An Unrealistic 'Mission Impossible'? Surveying Principals' Interpretations and Local Solutions for L2-mediated EFL in Finnish Adult Basic Education

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Abstract
Finnish Adult Basic Education (ABE) comprises primary and lower secondary education designed to improve adult immigrants' participation. Completing the entire syllabus and graduating with a Finnish basic education certificate is helpful for many adult immigrants without prior basic education in finding work, continuing studies at the upper secondary level, and applying for Finnish citizenship. English has potential utility for integration in the Nordic countries, yet adult immigrants' foreign language studies, and Finnish ABE, have been little studied. Recent government reports have indicated that ABE students seem to face exceptional challenges in their language studies, particularly their compulsory advanced syllabus English studies. The present survey study (n=35) targeting principals of ABE institutions examines institution-level foreign language education practices and principals' views on language education. The findings indicate that ABE English education is rapid-paced, relies on a local teaching language that students have only learned for a few years, and may lack suitable instructional materials and tests. Most principals are not convinced that their students graduate with English skills sufficient for language needs in working life or upper secondary education. Varied local interpretations of national guidelines lead to inequity in language learning opportunities. The findings highlight the significance of aligning materials and local and national policies with student diversity and the evolving role of English in the Nordics.

Keywords: adult basic education; local curriculum; EFL; Finnish education system; foreign language education; principal

1. Introduction

Finnish Adult Basic Education (ABE) is integral to Finland's approach to enhancing immigrants' integration. Through ABE, individuals without

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prior basic education can graduate with a Finnish basic education certificate, which is a valuable document when applying for citizenship, work, or study places in upper secondary education. ABE comprises subject matter comparable to Finnish primary and lower secondary education and includes advanced syllabus foreign language studies, which are compulsory. While other foreign languages could be offered, government reports (Hievanen et al. 2020; Jauhola 2012) have suggested that English is a prevalent foreign language subject in ABE and that these English as a foreign language (EFL) studies are exceptionally demanding for students.

The role of EFL in adult immigrants' integration to the Nordics merits more research attention than it has received. Second language (L2) mediated EFL, particularly in contexts where English is not commonly perceived as an integration language, is understudied, as is the language education in Finnish ABE. In recent government reports on ABE (e.g., Hievanen et al. 2020; Vesa and Vihervaara 2017), local languages feature more prominently than EFL, which is not surprising considering the widely accepted importance of local language competence for integration. At the same time, English dominates among foreign languages in the Nordics, and competence in English has great personal utility in education and work. Also, English being a global lingua franca, many adult immigrants have prior competence in the language, while comparatively few have learned local Nordic languages before migration.

Principals' crucial role in shaping the evolving landscape of language education has remained unexplored in the context of Finnish ABE. In Finland, while official guidelines (e.g., EDUFI 2017) acknowledge the pedagogical leadership inherent in ABE principals' work, studies indicate financial and human resources management often compete for Finnish principals' attention (Ahonen 2008). Further complicating this issue is the significant variance in principals' interpretations of their pedagogical role, which frequently diverges from teachers' expectations (Lahtero et al. 2021).

This study critically examines the role of English in Finnish ABE language education based on a 2021 survey of 35 institutions. The focus is on principals' views and institution-level choices regarding these language studies. The present study treats ABE less as a theoretical testing ground and more as a topical and relevant Nordic EFL education context, as it examines the current circumstances of these challenging and

societally significant English studies. The study addresses the following research questions:

- What do principals report about the implementation of foreign language studies in Finnish Adult Basic Education?
- How do principals view the effectiveness and challenges of said studies?

The findings show that English is the only foreign language subject offered in Finnish ABE. Principals are not convinced that the rapid-paced EFL studies sufficiently prepare ABE students for what upper secondary education or working in Finland demands of their graduates' English competency. ABE students have a more limited opportunity to learn English than Finnish lower secondary education pupils despite both groups acquiring equivalent qualifications upon graduation. The potential for inequality in English learning opportunities remains among ABE students, as practices vary among institutions regarding the number of EFL courses offered. Several principals suggest the national core curriculum is idealistic and impracticable, and many call for instructional and testing materials tailored for ABE English. Approaches such as translanguaging, where various languages are seen as resources in language learning, may not be extensively leveraged.

