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Less or more widely studied languages – How has language specialist education in Finland changed in twenty years?

Outi Veivo, Soili Norro and Marjut Johansson

Abstract: In recent decades, language education has undergone many changes in Finnish primary and secondary schools in such a way that it has had an impact on the study of foreign languages. Also, in Finnish higher education, language degree programmes have been the object of various reforms and language policy measures. The objective of this article is to discover whether these changes are reflected in the number of new students entering language specialist education. By analysing the distribution of new students across different language degree programmes, we aim to characterize which languages are less and which are more widely studied in the Finnish higher education context. Our aim is also to discover whether the situation has changed over the last twenty years. Our results show that the proportion of English language students has grown at the expense of other languages, such as Swedish, German and French. These findings are discussed in the framework of educational and national language policies.

Keywords: language education policy, Finnish higher education, language degree programmes, less widely taught languages, less widely studied languages

Introduction

In this article, we analyse the situation of language education in Finnish higher education (HE). Languages in HE can be approached from four different angles, depending on the function of the language and the learning objectives. First, most HE degree programmes are taught in one of the national languages, that is, in Finnish or, to a lesser extent, Swedish, the minority language (i.e. in students' first language). Second, international degree programmes in all Finnish universities are based almost uniquely on English-medium instruction (i.e. in a foreign language for learners), with the exception of a few Finnish, French or multilingual degree programmes. Third, general language teaching for all HE students is provided by language centres that orientate students towards profession-specific language use. In this paper, our focus is on the fourth perspective, language degree programmes. These are taught in faculties of humanities and they specialize in language education whose objective is to provide professional language expertise.

We set out to reply to the following research question: Which languages for language-specialist professions can be characterized as less commonly and more widely studied at Finnish universities

across two different time periods: twenty years ago and in recent years? Our objective is to answer this question by statistically analysing the number of students in language degree programmes and to discuss how changes in secondary education and language policies have been reflected in HE.

Analysing languages from an educational perspective that involves language policy and the relationship between different languages can be considered to be an ideological and a cultural process that is tied to power relations in hierarchical, historical and political processes within a given context by social actors (Gal & Woolard 2001). This language making is equally tied to the representations of the public, individuals and communities to language attitudes and ideologies (Krämer et al. 2022). This hierarchical formation also takes place in relation to language education. In language education, languages are referred to as widely or less commonly taught languages, depending on their importance and number of learners in a given context.

The official languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish (Swedish is the first language of approximately 5.3% of the population), and it is obligatory to learn both languages at school. In the Finnish education context, among less commonly taught languages, Russian and German have traditionally been important in Finnish society for historical and political reasons. In addition, French and Spanish have also been offered as major international languages; as such, they are important for the Finnish language skills reserve (Saarinen et al. 2019: 126). These foreign languages can be characterized as less taught languages in the Finnish education context, since they are optional and the number of pupils learning them has always been low. In addition, minority languages, such as Sami, Romani and the heritage languages of some migrant groups, are being taught at least to some extent in schools (Pyykkö 2017).

Language policy can be understood as the relationship between society and different languages and their speakers, as well as the measures taken to affect this relationship (cf. Saarinen & Ihalainen 2018; Spolsky 2019). Perceptions of language, language attitudes and discursive practices at different societal levels influence language education policy and the educational policy decisions concerning curriculum planning, legislation and financing (cf. Hornberger & Johnson 2007). Language ideologies affect language policy, which is seen as a multi-layered process, by producing and reinforcing attitudes towards different languages and their indexical value, thereby determining, for instance, which languages are taught (Johnson 2013; Ricento & Hornberger 1996). Language ideologies manifest as language attitudes that affect human behaviour (Gueunier 2003), including students' choice of optional languages.

Regarding language policies in general, they are multi-sited and produced and reproduced by different actors (Halonen et al. 2014). Our study is situated at the intersection of critical applied language studies and language education policy in a broad understanding (Pennycook 2021; Liddicoat 2013). Language policies and changes in language education have to be investigated in their specific contexts from the perspective of how language education affects their speech communities (Liddicoat 2013). Our context is national language education in HE, which, as with any other context, is dynamic.

All the countries of the Global North, including Finland, have undergone major transformations due to globalisation, internationalisation, digitalisation and, most recently, artificial intelligence. All these trends have had an impact on the diversification of communication, the relationships between people and their transnational mobilities and migrations in post-industrial societies (Vertovec 2023). Contemporary societies are superdiverse: they are becoming increasingly more complex and being affected by the ‘multidimensional nature of diversification processes’ (Vertovec 2023: 2).

