

“Keskustele parisi kanssa”

Speaking skills in the Finnish national core curriculum and oral exercises in *Spotlight 9*

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## **Abstract**

Speaking skills are considered increasingly more important in foreign language teaching, but textbooks, the most used teaching materials, do not always offer satisfactory exercises for training them. This thesis is a case study examining the objectives for speaking skills in the new Finnish national core curriculum for basic education and oral exercises in the *Spotlight 9* book series. The research was conducted by close reading the curriculum to identify the central objectives for speaking skills in grades 7-9 and conducting a content analysis of the oral exercises collected from the *Spotlight 9* books to find how the exercises meet the objectives related to the different focus areas. The findings show that the central focus areas of speaking skills in the curriculum are communication, cultural aspects of communication, communication strategies, and pronunciation. Of these focus areas, *Spotlight 9* includes most exercises for practising communication, consistently featuring numerous exercises that enable authentic communication, and cultural aspects of communication, while featuring little material for practising communication strategies or pronunciation. Compared to earlier research on the topic, the amount of communicative exercises was surprisingly large, while the small number of exercises for pronunciation and communication strategies was in line with earlier findings.

## **Tiivistelmä**

Suullisten taidot ovat nousseet vieraiden kielten opetuksessa tärkeään osaan, mutta oppikirjat, eniten käytetty opetusmateriaali, eivät aina tarjoa tyydyttäviä tehtäviä suullisten taitojen opetukseen. Tämä tutkielma on tapaustutkimus, jossa tutkitaan suullisiin taitoihin liittyviä perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteissa asetettuja tavoitteita vuosiluokilla 7-9 sekä suullisia tehtäviä *Spotlight 9* -kirjasarjassa. Tutkimusmetodeina toimivat lähiluku ja sisällönanalyysi. Tutkimus toteutettiin lähilukemalla perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet keskeisten suullisiin taitoihin liittyvien tavoitteiden tunnistamiseksi sekä analysoimalla *Spotlight 9* -kirjojen suullisia tehtäviä ja sitä, miten hyvin opetussuunnitelman tavoitteet niiden kautta toteutuvat. Opetussuunnitelman keskeiset suullisiin taitoihin liittyvät tavoitteet vuosiluokilla 7-9 liittyvät vuorovaikutukseen, viestintästrategioiden käyttöön, viestinnän kulttuurisiin piirteisiin ja ääntämiseen. Tutkimustulosten perusteella *Spotlight 9* -kirjoissa näistä sisältöalueista parhaiten edustettuja ovat vuorovaikutus, johon liittyviä harjoituksia kirjoissa on säännöllisesti ja runsaasti, sekä viestinnän kulttuuriset piirteet. Viestintästrategioihin ja ääntämiseen liittyviä tehtäviä kirjoista löytyi vähän. Aiempiin alan tutkimuksiin verrattuna kommunikatiivisten tehtävien määrä oli yllättävän suuri, kun taas ääntämiseen ja viestintästrategioihin liittyvien tehtävien pieni määrä oli linjassa aiempien alan tutkimustulosten kanssa.

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## 1. Introduction

Speaking has traditionally been a somewhat neglected area of foreign language education. This has started to change since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a more communicative approach to language teaching has become popular and speaking skills have become recognised as an important part of language proficiency. Nowadays, speaking skills and communication are considered core skills at the level of the Finnish national core curriculum. However, even as practising speaking the language is nowadays considered an important part of foreign language teaching, textbooks are still the most used teaching materials, and books and other teaching materials do not always offer satisfactory materials for training speaking skills.

This thesis is a case study that examines 1) how speaking skills are described in the new Finnish national core curriculum for basic education and 2) oral exercises in 9<sup>th</sup> grade English textbooks. The books chosen for this thesis are the three *Spotlight 9* books, published in 2017 by SanomaPro Oy. My research questions are:

1. What objectives does the new Finnish national core curriculum for basic education set for learning speaking skills in grades 7-9?
2. What kind of exercises does *Spotlight 9* offer for teaching and practicing speaking skills?
3. How do these exercises meet the objectives set in the curriculum?

I want to examine both the curriculum and textbooks because they both influence teaching practices. The national core curriculum sets the common goals and objectives for all teaching in Finnish schools, including several detailed objectives for each subject, and I am specifically interested in what objectives the curriculum sets for learning speaking skills in grades 7-9. Textbooks are, as mentioned, the most used teaching materials in Finnish schools, and as such, they have a large influence on what teachers end up teaching and how they approach objectives set in the curriculum. I want to approach the issue specifically from a teacher's perspective, paying attention to what the books have to offer to a teacher and whether there are shortcomings in the books that the teacher would have to compensate for.

In this thesis, I will first introduce some key theoretical concepts that influence current language pedagogy in Finland and discuss earlier research on textbook usage and the status of speaking skills in Finnish schools. I will then introduce my research methods and materials. In the analysis section, I will first analyse the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education and then, in light of those findings, analyse the data gathered from the *Spotlight 9* books. In the discussion section, I will

discuss the findings in a broader context, also drawing on earlier research. Finally, I will present a conclusion.