The paper starts by contextualising EFL in Finnish ABE in terms of trends in migration, the Finnish school system, the national core curriculum, English's role in the Nordics, and pedagogical leadership (section 2). Section 3 presents the research design and methodology employed. Detailed findings are presented in section 4, followed by a discussion and conclusions in section 5.

2. Background

The Nordic countries are preparing to face a growing need to support the integration of adult immigrants. Amidst a global trend of increasing international migration (UNDESA 2020), the growing net migration to Nordics (Peterson 2024; Statistics Finland 2023) poses new challenges for Nordic education systems. Many adult immigrants' skills and qualifications may not fully align with the demands of the surrounding society, making these individuals particularly vulnerable in such knowledge economies: UN Human Rights has been vocal about how untransferable skills, incompatible language competencies, and

unacknowledged qualifications jeopardise international migrants' participation all too often (OHCHR 2018). The Council of the European Union has also expressed concern over the persistent issue of limited educational access for EU adults with no more than a lower secondary education qualification (CEU 2016).

Ensuring everyone, adults included, has access to primary and secondary education is not only a human rights issue but also an effective inclusive investment from a societal perspective. Larja, Sutela, and Witting's (2015) statistical study suggests that investment into education pays off manifold: education is relatively strongly inherited in the Finnish immigrant population, meaning immigrant parents' level of education predicts their children's level of education with a relatively high level of confidence. In Nordic knowledge economies, Finland included, immigrants are overrepresented among the unemployed (Finnish Government 2021; MEAE 2016). Factors such as ethnic discrimination (see, e.g., Ahmad 2020) likely explain the disparity to some extent, but education still plays a significant role in finding employment. In the EU, completing upper secondary education tends to be the minimum requirement for transitioning successfully from education to employment (CEU 2016), and the Finnish Government (2021) noted recently that immigrants are underrepresented among upper secondary level students.

2.1 Finnish Adult Basic Education

Finnish Adult Basic Education, part of the education system often lauded for its equity and exemplary performance in international ratings (e.g., Thrupp et al. 2023), is essential in Finland's strategy to foster the integration of adult immigrants without prior basic education. Free basic education, regardless of student age, is a constitutional right in Finland (Finlex 1999), and all immigrants, including asylum seekers, can freely apply for study places (OKM 2023). In contrast to basic education for children, municipalities are not obligated to organise ABE (OKM 2014: 28); consequently, ABE institutions comprise a mixture of municipal and private actors (Vipunen 2024a). The number of students in ABE has more than doubled in the last decade, from approximately 2,000 students in 2013 to 5,100 students in 2023 (EDUFI 2019; Vipunen 2024b).

The impact of Adult Basic Education is considerable for adult immigrants without prior basic education. Firstly, ABE allows students above the Finnish school leaving age of 18 to complete studies equivalent

to those in lower secondary education (EDUFI 2017), which is typically required to access upper secondary level education (OKM 2023). After graduation, ABE students should possess the necessary knowledge and skills to pursue upper secondary level studies or find work in Finland (EDUFI 2017). Another key objective of ABE is to foster the development of local language skills (EDUFI 2017). International immigrants to Nordic countries rarely speak Nordic national languages as a first language; for instance, between 2012 and 2021, approximately 98% of foreign background immigrants to Finland were classified as 'foreign-language speakers'[1] (Finnish: *vieraskielinen*), said statistical term indicating that their first languages did not include Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi (Statistics Finland 2023).

