage of the added pedagogical value some technologies may offer (see Chapter 2). These observations align with a wider analysis of the use of digital technologies in lower secondary schools in Finland (Oinas et al., 2023[34]).

> **Box 3.1. The use of digital technologies in case study lessons in Finland**
>
> Digital technologies were integrated into all three lessons observed for this case study.
>
> **Lesson 1:** All students used their own device throughout the lesson. They worked through the teacher's presentation independently and completed written tasks and other exercises on the device. At the end of the lesson, the teacher set a homework task via the virtual learning environment; this would be submitted by students electronically and then evaluated by the teacher digitally. Students navigated the different tools with ease and generally remained on task.
>
> **Lesson 2:** Digital technologies were used to support classroom management. As students increasingly disengaged from the first task – a pair discussion based on written prompts – the teacher transitioned to an active viewing exercise of a video from an English language news channel. Students were visibly more engaged during the video and more willing to participate in the subsequent class discussion.
>
> **Lesson 3:** Having given students time to complete grammar exercises in their textbooks, the teacher projected the digital version onto the whiteboard to review as a class. Students self-assessed their answers. At the end of the lesson, which had covered aspects of Canadian culture, the teacher played some music by Canadian artists and encouraged students to share their opinions.

During the interviews, many participants identified advantages of using digital technologies in language classrooms. This includes making the teaching more engaging, better aligning with students' interests and digital habits, taking advantage of game-based tools, and facilitating lesson planning.

> *They are fun because sometimes they are like a game and we get pretty competitive. (Student, School A)*
>
> *Digital materials make it easier to search for information and materials. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *In language teaching … you need something to render the teaching more vivid and interesting. Young people are used to this kind of material and there is a lot of video or audio material available nowadays. Digital technologies enable the teacher to integrate popular youth culture into lessons. (School leader, School B)*

Some participants expressed reservations and identified associated challenges. One student noted that the technology does not always work; a teacher felt that scope to use certain tools is limited as decision-making power is held at municipal level. More commonly, challenges related to the perceived pedagogical value of the tools. Some teachers noted the low educational quality of the digital resources accompanying textbooks, including a lack of challenge. Another had concerns around screen time and felt that digital technologies are not conducive to interaction and communication. A final teacher speculated that digital tools negatively impact learning, particularly writing.

> *I am an old-school teacher. I think the kids spend a lot of time already on their phones…I don't want to add to that…I want them to speak, to listen, to have contact. (Teacher, School C)*
>
> *Students don't have their own laptops so they don't use a lot of laptops. The digital materials from the book by the publisher are awful, we cannot use them. (Teacher, School C)*

English teachers see textbooks as a key resource but think they could be of better quality

In each of the observed lessons, all students had paper copies of the textbook. Teachers integrated activities from the book into two of the lessons. In the interviews, many of the educators saw the textbooks as a critical resource for teaching English. One school leader explained that, despite the expense, the school ensures all students have their own copy of the textbook to write in as they feel this improves results.

For all the teachers, the textbook provides a road map of the lesson objectives and teaching content for the year. As one teacher explained, this is at least in part a result of the high level of curricular autonomy in Finland. Although this teacher viewed the freedom negatively, wanting more structure and guidance for learning goals, pedagogies and classroom assessment, other teachers appreciated it and were happy to use the textbooks to fill gaps. Some students also reported liking the structure offered by the textbooks.

> *In languages [the curriculum] is too open-ended. For example, the curriculum says we teach the basic structures of English, but nobody says what they are. (Teacher, School A)*
>
> *I find the textbooks very useful, otherwise I would be doing much more work. (Teacher, School B)*

The teachers in one school were very satisfied with their chosen textbook. They appreciated the wide selection of activities on offer, including differentiated assessments, teacher resources and digital materials. Another teacher found the textbook useful in helping integrate aspects of English-speaking culture into lessons.

> *Everything is taken care of for us, everything is there in the book. (Teacher, School C)*

However, teachers in other schools were less convinced: one emphasised the importance of combining activities from the book with their own activities, particularly to meet the different needs of students; another felt that the level of challenge, particularly in the listening exercises, was insufficient. In different schools, teachers described some of the material as outdated. Finally, the interviews revealed wider concerns about the quality of the digital resources which, in their early form at least, simply digitised the paper versions.

One teacher remarked on the use of both English and Finnish in the textbook. This is typical of approaches to teaching grammar in Finland; however, having worked in other education systems, this teacher was surprised to discover the extent to which Finnish is used. In particular, the teacher noted that this causes challenges for students whose first language is not Finnish, particularly those who have recently arrived. In such cases, the teacher described having to prepare three versions of each assessment: one Finnish-English, one English-only and one differentiated assessment for students with low proficiency.

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Notes

[1] Throughout this report, the phrase "additional language" is used to refer to any language that is not the learner's first language and/or the language of instruction. This encompasses both foreign languages and official languages or those with special status in countries formally recognising more than one.

[2] In 2021, students performed below their counterparts in 2013 in all four skill areas but the drop was greatest in speaking. This requires further investigation but technical factors such as administration during the COVID-19 pandemic, a reliance on teacher evaluation and use of (unstable) video technology for the speaking tasks, as well as lower motivation among students have been suggested.

[3] See Note 2.