## **2. Theoretical background**

In this section, I will introduce relevant theoretical concepts that inform language teaching and teaching of speaking skills today: the conception of learning behind Finnish education policy; the currently reigning approach to language teaching; theoretical conceptions of speaking skills; and finally, the status of speaking skills and textbooks in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in Finland.

### **2.1 The social constructivist view of learning**

Constructivism, broadly speaking, is a philosophy of education that emphasises and focuses on how humans form meaning and construct social reality. The metaphor of construction embedded in the name refers to how the social reality is a product of the human mind and in a constant state of creation and reconstruction driven by interpretation and reinterpretation. (Siljander, 2014, p. 215) In a constructivist view of learning, the learner is an active subject who picks and chooses and moulds information and interprets it based on their inner schemes, and learning is an active process of constructing and creating knowledge. (Siljander, 2014, pp. 224-225)

Constructivist philosophy is realised in many different forms created and pioneered by different scholars. According to Siljander (2014), the different constructivist movements can be divided into broad categories of individual and social constructivist movements based on what they emphasise in their views of learning. (p. 216) Individual constructivist theories emphasise the meaning of mental processes, schemes, and self-regulation in learning and development. Social constructivist theories emphasise the social aspects of learning: learning and constructing knowledge are foundationally social, cultural and communal processes and phenomena. (Siljander, 2014, p. 217)

The Finnish national core curriculum does not explicitly subscribe to any single constructivist theory of learning. However, the curriculum includes a description of a view of learning that is clearly social constructivist in nature. I will discuss this in more detail in the analysis section.

### **2.2 Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), or the communicative approach, is the currently reigning approach to language teaching. Its origins are to be found in the late 1960s, but it started rising in popularity as an approach to teaching starting in the late 1970s. (Tergujeff, 2013). The history of language pedagogy is characterised by shifts in teaching methods caused by changes in

theoretical conceptions of language and views on learning. CLT is also a part of this continuum of changes, and its core principles are partially a result of scholars reacting to and rejecting old ways of teaching. The emergence of CLT is linked to some specific developments that were happening in the fields of psychology and linguistics in the 1960s.

On the psychology side, increasing critique of behaviourism (as an inadequate way of understanding the human mind) and a new focus on cognition and learning in the mid-1960s led to criticism of the then-popular audiolingual method, which was explicitly based on a behaviourist view of learning. (Stern, 1983) This criticism led to the rise of cognitive theory in language pedagogy. Proponents of cognitive theory rejected the core views of the audiolingual method: the behaviourist view of learning as building ‘correct’ stimulus-response chains was rejected as simplistic and newer learning theories started to replace it. Additionally, implicit learning strategies (which assume learning to happen more subconsciously and intuitively) lost popularity and gave way to explicit learning strategies (which view learning as a more cognitive and conscious process) (Stern, 1983, p. 402). Consequently, central teaching practices of the audiolingual method were also replaced: translation and using learners’ first language in class were restored to favour after being shunned by the more immersion-oriented methods, and the simple working methods of audiolingualism (mimicry, memorisation, pattern drills) started to be replaced with more intellectually demanding practice. These views and practices have lived on in CLT.

On the linguistics side, in early 1960s, criticisms of structural linguistic theory called the foundations of the current language teaching approaches of the time into question (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 153), as these approaches emphasized memorising grammatical structures and vocabulary. Early theories of communicative competence and a focus on communication in applied linguistics led to ideas to make communication the centre of language teaching curricula in schools. Thus, in the late 1960s British scholars such as Christopher Candlin and Henry Widdowson started to advocate for a new approach to language teaching: one that focused on communicative proficiency over mastery of structures. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Tergujeff, 2013) This approach remains the core of CLT.

CLT is a broad approach to language teaching and has no single text or authority to define it (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 155). However, its basic ideas and principles are widely recognised. As the name implies, communicative language teaching places emphasis on communication. Richards and Rodgers (2001) describe CLT as “an approach (and not method) that aims to *(a)* make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and *(b)* develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills [reading, writing, listening, speaking] that acknowledge the

interdependence of language and communication.” (p. 155) Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) summarised in their guide for pronunciation teaching that CLT is based on the notion of communication as the primary purpose of language, and therefore using language for communicating should be emphasized in language pedagogy (as cited in Tergujeff, 2013, p. 25). Richards and Rodgers (2001) summarised some core principles of CLT as such:

- Learners learn a language through using it to communicate.
- Authentic and meaningful communication should be the goal of classroom activities.
- Fluency is an important dimension of communication.
- Communication involves the integration of different language skills.
- Learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error. (p. 172)

In summary, CLT is a broad approach to language teaching, a “philosophy” that emphasises the importance of attaining communicative proficiency in a new language over the mastery of linguistic structures. CLT also emphasises communication as a tool of learning; as communication is the purpose of language, language should be used for communication in pedagogy. CLT does not rigidly prescribe a set of teaching practices that should be used in all teaching, but its core ideals lead to some working methods (pair work, discussions) being favoured over others (mimicry, pattern drills). CLT also emphasises the role and importance of learner interest: learners should be able to engage in authentic and meaningful communication to engage with the language.