Foreign language policies and planning have been underrepresented in language policy research. Liddicoat (2022) observes a lack of such research on languages other than English. Based on previous studies, he considers that there are the following types of research topics in this area. First, most studies have identified a crisis in foreign language learning in English-speaking countries, where policies have failed to establish solid foreign language education. Second, in non-English-speaking countries, topics focus either on the expansion of English language education or on the effect on other languages of teaching English (Liddicoat 2022).

In what follows, we begin by presenting the changes made in language education at primary and secondary levels in Finland. We then focus on recent HE policy measures before presenting our data, methods and results.

1. Language education policy in Finland

Language education at both primary and secondary level has undergone various changes in recent decades. These changes concern the status of languages as compulsory subjects, the age at which students start learning languages and the status of languages in the matriculation exam (i.e. the final exam at upper secondary school). These changes have all had an impact on the number of students who choose to take optional language subjects as part of their programmes.

At the same time, the language degree programmes in higher education have also undergone a number of different changes. These changes are described below.

1.1. Primary- and secondary-level language education

Since the introduction of a nine-year comprehensive school in the 1970s, the right to study at least one foreign language has been part of Finnish language education policy (Sajavaara 2006). In addition to either Finnish or Swedish as a second national language, studying one foreign language is compulsory. Since English is the most popular choice, many attempts have been made to expand the range of languages over the years (OKM 2012; Penttilä 2012). Language policy decisions in recent decades have, however, led to a reduction in the range of languages available, rather than an expansion of the language reserve, and in the number of pupils who choose to take elective language courses (for teachers' views on this development, see Veivo et al. 2021). We begin by describing some of the changes concerning primary and lower secondary education (grades 1–9). One of the aims of this reform was to expand the range of languages studied at school, since 90% of students would choose English as their first foreign language (Pyykkö 2017). The reform did not reach this objective however, as most municipalities continued to offer only English in the first grade. There are some exceptions among the biggest cities, such as Helsinki, Tampere, Oulu and Espoo, which offer 7–9 different languages.

In upper secondary education, there have also been changes that have affected the study of foreign languages since the 1980s, the first being the removal in 1985 of the requirement for students who had chosen advanced-level mathematics to study at least two languages (Sajavaara 2006). In 1994, this exception was extended to all students.

In 2006, the matriculation exam changed, with humanities and natural sciences being offered as separate subjects. Until the reform, they were a single subject in the Finnish matriculation exam. This caused a drop in the number of students choosing to study additional language subjects. In 2005, an additional language other than English was taken by 9753 students, but by 2020, the number had dropped to 3967. Because the matriculation exam has a strong washback effect on the subjects that students choose, the proportion of students studying at least three languages dropped from 53.6% in 2010 to 48.5% in 2017 (Vipunen a).

A reform of HE student selection was carried out in 2020. Since the reform, more than half of students are selected based on their marks in the matriculation exam, and the mark for mathematics

carries more weight than that for the first foreign language studied as a compulsory subject from grade one. Therefore, students prefer taking advanced courses in mathematics, which means they do not have time for additional languages in their programme. In addition, teachers have observed that the system gives very little weight to additional languages (Mäntylä et al. 2021).

As Piri (2001) mentions, the tendency in Finnish education policy from the 1980s onwards has been to decentralize decision-making. She points out that in a decentralized language planning model, the influence of language experts and the importance of commonly accepted aims and values may diminish. The Finnish system is quite decentralized, and municipalities most commonly organize education; thus, decisions concerning language education policy are largely taken by municipal boards. In some cases, decisions about language education are even made by schools. In times of financial difficulty, municipalities often save costs by offering only one language option or set the minimum required group size unrealistically high.

The lack of legislative regulation for the implementation of the national language education policy and targeted funding from the state has led to unequal opportunities to study optional languages. These languages depend on funding and vary greatly between different regions and even between schools within the same municipality.

