

Andreas Braun

PhD, University of Hertfordshire, UK
andreas.braun@live.co.uk



The educational challenges of maintaining Finnish in the UK: A longitudinal account of three Finnish mothers

Keywords: education, Finnish, English, multilingualism, language mixing

Finnish parents living in the UK face linguistic challenges when their children start formal education. It is the turning point when the community language is used more than Finnish. The aim of this article is to investigate Finnish parents' perceptions of how the linguistic milieu in nurseries, schools and other communal establishments has affected their language practices over time. The content of this study was informed by an analysis of informal discussions and observations of the language use of three Finnish mothers living in the UK. The data was part of a larger study of 35 trilingual families in the UK with various backgrounds. The informants commented on their families' language practices over time in relation to the children's school settings, such as nurseries, pre-schools or primary/secondary schools.

It was found that the mothers spoke exclusively Finnish with their very young children but started to struggle by using more English when their progenies entered school or nursery. Although the parents did not speak English as their native language, they regarded it as important for their children's academic path, which in effect made English an essential language in their families.

A major challenge for home language maintenance in multilingual families seems to be the start of formal education, when the child's dominant language is most likely to

change. The language spoken in nursery or school usually becomes the first language depending on the time the child spends there, which puts more pressure on the parents to maintain the home languages. Particularly the use of English has become so widespread as a global language that its presence is felt in almost all language domains: science, media, tourism, trade and other fields of contemporary life. It appears that education has also played an important part in spreading English, with governments across the globe introducing English as early as the pre-school stage.

In the process of the European Union's enlargement, European and international schools have been established to provide education for children with different native languages and nationalities. Some of the main objectives of these schools are to give pupils confidence in their cultural identity and sound education in the mother tongue besides English, based on a broad range of subjects, from nursery level to university entrance. In addition, some minority groups have established supplementary schools, teaching minority languages to their children as a response to concerns that the "official" education systems are neglecting the minority children's cultural, religious and linguistic heritage. However, such schools are

rare and sometimes costly, and older children often regard supplementary schools as tiresome, and the lessons are attended mainly through pressure from the family.

The overall aim of this article is to explore the language use of Finnish mothers with their children over time in relation to the influence of the linguistic milieu at schools and other communal establishments.

Methods

As part of a longitudinal study, the data from three Finnish mothers was available for a follow-up investigation about the language use with their children over time. The initial data collection (semi-structured interviews) was done in 2004 with follow-ups in 2010 and 2017 in the UK, by means of two informal discussions with each mother. All three mothers were white Finnish nationals in their 50's and had been living in the UK for over 15 years. Although there were other Finnish participants in the first study, only three could be contacted for the follow-up. Qualitative thematic analysis (QTA) was employed to analyse and compare the data using Nvivo software package to scrutinise qualitative information. All participants' names and other identities were anonymised.

Results

The data indicated that over time English had become the dominant language in the families' everyday conversations. Although the mothers spoke exclusively Finnish with their young children, as soon as they started formal education their preferred language gradually changed to English. Before the age of four, the children would mainly hear Finnish, as they spent most of their time with their Finnish parents. However, there was a noticeable language shift when the children started formal education, where everything was conveyed in English. A parent said: "I find it more difficult in one way, because there is so much responsibility how they (children) learn language not just what is happening around us in the school or play group. It comes up to us as parents so much." Parents were also worried that their young children were not exposed to English enough, which would be a disadvantage for them at school later on.

This created a dilemma, as the parents wanted to preserve Finnish with their children, but at the same time were worried that their English was not developing properly. Although all three participants spoke English on a professional level, it was not their native language – so they felt timid to use it with

their children. Some went to English speaking toddler groups in order to "mingle" with English speaking parents and children. One parent said: "It is sometimes difficult and sometimes I feel really bad when my child can't discuss with other children and she (child) gets very quiet and becomes very shy – so it's embarrassing. I think for me as a mum but especially for my child at the moment."

However, this changed with the beginning of nursery and school, which marked an important milestone in these families' language practices. Suddenly, the children were overwhelmed by new vocabulary from different language domains. Once the children became accustomed to their school and the language that was spoken there, the participants began to struggle with Finnish, which let them to try strategies to maintain Finnish, such as supplementary after-school classes. But when the children got older they made their own choices and usually discontinued attending those classes. In effect, they even changed to English or mixed the languages while talking to their Finnish parents. The parents themselves needed to switch to English during homework time, as the text books required English only. In other words, as the children got older, more English instead of Finnish was spoken, not by choice but by the dominance of natural input of English at school but also in the wider community. However, despite the overwhelming exposure to English, older children continued to acquire Finnish passively by hearing the language from their parents and visiting Finland to see relatives, especially grandparents.

Discussion

There is a correlation between the beginning of formal education and use of minority languages. The linguistic milieu in nurseries, schools and other communal establishments affected the participants' use of the Finnish language with their children. At first, they were mostly speaking Finnish with their young children, but as soon as they were enrolled at pre-school, English became the dominant language. Some parents welcomed this development as they wanted their children to learn English to "fit" into the community where they lived. Therefore, nurseries, schools and the general community were given the responsibility for the children's acquisition of the community language, English.

At the same time, parents tried to maintain Finnish with their children at home, even if they talked back in English. In this way, the children would at least hear Finnish, which seemed to benefit their range of vocab-

ulary, though at a slow pace. Some tried to find strategies in order to maintain Finnish, such as sending their children to supplementary afterschool clubs. However, such establishments were not always available, and even if they were, the children got often tired of them when they got older, as it was seen as “unnecessary extra work”. In other words, language maintenance became a more pressing issue as the children were immersed in English. Once the children were older and established themselves at school, they expressed their own language preferences, putting Finnish in a disadvantaged position. The acquisition of English was seen as important, even at the pre-school stage. Participants wanted their children to acquire English either in playgroups or nurseries, because it was regarded as essential academically, whereas Finnish was mainly used for communicative purposes at home or with the extended family back in Finland during holiday visits.

The role of education is a snapshot of one particular factor influencing the language practices of three Finnish mothers living abroad. There were additional themes that will be reported elsewhere.

Bibliography

- Braun, Andreas & Tony Cline (2014). *Language Strategies for Trilingual Families. Parents' Perspectives*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Chevalier, Sarah (2016). The Value of English in Multilingual Families. Martin Leer & Genoveva Puskás (eds.), *Economies of English*. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 97–116.
- De Saint-Georges, Ingrid & Jean-Jacques Weber (eds.) (2013). *Multilingualism and multimodality: Current challenges for educational studies*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- EURSC (2018). *SC ScholaEuropaca*. Available: <https://www.eursc.eu/en/European-Schools/mission>



Yhdysvaltalaisen Finlandia Foundationin johtokunnan puheenjohtaja Ossi Rahkonen kävi Siirtolaisuusinstituutissa vierailulla 7.8.2018. Lahjoitimme hänelle turkulaisen pilapiirtäjä Mika Rantasen tekemän karikatyyrin. Kuvassa myös instituutin toimitusjohtaja Tuomas Martikainen ja vastaava tutkija Miika Tervonen. Kuva: Satu Löppönen.