As mentioned earlier, CLT is still the most prominent approach to language teaching around the world, including in Finland. Its prominence and influence can be seen in many places. Brand-new teaching guides (e.g. Tergujeff & Kautonen, 2019) follow and emphasize CLT principles. In my personal experience, the philosophy of CLT is alive and well among teachers, as advice along the lines of “being understood is more important than speaking perfectly” is often heard from teachers at schools and from instructors training new teachers. And, as I will further discuss in the analysis section of this thesis, the influence of CLT can certainly be seen in the current national core curriculum and in EFL textbooks.

### **2.3 Conceptualisations of speaking skills**

The theoretical foundation for our current conception of “speaking skills” is Canale and Swain’s (1980) oft-cited framework of communicative competence. Drawing on earlier theories of communicative competence and research in applied linguistics, Canale and Swain created a framework for use in second language teaching and testing where speaking skills, and other



communication skills, are divided into three categories: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence.

Grammatical competence, also called linguistic competence, is the “knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology.” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 29) Sociolinguistic competence is the command of “sociocultural rules and rules of discourse”, the ability to participate in interaction in ways that are culturally and situationally appropriate and the ability to interpret the intended social meaning from utterances (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). Strategic competence is the command of “verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30); these strategies include compensating for and circumventing unfamiliar words and structures, monitoring one’s own language use and repairing (correcting) when mistakes occur, and strategies for taking, keeping and ending a turn in conversation. Canale and Swain further divide these strategies into two main types: “those that relate primarily to grammatical competence ... and those that relate more to sociolinguistic competence” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30).

In this framework, the different areas of communicative competence are strongly interlinked; all three are necessary for a person to be able to engage in meaningful communication, and shortcomings in one area can be compensated for through proficiency in the other areas. Thus, speaking skills are also closely connected with other areas of language proficiency and not a separate set of skills that should be considered separate from other language skills.

Where Canale and Swain’s framework is the theoretical foundation for conceptualising communication and speaking skills, a more pragmatic framework for conceptualising and assessing speaking skills can be found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The CEFR, originally published in 2001, contains an influential framework that categorises language proficiency into six levels (Common Reference Levels), A1 to C2, which can be grouped into three broader categories of proficiency: Basic (A1-A2), Independent (B1-B2), and Proficient (C1-C2) Language User. The CEFR guides language teaching decision-making and curriculum work across Europe, including in Finland, and the Common Reference Levels especially serve as guidelines to what skills are considered necessary at each stage of language education.

The proficiency requirements to reach each of the Common Reference Levels are summarised in the global scale (CoE, 2001, p. 24). The descriptors for the different proficiency levels show that the CEFR framework is centred around communication: what determines which level a language

learner has reached is how fluently they can communicate in different situations and about different topics.

The CEFR describes language proficiency in terms of competences (which are “the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics that allow a person to perform actions” (CoE, 2001, p. 9)). These competences include general competences (knowledge, skills, existential competence, ability to learn) (CoE, p. 11) and communicative competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic; similar to Canale and Swain’s framework) (CoE, 2001, p. 13). Communicative competences are realised through performance of language activities: reception, production, interaction, and mediation, all of which can be performed in oral or written form (CoE, 2001, p. 14). A similar categorisation can be found in the Finnish national core curriculum, where language proficiency is classified into categories of interpretation (reception), interaction, and production. A slightly different categorisation of language proficiency can be found in The Common Reference Levels self-assessment grid (CoE, 2001, pp. 26-27), which divides language proficiency into categories of Understanding, Speaking, and Writing, with Understanding further divided into subcategories of Listening and Reading, and Speaking divided into Spoken Interaction and Spoken Production. These categorisations show two similar but slightly different ways to conceptualise speaking skills: as the oral forms of reception, production, interaction, and mediation; or as Listening, Spoken Interaction, and Spoken Production.

The CEFR also includes a table of qualitative aspects of spoken language use (CoE, 2001, pp. 28-29). This table is designed as a tool for assessing spoken performances. It focuses on five aspects of spoken language: range (breadth of vocabulary), accuracy (command of grammar), fluency (ability to speak comprehensibly at length), interaction (natural interaction with other participants in conversation), coherence (ability to create cohesive discourse).