1.2. Language degree programmes in higher education

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Finnish HE offered a wide range of degree programmes in national and foreign languages; however, until the turn of the century, they had not been an object of specific national policy development (Pyykkö et al. 2007: 129). In a similar vein, there had been no systematic analysis of the labour market's need for language specialists, even though language education as such was widely studied (cf. Luukka & Pöyhönen 2007). This situation changed when Finland became a member of the European Union in 1995. For HE, this had an impact on educational policies and their implementation, such as the Bologna process, student and staff mobility and language policies (de Wit & Altbach 2020; Saarinen & Taalas 2017). Following the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in 2001, the Finnish National Board of Education launched programmes to diversify language choices in schools and to develop the competencies of language teachers (Nyman 2004, See 2.1.).

The European degree structure was organized in three cycles (bachelor, degree and doctorate cycles), but before this could be implemented in the mid-2000s, there was in-depth planning of

national degree programme curricula. This meant that new types of pedagogical objectives could be integrated into language education. One of the conceptual changes this development brought about was the notion of a *language specialist*. This refers to the expertise and competencies that an academic language graduate requires for contemporary working life (Nikula 2004). Therefore, graduates who train in language sciences master one or several fields of a professional specialisation, such as language teaching, language technology, translation, language consulting or language policy and planning (cf. Luukka & Pöyhönen 2007).

In the mid-2000s, a language education policy project (Luukka & Pöyhönen 2007) investigated language teaching in Finland from the perspective of life-long learning (i.e. from kindergarten to HE). It took into consideration the teaching of languages, including languages with different statuses in Finland, such as national, minority and migrant languages, among others, and, on the whole, the Finnish language reserve. Since 2007, language policy planning has been focused on what was known as the language competencies reserve, which refers to the needs of Finnish society and the labour market in terms of national and foreign language competencies (Luukka & Pöyhönen 2007). With regard to HE, language competencies reserve has traced the situation of language education and the development of language education curricula for degree programmes, among other things (Pyykkö & al. 2007). In 2007, there were foreign language degree programmes in eight Finnish universities, with the most commonly taught languages being English and Swedish. In the Finnish context, the less taught languages (i.e. German, French and Russian) had degree programmes in several universities, and Spanish and Italian were offered by a couple of universities. Less commonly taught Asian and African languages were available only at the University of Helsinki (Pyykkö et al. 2007: 123).

The next policy working group was set up by the Council of University Rectors of Finland (Unifi) in 2015. Its task was to develop a policy paper on language degree programmes in Finnish universities. The working group charted the changes in international contexts and their impact on language teaching and learning (Nuolijärvi 2015; Unifi 2015). It excluded the national languages, Finnish and Swedish, as well as autochthonous minority languages and concentrated uniquely on degree programmes in foreign languages. Its propositions included several different measures that would enhance the quality and efficacy of university-level foreign language teaching. It recommended transdisciplinary teaching at the BA level and collaboration between universities in course offerings. It considered that the needs of professional life should be included as an

orientating principle in degree programmes. It also encouraged the reduction of all possible overlaps in course offerings. On a more positive note, it recommended, among other things, adding Chinese to the degree programme. However, most of the proposals targeted reducing or simply terminating entire language degree programmes or parts of them in specific universities. The major degree programmes to be terminated were German (Eastern Finland), French (Tampere) and Russian (Turku). In 2017, the University of Vaasa made the decision to transfer all its language degree programmes to the University of Jyväskylä, which was exceptional (Tiedote/Press release 2017). While this measure was a large-scale reduction, smaller-scale terminations of teaching positions were executed by universities due to a worsening economic situation throughout the 2010s.

In 2017, a report on language education, *Multilingualism as strength*, published by the Ministry of Education and Culture put forward the concept of a national *language reserve* that consists of languages spoken and learnt in a given country (Pyykkö 2017). According to this report, the Finnish language reserve is seen as social capital for the Finnish society, with multilingualism considered as a societal strength (Pyykkö 2017). The report recognizes a multitude of language education situations and issues that needed to be tackled. These included basic language education in schools, the need for proficiency in languages other than English in professional life and the need to provide language education to migrants. The report suggests that Finland's language education policy needed clarification in terms of its principles and objectives so that different levels could be coordinated. The report introduces several recommendations for action and sets the objective for every adult to have English language skills and for 'most people' to have some competencies in one or more languages. While the report presents several key figures related to languages as major subjects in universities, the recommendations for HE are scarce or subtle. Among other recommendations, it proposes that universities should develop new types of degree programmes, including those that combine language and content degree education, and take responsibility for language teacher education. The only language singled out for development was Chinese.