Reports by the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) and its independent sub-agency, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FEEC), suggest that English is currently a typical advanced syllabus foreign language subject in Finnish ABE (Hievanen et al. 2020; Jauhola 2012; Vesa and Vihervaara 2017). While providing English seems to be a common choice, language education practices can still vary at the institutional level: the national core curriculum for Finnish ABE (EDUFI 2017) enables providers to plan language education at their institutions according to local and national needs. While designing their local curricula, education providers can choose which foreign language subjects to offer and determine the number of courses offered for each language subject (EDUFI 2017: 123–124). How local and national language needs have been perceived at the institutional level and what choices have been made have remained mostly unknown. Prior research is limited to unrefereed census-based reports by Hievanen et al. (2020), Vesa and Vihervaara (2017), and Jauhola (2012), and language education is discussed in these reports only to a limited extent. What these reports have demonstrated, however, is that some ABE teachers perceive EFL as an

[1] The term 'foreign-language speaker' corresponds to the translation of Finnish *vieraskielinen* as used in the referenced statistics (Statistics Finland 2023). The Finnish term is also found in the core curriculum for ABE (EDUFI 2017), various government reports on ABE (e.g. Vesa and Vihervaara 2017), and a government integration glossary (TEM 2021). While 'foreign-language speaker' can serve a euphemistic function and potentially conflate with terms like 'immigrant' (see Taylor 2019 for a related discussion), this paper is committed to using the term transparently and precisely to avoid such issues.

excessively demanding subject for their students (Hievanen et al. 2020; Jauhola 2012).

Finnish Adult Basic Education differs from lower secondary education in having a phase-based structure instead of grades. ABE studies comprise an introductory and a final phase (EDUFI 2017), consisting of courses with 28 lessons each. While more limited learning goals can be set on a personal basis (students can complete individual phases or courses), in practice, the final phase is the core of ABE, while other phases enable it if otherwise unattainable. EDUFI (2017) prescribes that graduating with a basic education certificate entails the successful completion of the final phase, and as the contents of instruction in the final phase must fulfil the educational objectives set in the national core curriculum, it follows that competence demonstrated during the final phase is critical as teachers give final assessments. According to the national core curriculum (EDUFI 2017), if a student is to complete the basic education syllabus and graduate from ABE with a basic education certificate, their final phase studies must include at least one advanced syllabus foreign language. At the same time, the studies must include at least 20 language courses, at least four of which must be mother tongue and literature[2] courses (EDUFI 2017: 53–54).

2.2 English as a foreign language in the Nordics

Like Nordic national languages, English is a first language for only few immigrants arriving in Nordic countries (Peterson 2024). However, it is a global lingua franca, and many Nordic residents, immigrants and non-immigrants alike, find a common language in English, having learned it as a second or foreign language. This adds to English's complex and evolving role in present-day Nordic countries (e.g., Peterson and Beers Fägersten 2024). While not a national language in any Nordic country, English has dominated as a foreign language subject since World War II (Strang 2024).

Recent Finnish studies (Laitinen et al. 2023; Pyykkö 2017) have demonstrated English's growing permeation and still increasing utility in education and the labour market. Research indicates language ideologies

[2] *Mother tongue and literature* is a language subject encompassing several alternative syllabi including *Finnish or Swedish as a mother tongue and literature* and *Finnish or Swedish as a second language and literature*. Other languages such as Sámi, Finnish Kalo (Romani language), and sign language may also be studied under this subject (EDUFI 2017: 124–142).

in the Nordics may lag behind the evolving linguistic landscape. Tholin (2014) points out the crucial role of English in admission to further education in Sweden, and Krulatz and Dahl (2021) found that the importance of English for refugee-background adults is downplayed in Norway. In the Nordics, immigrant students may be systematically disadvantaged if integration is falsely equated with proficiency in the local language (Krulatz and Dahl 2021) or if immigrants' English education relies on a local majority language and monocultural norms as reference points in educational objectives and grading criteria (Tholin 2014). Krulatz and Dahl (2021) conclude that a lack of English proficiency and resulting limited access to further studies may lead to refugees being limited to non-expert professions regardless of their own preferences and abilities.

2.3 Inclusive implications of local actions in language education

Thomas and Breidlid (2015) propose instructional materials and syllabi should be more inclusive of students' diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and call for critical examination of educational policies and practices to ensure they do not perpetuate social inequities but enhance educational opportunities regardless of cultural background. Mustonen et al. (2021), on the other hand, emphasise the importance of recognising and leveraging adult immigrants' pre-existing skills. Their study suggests that Western educators often struggle to accurately assess immigrants' competencies, particularly for immigrants without formal education backgrounds (Mustonen et al. 2021).