#### **2.4 Speaking skills and textbooks in Finnish foreign language education**

Speaking skills have traditionally been a somewhat neglected area of language teaching in schools for various reasons. However, in recent decades, the rise of the popularity of the communicative approach has brought more speaking into classrooms. In addition, studies have indicated that students value speaking skills. Mäkelä (2005) summarised older findings such as: about 80% of Finnish adults “voiced the need for more oral English practice” (p. 9), students felt they did not learn to speak English well enough (p. 9), and students “regarded oral skills as one of the most important goals in language teaching” (p. 10). In his own student survey, he also found that a clear

majority of the surveyed upper secondary school students ranked learning to speak as the most important area of language learning (Mäkelä, 2005, p. 109). Nowadays, speaking skills are considered an essential area of language competence, and explicit teaching and practice to train them is recommended.

Textbooks play a large role in Finnish language education. A survey by Luukka et al. (2008) shows that textbooks and workbooks are the most popular teaching materials among foreign language teachers in Finland, as 98% of respondents reported using textbooks often and 95% reported using workbooks often (p. 95). Similarly, 97,8% of the Finnish teachers who answered The English Pronunciation Teaching in Europe Survey in 2010-2011 reported that they used textbooks in teaching (Tergujeff, 2012). In her dissertation on English pronunciation teaching in Finland, Tergujeff (2013) also observed that teachers usually follow the contents of textbooks quite closely; additionally, she points out that “exercise types and contents that are *not* present in the textbooks did *not* come across in teaching either” (p. 53). These findings show that not only are textbooks very common in foreign language teaching in Finland, they can also come to define the contents of teaching.

Recent literature recommends using interactive, communicative exercises to practice speaking; for pronunciation teaching, a balanced approach of teaching both segmental and supra-segmental features of speech is recommended. Previous research on language textbooks in Finland has shown some common shortcomings in how speaking skills are practised. Summarising recent research in language textbooks in Finland, Tergujeff (2019) stated that the prosodic qualities of speech, especially intonation, often receive little attention and practise and that many textbooks include very few exercises that enable free, open production of speech (p. 87). In her earlier study of pronunciation teaching materials in Finnish EFL textbooks, Tergujeff (2010) concluded that they “almost entirely lack explicit exercises in intonation, rhythm and connected speech” (p. 202). Mäkelä (2005) found in his dissertation that the amount of communicative, authentic, and interactive exercises in Finnish upper secondary school English textbooks is small, and the amount of pre-communicative exercises (exercises that do not enable authentic communication, e.g. imitation, reading aloud, strictly guided speech) is large. The contents of textbooks do not necessarily meet the objectives set for language education and the recommendations of contemporary ideas of language learning.

### **3. Methodology and materials**

#### **3.1 Close reading and content analysis**

This thesis is based on close reading and content analysis. Close reading is the practice of interpreting the meanings of a text through a detailed analysis of the text “based first and foremost on the words themselves” (McClennen, n.d.). Content analysis here means analysing the presence, meanings and relationships of certain themes or concepts in a text to produce a summarised description of the phenomenon (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka, 2006). This approach is similar to Mäkelä’s (2005) analysis of oral exercises in Finnish upper secondary school English textbooks.

The analysis was conducted through close reading of the current national core curriculum for basic education to identify the key objectives that the curriculum sets for students’ speaking skills, and then applying a content analysis of the *Spotlight 9* books: collecting all the oral exercises in the books and analysing the collected exercises to see how well they fulfil the objectives set in the curriculum.

#### **3.2 The Finnish national core curriculum and the *Spotlight* series**

The most recent Finnish national core curriculum for basic education (grades 1-9) was published in 2014. It has been implemented at schools in stages starting in 2016, with the final stage, implementing the curriculum in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, being completed in 2019. The curriculum includes broad objectives for what students should learn during their entire nine-year basic education and subject-specific goals for what level of competence students should achieve at different stages of their education in each subject. These objectives serve as the guidelines for teachers everywhere in Finland. In this thesis, I will focus mostly on the learning objectives for the A-syllabus of English in grades 7-9 but I will also discuss other relevant passages. The curriculum is only published in Finnish and Swedish, and all the English passages attributed to the curriculum that I use in this thesis are my own translations from Finnish to English.

*Spotlight* is a schoolbook series published by Sanoma Pro Oy and designed for teaching the A-syllabus of English in grades 7-9. The series was updated to respond to the objectives of the new curriculum in 2017. For 9<sup>th</sup> grade teaching, the series offers a textbook, a workbook, extra materials for the teacher, as well as a license to access digital materials online. This thesis only examines the print materials, not the digital content.

The exercises relevant to this thesis were chosen according to two criteria: a) The exercise includes explicit instructions for the students to speak in English, or b) The exercise is marked with a speech bubble symbol, which marks it as an exercise intended as a pair discussion, even if the exercise otherwise does not include explicit instructions to speak.

## **4. Analysis**

### **4.1 The national core curriculum for basic education**

In this section, I will present my close reading of the curriculum text, starting from foundational premises that influence education and understanding the curriculum, moving on to general objectives for language education and teaching English, and finally, examining the learning objectives for English in grades 7-9.