A follow-up report, *Language Reserve-Now!*, was published a couple of years later (Vaarala et al. 2021). It was based on a large survey of language teachers and several stakeholders and restricted to some topics that were present in Pyykkö's (2017) report. At the HE level, these topics

include only general language instruction and the development of language teacher education (Vaarala & al. 2021).

At the moment, seven Finnish universities out of thirteen (OKM) offer a variety of degree programmes in national and foreign languages in the faculties of Arts. Among them, Turku and Helsinki have the widest offering of language degree programmes (at BA and MA level):

Table 1. Language degree programmes in Finnish HE.

University	National languages	Foreign languages
Helsinki	Finnish, Swedish (Nordic Languages)	English, Ancient Greek, Ancient Middle Eastern Languages, Chinese, Czech, Expertise in Multilingual Communities (Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi and Urdu, Persian, Somali, Swahili, Turkish), Finno-Ugric Languages, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Latvian, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Polish, Russian (as L1 and as L2), South Slavic Languages, Spanish
Turku	Finnish, Swedish (Nordic Languages)	English, Chinese, Classical Languages, (Finnish and) Finno-Ugric Languages, French, German, Italian, Spanish
Jyväskylä	Finnish, Swedish, Finnish Sign Language	English; French, German, Russian
Åbo Akademi	Finnish, Swedish	English, French, German, Russian
Tampere	Finnish, Swedish (Nordic Languages)	English, German, Russian
Eastern Finland	Finnish, Swedish	English, Russian
Oulu	Finnish, Swedish, Sami	English, German

Table 1 presents an overview of the current situation of language degree programmes. Each programme consists of courses on advanced language skills such as academic writing, on linguistic knowledge such as language specific phonetics or grammar and on different fields of linguistics and translation studies such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics or history of translation studies. Finnish and Swedish are taught in seven universities out of nine (with the Universities of Vaasa and Lapland being the exceptions), each offering English, which is the most common language in Finnish schools. The other foreign languages offered are German (in six universities) Russian and

French (in four universities), and Classics, Italian and Spanish (in two universities). Other languages are mainly taught in only one university (Helsinki).

2. Methods and data

To describe possible changes in the relative sizes of different language degree programmes in Finnish HE, we chose two five-year time periods for detailed analysis, namely the years 2000–2004 (period 1) and 2017–2021 (period 2). The relative ‘size’ of any HE degree programme can be described in different ways (e.g. in terms of the number of students at different levels, the number of diplomas, etc.). In the current study, we chose to operationalize it as the number of new students in different language degree programmes at BA and MA level. Twenty years ago, the Bologna process had not yet been realized, and even at the BA level, first-year students were registered statistically as MA students. This means that the number of new BA students alone was not available for the first time period. Therefore, for the two datasets to be comparable, we analysed the joint numbers of new BA and MA students for both time periods. The number of new students in all degree programmes in Finnish HEs are restricted by quotas that are decided at the university level. These numbers do not therefore reflect a general interest in language subjects, as they would in countries where students can freely self-register for any degree programme. Within the limitations of the present study, it was not possible to analyse the number of new students who continued their studies after the first year or who graduated from different language degree programmes.

Our data are derived from statistics on the number of students in HE in Finland that are available from the statistics service of the Finnish National Agency for Education (Vipunen b). Because the total number of new university students varies from year to year, for instance because of differences in the size of age groups¹, in Table 2, we present the proportion of new language students out of all new students. During the years 2000–2004, it was possible to study Translation Studies in some languages as a major subject (e.g. major in English OR in English Translation Studies). The number of students in all Translation Studies programmes was combined with that of students majoring in the corresponding language to get a complete picture of the status of a given language. All language-related degree programmes that could not be associated with a specific language, such as general linguistics, speech sciences and logopaedics, were excluded from the analysis.

¹ For example, in 2000, the size of the 20–24-year age group was 327,230; in 2020, it was 308,410.

Table 2. Number of all new students and new language students and the proportion of language students in HE in Finland (2000–2004 and 2017–2021).

	<u>New students</u>	<u>New L students</u>	<u>% of L students</u>		<u>New students</u>	<u>New L students</u>	<u>% of L students</u>
2000	18948	1663	8,8%	2017	15060	1117	7,4%
2001	20103	1727	8,6%	2018	15717	1068	6,8%
2002	22616	1675	7,4%	2019	16137	1067	6,6%
2003	21860	1675	7,7%	2020	18009	1141	6,3%
2004	21932	1647	7,5%	2021	19086	1097	5,7%
mean	21092	1677	8,0%	mean	16802	1098	6,6%

As Table 2 shows, the average number of new university students in Finland was smaller in period 2 than in period 1, which was due to smaller age groups. We can also see that the average proportion of new language students out of all new university students was slightly smaller in the latter than in the former time period.

