

Finland: Initial Assessment for Intensive Finnish Language Courses

Type of provider

Espoontyöväenopisto, which is a part of Omnia Joint Authority, is an adult education institute providing liberal adult education. Liberal adult education is open to anyone, regardless of their age or educational background, offering a wide range of subjects and courses, which are not tied to specific degrees. The Liberal Adult Education Act (1998/632) aims to guarantee the equality and accessibility of education and foster

Objectives

Comprehensive language testing, which occurs before immigrants start intensive Finnish language courses. The pedagogical aim is to form groups of similar-level learners for the eventual courses. The students pay for the course and testing; liberal adult education is subsidised by the government, which keeps the fees low. Not integration training as such.

Assessment approaches

Initial assessment. The test consists of many parts, evaluating the learners' reading, speaking and listening skills and general comprehension for a sense of the overall language level. The test was originally developed by Testipiste; their test is more extensive and includes mathematics.

Target Group

Anyone intending to enrol in intensive Finnish language courses. Refugees and immigrants from various backgrounds (academic or non-academic, Finnish spouse etc.). Different tests are used for illiterate immigrants.

Potential transferability/ scalability

Comprehensive testing requires resources and assessors. Slow method. Cost may be an issue. Could further use technology and online testing.

However, quality testing ensures working groups and effective teaching. It creates a better learning environment, which makes it easier for the teachers. The students are more motivated and less likely to drop out.

Also works as a business model (the Netherlands).

Summaries or Basic elements of analysis

Tests prospective students' starting level before they enrol in intensive language courses. Based on the test results, suitable groups of similar-level learners are formed. Done by a liberal adult education institute, which is subsidised by the government; the initial testing receives no direct support. Not integration training, but integration plans may allow for language courses.

Introduction in keywords

- Initial Assessment for Intensive Finnish Language Courses
- Finland
- comprehensive language testing, which occurs before students start intensive Finnish language courses
- tests the overall language level (reading, speaking and listening skills, general comprehension)
- intended for immigrants from various backgrounds (academic or non-academic, Finnish spouse etc.)
- the aim is to form similar-level working groups for the eventual courses (different levels, fast or slowly proceeding courses)

5 areas descriptive text

Organisation and Description of the tool(s) (which skills are assessed)

A part of the larger multisector education provider Omnia Joint Authority, Espoontyöväenopisto is an adult education institute that organises liberal adult education. It offers a wide range of courses and subjects, which are not tied to specific degrees; teaching is open to anyone interested, regardless of their age or educational background. There are a number of language courses for immigrants. Specialised courses include courses for immigrants who are stay-at-home parents and illiterate immigrants.

Before prospective students start intensive Finnish language courses, they may take an initial test, which assesses their starting level. The idea is to gain a sense of the overall language level to better place the students into groups for the eventual courses, so that every student is in a group that is suited to their individual needs. Courses are offered at different levels, and they may proceed slowly or fast.

The comprehensive test measures students' reading, speaking and listening skills, and their ability to perceive the language. Laura Hartikainen, a Finnish second language teacher from Espoontyöväenopisto, works extensively with the test. Although some students may feel shy or unused to interviews, Hartikainen points out that the different parts of the test enable them to form an overall picture of the language level.

Implementation (how the tool is used, how the assessors are trained, how often it is used)

The test consists of different parts. First, an interview with a Finnish language teacher. After that, written exercises and reading comprehension. In the part of the test that assesses the learner's ability to perceive the language, exercises include recognising words, visually differentiating between words and figuring out a linguistic pattern. Hartikainen explains that many of the tasks are easy if you have studied languages before and know the Latin alphabet. If not, it is much more difficult. Some tasks are intended to be challenging: reading texts that start out easy, only to progress to these "very long, long Finnish words, like venäjänvinttikoirra [Russian wolfhound]", to test the students' resilience and give them the opportunity to show that they have mastered the alphabet. Other tasks include dictation, which consists of increasingly more difficult words, for example, the names of plants or birds. For a beginner, it's only natural to confuse, say, the letters J and Y, but this is discouraged at an intermediate level. Nevertheless, the focus is on practical skills rather than grammar.

The test itself was developed by Testipiste, who also trained the assessors. The testing that Testipiste currently carries out is more extensive than this initial testing, including mathematics. Hartikainen also mentions visiting the Netherlands to learn about the system the local 'Testipiste' uses. Unlike its Finnish equivalent, it is run like a business, and is not based on governmental or project funding.

It is not feasible to test every prospective student. The comprehensive language test is only used for students who intend to enrol in intensive Finnish language courses. Out of 1,000 students, 200 may be tested. However, the institute is increasingly looking into online testing.

Description of the target groups

As Hartikainen points out, immigrants come from a wide variety of backgrounds: stay-at-home parents, immigrants with Finnish spouses, immigrants with an academic background and illiterate immigrants. "We try to plan courses that serve different [kinds] of people, not only (...) different (...) groups, but also different kinds of learners," Hartikainen explains. There are courses at different levels, some proceeding fast, some slowly.

Immigrants who have not studied languages before may fail to see the point of an exercise where the idea is to explain something about a picture. Hartikainen tells us: "Sometimes when I see that, okay, this is not going to happen, [I'll just talk] about their family or something. (...) You have to be really sensitive [to the learner's needs]".

The test is not suitable for illiterate learners, as the amount of information it gives will be very limited.

Policy context

The students pay a fee for the course, the initial testing and the copy costs. However, the fees do not cover the actual costs. The Liberal Adult Education Act (1998/632) aims to guarantee the equality and accessibility of education and foster active citizens. As such, liberal education is considered an important part of lifelong learning in Finland, and receives subsidies from the government.

More could nevertheless be done to specifically help immigrants. For example, Helsinki offers free courses for stay-at-home parents, who can bring their children along to the courses. The initial testing receives no direct support or funding from the government, and there are some worries whether the procedure can continue in the future.

Although the courses are not integration training as such, some students may already have an integration plan that allows for studying Finnish, and may be entitled to benefits. Without the necessary language skills, it is difficult to enrol in vocational education.

Impact for assessees

The key moments of learning are more likely to occur during the course itself than during the initial testing. However, sorting students into suitable groups based on the results of the initial test undoubtedly leads to better functioning groups, because students end up on a course that fits their individual needs. This makes for more motivated students, who are less likely to drop the course.

The comprehensive testing may in itself also bring out the best in some students. Hartikainen prefers face-to-face assessment, interviews, “because [the assessees] orientate totally differently when they see somebody. And they take it (...) a little bit more seriously. That we are really studying here.”

Although some may express disappointment if the test result does not conform to their idea of their own language skills, it is unlikely to be a good idea to place a student in a higher-level group. Nevertheless, results are not black and white, but an indication of the student’s abilities and how they learn languages.