#### **4.1.1 Foundational premises: view of learning and conception of text**

The current curriculum is based on a social constructivist view of learning. The curriculum states that learning happens in interaction with other students, teachers and other adults as well as different communities and learning environments. (EDUFI, 2014, p. 17) Students are seen as active agents in their own learning who set objectives and solve problems both independently and in cooperation with others. Learning is considered a multifaceted phenomenon tied to the subject, time, and place of learning. These basic premises are reflected in the more specific objectives set for language education: interaction, participation, and acting in different situations and contexts are to be emphasized in language education.

Another founding premise relevant to this study is the conception of text. The curriculum subscribes to a broad conception of text: text means information expressed through verbal, visual, auditive, numerical, and kinaesthetic symbol systems and combinations thereof (EDUFI, 2014, p. 22). Texts can be interpreted and produced in many ways, including through speaking. This means that wherever the word text is used in the curriculum, it can also refer to speech, and objectives related to interpreting and producing texts also concern speech and speaking skills.

#### **4.1.2 General objectives of language education**

The curriculum outlines seven broad objectives for comprehensive competence, which students should develop through their entire basic education with the skills and information they learn from all different subjects. The second of these broad objectives, particularly concerned with culture and communication, and thus, language education, is relevant to this analysis. This objective (titled cultural competence, interaction, and expression) outlines the objective of language education as such: Education will support students in growing into versatile and skilled language users in both their mother tongue and other languages. Students are encouraged to interact and express themselves even with poor language skills (EDUFI, 2014, p. 21). This statement is in line with the

core ideas of communicative language teaching: using language for communication and interaction is essential, students should gain skills to express themselves in diverse ways, and errors and deficiencies in skill should be tolerated. Encouraging students to communicate even with poor language skills is considered especially important, as the notion appears several times in different sections of the curriculum.

The premise of language education, common to all language teaching in Finnish schools, is stated to be using language in different situations (EDUFI, 2014, p. 324). Language education should also provide students with the ability to make observations about texts and conventions of interaction in different languages. The importance of encouraging students to use language even if their skills might be poor is mentioned again as well.

#### **4.1.3 General objectives for teaching English A-syllabus in grades 7-9**

The description of the function of foreign language education and the general description of the English A-syllabus for grades 7-9 include some additional broad objectives related to using and practicing spoken English. Students should be encouraged to communicate in authentic environments, to use English in diverse communication, and dare to use their language skills (EDUFI, 2014, p. 348). One objective for language education in these grades is to deepen and elaborate on the skills students have already learned in lower grades.

The section describing the objectives for learning environments and working methods includes more specific objectives for using spoken English. For working methods, the curriculum emphasizes working in pairs and small groups and learning together in different learning environments (EDUFI, 2014, 350). The objective for language use is that it should be as proper, natural, and meaningful to students as possible (EDUFI, 2014, 350). This section also includes the explicit instruction that English is to be used whenever possible (EDUFI, 2014, 350). This is also implied earlier, when it is stated that difficult subject matters can be discussed in the school's instruction language if needed (EDUFI, 2014, 348).

#### **4.1.4 Learning objectives for English A-syllabus in grades 7-9 and final grading criteria**

Finally, the curriculum includes specific objectives for English A-syllabus language education and learning in grades 7-9. (EDUFI, 2014, 349) There are altogether 10 objectives, labelled T1-T10 (T for *tavoite*, *tavoite* meaning objective). The objectives most relevant to communicative competence

are divided into three categories, all including the label developing language competence: the ability to act in interaction, the ability to interpret texts, and the ability to produce texts. From these, I will focus on the objectives listed under the ability to act in interaction and the ability to produce texts. Connected to these objectives, for the final grading at the end of basic education, the curriculum also introduces the criteria for good competence (corresponding to the numerical grade 8) in each of these areas. These criteria are based on skill level B1.1 in the Finnish version of the Common European Framework of Reference (EDUFI, 2014, 351).

The category of the ability to function in communication includes three separate objectives (T6-T8) related to three different aspects of the ability to function in communication: communicating about various topics, taking initiative and using strategic skills, and cultural awareness in communication. (EDUFI, 2014, 349)

Objective T6 is to encourage students to participate in conversations about various topics relevant to their age and life experience, including topics and conversations where they need to express their own opinions. The criterion for a good grade is that the student can participate in conversations and express their opinions fairly effortlessly in everyday communicative situations. (EDUFI, 2014, 351)

Objective T7 deals with communicative strategies: it is to support students in taking initiative in communication, in using compensatory tactics, and in participating in meaning negotiations. The criteria for a good grade are that the student can operate actively at different stages of communication, verify that their message has been understood, circumvent or replace an unfamiliar word or rephrase their message when necessary, and negotiate over the meanings of unfamiliar expressions. (EDUFI, 2014, 351)