For both time periods, we set out to analyse in more detail the numbers of students who started to study languages as major subjects at Finnish universities (2000–2004: eight universities, 2017–2021: seven universities). We now move on to present the results of these analyses.

3. Results

To evaluate the importance of different languages in Finnish HE, we start by comparing the number of new language students in the two time periods (2000–2004 and 2017–2021). The summary of these numbers is presented in Figure 1.

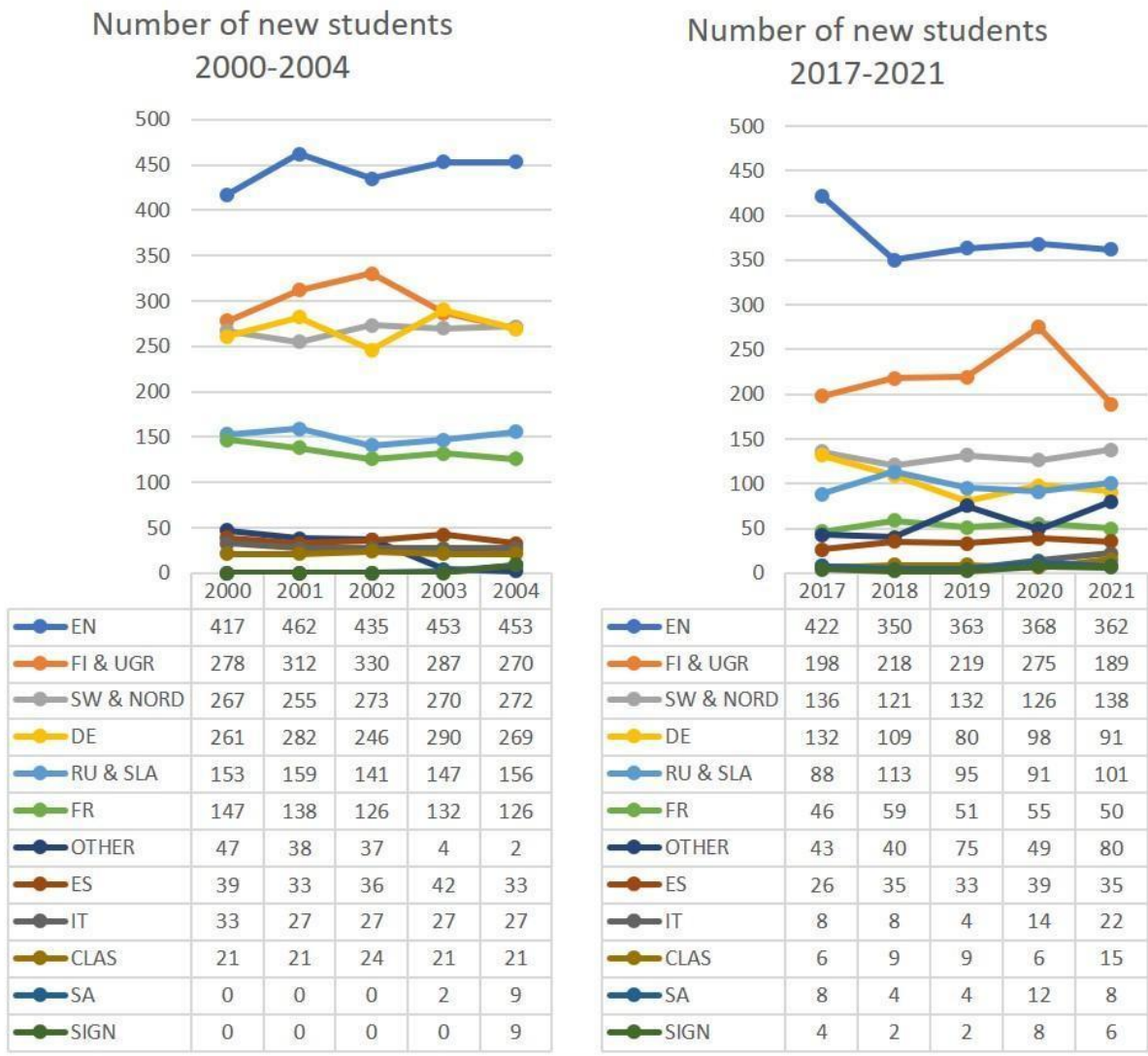


Figure 1: Number of new students in language degree programmes in Finland (2000–2004 vs. 2017–2021). EN = English and English Translation Studies, FI & UGR = Finnish and Finno-Ugric Languages, SW = Swedish, Swedish Translation Studies and Nordic Languages, DE = German and German Translation Studies, RU = Russian, Russian Translation Studies and Slavic Languages, FR = French and French Translation Studies, OTHER = Other Languages, ES = Spanish and Spanish Translation Studies, IT = Italian and Italian Translation Studies, CLAS = Classical Languages, SA = Sami Languages, SIGN = Finnish Sign Language

First, based on the figures, it can be stated that the total number of language students in Finland is now smaller than it was twenty years ago (mean 2000–2004: 3680, mean 2017–2020: 3117) and that the number of students of almost all individual languages has decreased considerably, with the exception of Spanish, for which the number of new students has remained at the same level. As shown in Figure 1, of all the language degree programmes studied in Finland, the number of

new students is consistently larger for English. Second, this comparison shows that twenty years ago, the languages studied in HE formed four distinct ‘size’ categories, while in recent years, the categories have not been as distinct.

For a more accurate overview of the relative sizes of different language degree programmes in Finland for both time periods, we transformed the absolute numbers of new students for each language into percentages of all new language students in a given year. The proportion of new students per language subject are depicted in Figure 2.