Objective T8 is culturally appropriate communication. The objective is to help students recognise cultural features in communication and participate in constructive intercultural communication. The criteria for a good grade are that a student can demonstrate their knowledge of essential rules of politeness and take into consideration some cultural conventions. (EDUFI, 2014, 352)

The category of the ability to produce texts includes only one objective. Objective T10 is directing students to produce text, both written and spoken, for various purposes, about general and relevant topics, paying attention to diversity in structures and good pronunciation. The criteria for a good grade are that the student can express the core message and some details about various topics; use a fairly broad vocabulary and range of structures, as well as some common phrases and idioms; and apply basic rules of pronunciation outside of practice. (EDUFI, 2014, 352)



To summarize all this, objectives for learning speaking and communication skills in grades 7-9 could be described as follows: Students should learn to communicate about various topics in different situations and contexts, and they should be able to express their own opinions; students should learn communicative strategies, especially compensatory tactics and negotiating meaning; students should learn and be able to follow essential cultural conventions of communication; and students should learn to use a broad range of grammatical structures and good pronunciation in speech. In the next subsection, I will examine how these objectives come through in the oral exercises in *Spotlight 9*.

#### **4.2 Oral exercises in Spotlight 9**

*Spotlight 9* is divided into six units, each of which is built around a text chapter (Text A) in the textbook. Every unit is structured similarly in each book. The textbook units are divided into the following sections:

- Log on (introduction to and revision of the topic and vocabulary of Text A)
- Text A, Listen and learn (listening comprehension)
- Chat (pair discussions)
- Grammar talk (introduction of the unit's grammar topic through pair discussions)
- Spotlight on... (introduction of a relevant aspect of culture in the English-speaking world)
- 5-7 B-texts, and
- Read more (excerpts from English literature).

The workbook and teacher's materials roughly follow this structure and, in addition, have some repeating structures of their own. The workbook includes exercises for every section of the textbook, plus vocabularies for the texts, a page dedicated to oral exercises in every unit, an explanation and summary of the grammar lesson(s) of the unit, and a self-evaluation page (Spotlight on learning) focusing on a different aspect of language skills in each unit. The teacher's materials, more a set of extra materials to use as needed than a guide for teaching, include a repeating set of extra exercises for some of the sections, plus materials for differentiating Text A for students with learning difficulties.

Following the criteria introduced in section 3.2 (p. 10), I collected 138 exercises in the textbook, 72 exercises in the workbook, and 79 exercises in the teacher's materials, for a total of 289 exercises

across all three books. In the following subsections, I will discuss how each of the objectives established in the curriculum is realised across the books.

#### **4.2.1 Communication and expressing opinions**

Communication is the most prominently appearing of the objectives established in the curriculum. Communicative exercises are consistently featured in several sections included in every unit. Many of the Log on sections include exercises where students talk about their own opinions about the theme of the unit; every Text A is followed by a page of pair discussion questions that proceed from recapping the text to more general discussion; the Chat sections are dedicated to rehearsing common expressions and structures to use in different situations; the Grammar talk sections offer a communicative approach to learning and practising new grammatical structures.

In addition to these repeating structures of the textbook, the workbook includes many interview exercises. The level of complexity in these exercises varies from simple yes/no questions to exercises with more open questions where the students need to express their personal opinions, and some exercises where the students take on different roles and come up with answers from new perspectives. There is one exercise (p. 79, E11+) and a few other miscellaneous instances where students need to present arguments for their opinions. The workbook also includes a few exercises that enable very open communication: the students are given a prompt (such as “share your opinion about studying in the final grade of lower secondary school”) and the rest of the conversation is left up to them. Arguing and open conversation prompts are mostly present in plus-exercises marked for more advanced students.

Overall, opinions seem to be the most thoroughly covered area of communication, as there are many exercises across different sections of the books that prompt students to express their own opinions about various topics. Communicating in different situations is practiced mostly in the Chat sections of the textbook, and students are occasionally instructed to pay attention to differences in communication style in different contexts (mostly when practicing politeness).

#### **4.2.2 Communication strategies**

Communication strategies do not receive much explicit attention in the exercises. One skill that is important in meaning negotiations and compensating is practised implicitly in many exercises: explaining a word in other words. The Log on sections in the textbook and teacher’s materials and

the extra exercises for the B-texts, found in the teacher's materials, include several exercises where students have to explain or guess a word through a definition or word association. For five out of the six units, the teacher's materials also include a Talking crossword, a pair exercise where students take turns explaining the given words in their own words to fill out a crossword puzzle. Other communication strategies mentioned as criteria for a good grade (verifying that the other person has understood the message, circumventing an unfamiliar expression, rephrasing), or other common strategies (asking for clarification, self-monitoring) are not mentioned, and these skills are also not implicitly practised in exercises such as the Chat exercises or the A/B-dialogues found in the teacher's materials.

#### **4.2.3 Cultural conventions of communication**

Cultural conventions of communication are mostly introduced and practiced implicitly. The Chat section in each unit of the textbook includes exercises where students talk with each other following a script and using given phrases appropriate to the situation. The situations include asking questions as a tourist and giving directions to a tourist, talking about your life to an exchange student, visiting a doctor, talking about the weather, and visiting a restaurant. In the workbook, every unit includes two exercises for practising conversational phrases: the student must use the appropriate sentence or phrase to respond to a clue. The phrases in these exercises are simple and polite.

Politeness is the one cultural aspect of communication that is practiced more explicitly. The Chat section in unit 3 is focused on practising how to sound polite, and in addition to the normal kinds of pair discussion exercises in other Chat sections, it includes practice in speaking with different tones and draws attention to the word "sorry". The workbook exercises also draw attention to politeness in a few occasions: one exercise (p. 201, E21) is about practising polite expressions to soften requests and negative statements, and one intonation exercise (p. 98, E25) instructs the student to use rising intonation to express interest and politeness.

#### **4.2.4 Pronunciation**

The number of pronunciation exercises in the books is very small (two to three per unit, 17 exercises altogether), but pronunciation is still featured systematically in every unit. For every unit, the teacher's materials include a pair exercise where a student must say a Finnish word or phrase in English with help from the IPA symbols; these exercises are the only ones where the IPA symbols are used, but they are also included for every word in every vocabulary. The workbook also

includes one exercise (p. 98, E23) where students need to identify which letter in a written word is not spoken aloud, drawing attention to the disparity between spoken English and its written representation.

In the workbook, every unit includes a page of oral exercises, one or two of which focus on pronunciation. The pronunciation exercises feature more practice of suprasegmental features of pronunciation than practice of sound segments. Only two exercises across all books focus on segmental pronunciation practice. These exercises focus on traditional problem areas for Finnish learners of English: the sibilants /z/ and /ʒ/, the affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, and the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ in unit 1, all sounds that are not used in Finnish; and the distinctions between /f/, /v/, and /w/ and the fortis-lenis plosive pairs /p/-/b/, /k/-/g/, and /t/-/d/ in unit 2.

The suprasegmental features of speech (e.g. intonation, stress, rhythm, tone) practiced in the workbook include rising and falling intonation and word and sentence stress. The use of intonation is practiced in different contexts: contrasting open-ended and close-ended questions, turning a statement into a question, tag questions, and as a tool to express interest and act polite. Word stress is practiced in two exercises, asking the students to first identify the stressed syllable (or “part”) in a set of words and then speak the words aloud. Sentence stress is introduced from two different perspectives: what words are not stressed in a sentence (prepositions, conjunctions), and what words need to be emphasized through stress.

#### **4.2.5 Self-assessment on speaking skills**

One important exercise from the books that is not included in my data but is closely relevant to the topic is the “Spotlight on learning” section of Unit 3 in the workbook (p. 120). This section includes a self-assessment form with which students can assess their own speaking skills. The form consists of eight statements, and students need to judge whether each statement applies to them almost always, often, sometimes, or never. The statements are:

- I have the courage to use English even if I’m not sure how something should be expressed.
- I can tell people basic information about myself and my life and ask for the same information from others.
- I can react sensibly in everyday situations (e.g. greetings, apologies, well-wishes).
- I am an active conversation partner.
- I know how to pronounce words.

- I understand that word stress affects meaning.
- I can change my speaking style in accordance with my conversation partner (e.g. whether the person is familiar or unfamiliar).
- I remember to say *please*.

This form draws attention to the core objectives for speaking skills expressed in the curriculum: using English bravely, being able to relay basic information and communicate in different situations, being able to use different registers and styles in different contexts, being an active conversation partner, speaking politely, and using good pronunciation. This assessment should help students identify the core focus areas in speaking practice and thus help them find what area to focus on in order to improve.

## 5. Discussion

Based on a close reading of the national core curriculum, the central focus areas related to speaking skills were identified to be communication, communication strategies, cultural conventions of communication, and pronunciation, each of them containing specific objectives for proficiency students should attain by the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Content analysis conducted on selected oral exercises showed that the *Spotlight 9* books include materials of varying quantity and quality for the different focus areas.

The findings show that communicating in various situations and expressing opinions are the aspects of speaking skills that receive the most attention in the exercises in these books. There are several exercises where students get to express their own opinions and use language fairly authentically. This seems slightly surprising in light of earlier research findings, where foreign language textbooks in Finland were mostly found to be lacking in communicative exercises. This might indicate that the influence of CLT is becoming more present in textbooks alongside general teaching practices and beliefs.