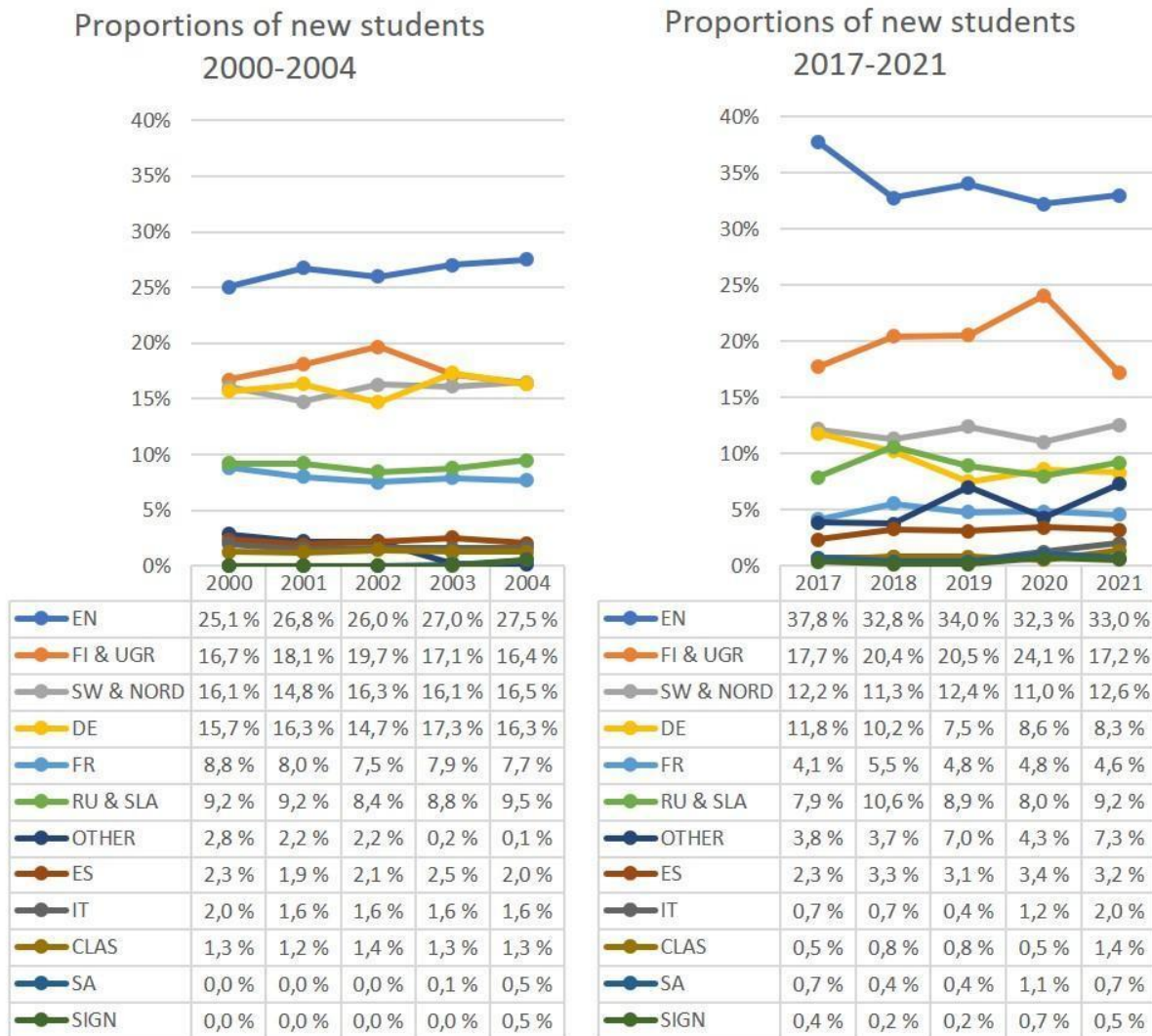


Figure 2. Percentage of new BA and MA students majoring in different languages in Finnish HE (2000 to 2021).

EN = English and English Translation Studies, FI & UGR = Finnish and Finno-Ugric Languages, SW = Swedish, Swedish Translation Studies and Nordic Languages, DE = German and German translation Studies, RU = Russian, Russian Translation Studies and Slavic Languages, FR = French and French

Translation Studies, OTHER = Other Languages, ES = Spanish and Spanish Translation Studies, IT = Italian and Italian Translation Studies, CLAS = Classical Languages, SA = Sami Languages, SIGN = Finnish Sign Language.

As Figure 2 shows, the proportion of students of English was the largest for both time periods. However, it is noteworthy that the percentage of English students has grown considerably larger over the years (on average, 26% in period 1 and 34% in period 2).

When we look more closely at the first years of the 2000s, we can identify a second group of relatively widely studied languages, which is comprised of Finnish (18%), Swedish and Nordic Languages (16%) and German (16%). The next group consists of two language degree programmes with less than 10% of all students, namely Russian and Slavic Languages (9%) and French (8%). The proportion of students in all other language degree programmes (Classical Languages, Spanish, Italian, Sami, Finnish Sign Language, Other Languages) was less than 5% during this first time period.

When we look at period 2, the only language remaining in the mid-range is Finnish, with an average of 20% of new students per year. The average proportion of students for Swedish and Nordic Languages dropped to 12% and that for German to 9%. This is a considerable change. The average proportion of students of Russian and Slavic Languages (9%) is similar to that of German and Swedish, whereas that of French is only 5%. The language degree programmes with the smallest proportion of students (<5% for Spanish, Italian, Classical Languages, Sami and Finnish Sign Language) remain the same as in period 1. The category of Other Languages has grown somewhat bigger (with an average of 5%), including