Less surprising is the handling of communication strategies in the exercises. The exercises only include one way to practise skills used in communication strategies, and no explicit attention is called to using them in interaction. This is probably due to two reasons. First, communicative strategies are usually considered to be something that people develop naturally through their own experiences in interacting with other people; Canale and Swain already point out that “such ‘coping’ strategies are most likely to be acquired through experience ... but not through classroom practice that involves no meaningful communication.” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 31) Second, communicative strategies are usually considered more useful and necessary in earlier stages of language learning. This is also reflected in the Finnish national core curriculum, where the learning objectives for grades 3-6 include more explicit and specific goals related to communication strategies (e.g. practising how to act when you can only speak a little (EDUFI, 2014, p. 220)). Even though communication strategies are something to consider in students’ final grading, teachers and publishers are probably operating under the fair assumption that these skills are something students have already attained through earlier teaching and life experience.

*Spotlight 9* contains very little material for teaching pronunciation, which is in line with findings in earlier research. As mentioned in the previous section, every unit includes two to three pronunciation exercises. While they are systematically included in the materials, their small number means that if a teacher leans heavily on the books’ materials in their teaching, pronunciation will not be practiced in class very often. Additionally, there is usually only one exercise per

pronunciation issue, which means that even issues that are widely known to be challenging for Finnish speakers (sounds that are not used in Finnish, word stress, sentence stress) might only be practiced once during the year. Good pronunciation is explicitly stated to be a learning objective in the curriculum, but with these books, offering a sufficient amount of material for pronunciation practice seems to be left up to teachers. The small amount of attention given to pronunciation seems to reflect a widely observed trend in language pedagogy: in the era of CLT, traditional pronunciation practice methods (which include lots of repetition and drilling) have fallen out of favour, and other, more communicative methods, have not taken their place to the same extent (Tergujeff, 2013, p. 24); in addition, native-like speech and pronunciation is not a common goal like it used to be in the past, which has led to some dismissal of the importance of pronunciation.

As was mentioned earlier, workbook exercises marked with a speech bubble are intended to be used as material for pair discussion. However, many of these exercises seem to function poorly as materials for practicing speaking skills. Tergujeff et al. (2019) introduce this problem with oral exercises: not all oral exercises are intended to develop speaking skills, some are simply used to practice vocabulary or structures in a different way (p. 99). Many of these exercises seem to fit the description: they are first and foremost grammar or vocabulary exercises and the speaking part seems to be an afterthought.

Additionally, many of these exercises come without any instructions for how to use them as discussion material. This means that unless the teacher comes up with creative ways to utilise them, these exercises will likely feature “pair discussion” only to the extent of students reading sentences out loud to each other. This kind of mechanical practice is useful to a limited extent: simply speaking the target language will naturally help in automatization of foreign sounds, for example, but mechanical practice without any explicit goals is not considered very helpful in developing speaking skills. In general, the current view is that the learner should know what they are supposed to be learning, as this awareness is believed to help direct the learner’s attention and advance learning (Tergujeff et al., 2019, p. 99). Considering this, these oral exercises that lack explicit instructions as well as recognisable goals and connections to developing communicative skills seem somewhat ill-conceived, and getting good use out of them is left up to the teacher.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine what objectives the current Finnish national core curriculum for basic education sets for learning speaking skills in grades 7-9, what kind of exercises the selected books offer for teaching and training these skills, and how the books function as materials that would help students and teachers meet the objectives. The theoretical background consisted of theoretical concepts that influence current language pedagogy in Finland and earlier research on textbook usage and the status of speaking skills in Finnish schools. The research methods were close reading and content analysis.

The central themes related to speaking skills in the curriculum were identified to be communication, communication strategies, cultural conventions of communication, and pronunciation. The *Spotlight 9* books contained exercises related to these themes in varying amounts: for communication and cultural conventions of communication, the books contained good amounts of practice material and explicit instruction that called attention to central issues; for communication strategies and pronunciation, the books did not contain as many exercises, and some of the central issues were left without explicit attention. As such, the books follow some common trends of foreign language textbook contents while subverting others: the overall small number of pronunciation exercises and lack of explicit attention to communication strategies are worldwide trends, but the number of exercises that enable authentic communication and the relatively larger number of pronunciation exercises focused on intonation and stress over segmental pronunciation exercises are exceptions to observed trends.

This thesis is naturally a very limited investigation of the reality of EFL teaching in Finland. Focusing on explicitly instructed book exercises excludes some common but “unspoken” teaching practices (such as listening and repeating vocabularies as warm-up and pronunciation practice) as well as any other teaching materials a teacher might employ to get their students to speak. This thesis is also a limited representation of the *Spotlight* books, as it is focused on one part of a three-part series, while the other parts could include more material in areas where this one seems to fall short.

In general, textbook analysis focused on issues of speaking and communication is an area that is worth more attention. Many of the earlier studies mentioned in this thesis were based on books that had been designed to respond to the requirements of the previous national core curriculum. Curriculum changes always prompt publishers to release a wave of new books to respond to new requirements, and it would be both worthwhile and interesting to examine how speaking and



communication are presented in books designed for a new, more digital era and how current Finnish schoolbooks in general meet the standards set in the national core curriculum.

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