languages such as Ancient Middle Eastern Languages, Arabic, Baltic languages, Chinese, Czech, Hebrew, Hindi and Urdu, Hungarian, Persian, Somali, Swahili, Turkish, Japanese, Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Portuguese, Polish and Slavic Languages. The incorporation of Chinese into this category of Other Languages, due to the creation of the department of Chinese at the University of Turku in 2021, may partly explain this change.

4. Discussion

In this article, we set out to compare the situation of language degree programmes designed for language specialist professions in Finnish universities twenty years ago with those of recent years. First, based on our results, we can conclude that languages that were very rare as major subjects twenty years ago (e.g. Sami, Hungarian and Baltic languages) remain rare today. The second

important observation concerns the overall picture; whereas twenty years ago, the languages leading to language specialist professions clustered over four distinct size categories according to the number of new students (Figure 2), in recent years, the categories are no longer so clear-cut. Instead, there is now one dominating language (English) and one mid-range language (Finnish), and all the other languages can be considered to be less studied languages.

In light of the figures presented above, we can conclude that English not only remains the most widely studied language in Finland but has also grown in importance over twenty years, with one-third of all language students now majoring in English. The proportion of future language specialists in Finnish—the first official language of Finland—has remained at the same level, but it is interesting to note that it is still considerably smaller than that of English. The proportion of new students of the second official language, Swedish, and of German—two languages that were relatively popular twenty years ago—has diminished considerably. The proportion of new French students has also decreased to a level at which French can now be characterized as a less studied language in Finnish higher education together with Spanish. In addition, Italian has become a rare language.

These changes in the number of new language students may reflect multiple changes in general attitudes to the importance of languages in society as well as in official language policies. If we look only at the absolute number of students, it is clear that it is affected by the size of the age group (see section 3) and the number of high school graduates in a given year. The changes in these numbers do not, however, explain the changes in the proportional sizes of different language degree programmes.

One of the main reasons for the loss of popularity of German and French lies in the reform of the matriculation exam in 2006 (see section 2.1), which resulted in a drop in the number of students choosing optional languages in upper secondary school. A similar drop was observed at the same time for Swedish, since it was no longer obligatory to include Swedish among the subjects in the matriculation exam. When the number of students is smaller in secondary education, there are fewer candidates for language degree programmes in HE, and this has led to pressure to reduce the quotas of new students for these programmes in HE. These quotas depend on local funding decisions made at the university level, as well as on national language policy decisions. National language policy measures of degree studies, especially those of Unifi (2015), narrowed down the role of languages with fewer students, thereby reflecting the declining trends in secondary

education. These measures may also have had an impact, at least indirectly, on how appealing language specialist studies appear.

Lastly, the changes observed in language specialist education can be explained by reasons related to societal and language attitudes, which are closely related to each other in a superdiverse world. One explanation for the popularity of English is its growing importance in Finnish professional life (for the current language needs of Finnish companies and for the dominant position of English, see Hyry 2021). The increasing popularity of English is in line with the expansion of English as a lingua franca in global and digital communication (cf. Liddicoat 2022). This expansion puts pressure on other languages that appear less attractive. It can also be argued that while the public consider English to be sufficient for ubiquitous transnational communication, other languages no longer have clear prestige or weight for social mobility. East Asian languages such as Chinese seem to be the exception.

While different measures have been taken in official language education policy to expand the variety of languages studied in primary and secondary education in Finland, these reforms have not led to an increase in the popularity of less taught languages. On the other hand, the intention of reforms concerning the matriculation exam has not been to diminish the importance of languages, although that is what the reforms have induced. As mentioned above, language education policy is tightly intertwined with general educational policy as well as with the societal attitudes and values that affect them (cf. Gueunier 2003). Therefore, even though the reforms did not aim to change language education policy, their influence on it is nevertheless obvious.

Conclusion

In this article, our objective was to identify which languages for language-specialist professions could be characterized as less commonly and more widely studied at Finnish universities across two different time periods. To attain this objective, we analysed the relative sizes of different degree programmes leading to language specialist professions in Finland twenty years ago and in the present, operationalized as the number of new students. Our most important observation is that the proportion of English students has grown. The worldwide trend that accentuates the significance of English seems to have affected Finnish national language education policy and its local implementation more than recommendations based on research.

Although the proportion of students of Finnish has remained approximately constant, the proportion of other language students has diminished. The situation has changed especially for

Swedish, German and French, which were more widely studied in the early 2000s than in recent years. We have been able to identify the reasons for this change from the reforms made in secondary education, notably in the structure of the final exams of upper secondary schools over the last twenty years. These reforms reflected changes in general educational policies as well as in language education policy. However, within the limitations of this study, we could not estimate the impact of other societal factors nor the effect of individual attitudes to language learning.

It is not yet possible to evaluate all the consequences of the 2020 HE student selection reform. However, according to a recent survey-based study of language teachers, it is one of the main reasons why the study of optional languages—particularly in upper secondary schools—is becoming even less popular than it was before 2020 (Veivo et al. 2021; Mäntylä et al. 2021). It is therefore anticipated that the decrease in the popularity of languages such as German and French will continue into the future as long as studying optional languages in upper secondary school is not rewarded for entering HE.

The recommendations of the first Finnish language reserve report underline the importance of offering a wide variety of languages in primary and secondary school (Pyykkö 2017) for promoting multilingualism in society. In light of our observations, it will be increasingly difficult to ensure that this continues in the future, since there are fewer language specialists trained in smaller languages, and as a consequence, there will also be fewer language teachers graduating from these subjects. One positive prediction is that the reduced number of language specialists in languages other than English may naturally increase their value in the labour market in the future. However, it is inevitable that the changes in the profile of language specialist education will eventually reflect the profile of the national language reserve. Whether this profile corresponds to the needs of society and the labour market remains an issue of future language policies and a matter to be researched by the labour market itself.

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