Within national guidelines such as the core curriculum for ABE, local actors shape educational policies. Svensson's (2021) ethnographic study shows how school principals could implement significant changes to local policies within the confines of national guidelines, having first recognised the need to re-evaluate languages in education. Over six years, two Swedish principals successfully integrated a translanguaging approach into a multilingual school's policy, promoting practices that supported diverse student language development (Svensson 2021: 76–90). However, previous studies on pedagogical leadership indicate such interventions might not materialise consistently in integrative education: Lahtero et al. (2021) found that Finnish principals interpret their pedagogical leadership variably and that teachers and principals often hold divergent views of principals' pedagogical roles. According to Ahonen (2008), financial and

human resources management require much of Finnish principals' attention, which may cause pedagogical leadership to remain secondary.

3. The present study

This mixed-methods study examined the local implementation of foreign language studies in Finnish Adult Basic Education and principals' views through a questionnaire featuring closed- and open-ended items. This section describes the survey process, provides rationales for the methodological choices, and discusses the limitations and strengths of the chosen approach. The section concludes by addressing ethical and privacy concerns.

Up-to-date statistical information from the Finnish education administration reporting portal Vipunen (2024a) was used to determine the sample frame of 75 educational institutions that had organised ABE during the school year 2020–2021. Survey items (see Appendix) were then designed to address the research questions (see section 1) and yield measurable variables and qualitative data. The finished items included true–false items, multiple-choice questions, statements evaluated using five-step scales, and open-ended questions (Dörnyei and Dewaele 2022: 29–35). The items were designed to be as unambiguous and concise as possible while avoiding loaded questions. The survey design employed conditional branching informed by filter questions (Dillman, Smyth and Christian 2014; Lavrakas 2008) to increase item relevance and reduce total response times. To disambiguate the respondents' task, principals were asked to consider only the school year 2020–2021 when responding unless otherwise requested in a specific survey item. Furthermore, to increase the response rate, potential respondents were approached using various channels and later reminded of the survey. During the analysis, measures of central tendency were used to establish an overview of the current state of ABE language studies. For open-ended items, emergent themes were highlighted using manual, inductive coding. The thematic content analysis was conducted in Finnish, the original language of the responses. Where responses to open-ended items are discussed, they have been translated into English for this article by the author.

As Dörnyei and Dewaele (2022) note, few surveys can be made compulsory, and the possibility of biased self-selection remains when responding is voluntary. The present study did not achieve full coverage (assuming the sample frame was established accurately). With 35

respondents and a population of 75, the response rate is 47%. While the rate approaches 50%, generally considered the lower limit of a reasonable response rate (Gillham 2008, cited in Dörnyei and Dewaele 2022), the lack of complete coverage should be considered when drawing generalisations from the sample to the population. It should also be noted that the small sample may not be able to capture the full diversity in ABE language studies and that the sample size varies item by item due to conditional branching used in the questionnaire form (as well as respondent self-selection). On the other hand, the responses that were received seem to be relevant: 34 out of 35 respondents reported they were the principal or head of the division responsible for ABE (Q2, n=35), and 32 out of the 35 institutions represented in the data had provided final phase studies during the school year 2020–2021 (Q4, n=35). Furthermore, the makeup of the sample appears to be representative of the population in terms of size, location, and type of institution (see Tables 1 and 2 below). The sample includes institutions from all regions of Finland and all types and sizes of institutions. Adult education tracks at general upper secondary schools are underrepresented in the sample, as are institutions with fewer than 60 ABE students.

Dörnyei and Dewaele (2022: 7) point out that surveys elicit data about the respondent, not objective facts about actual circumstances. Each survey response reflects, at best, each respondent's interpretations and beliefs about facts, sometimes even what the respondent would like to think they believe (Dörnyei and Dewaele 2022: 10). The subjectivity of the responses has been considered during the analysis, particularly for the attitudinal (Dörnyei and Dewaele 2022: 6–7) items Q15–Q21 at the end of the questionnaire; those items are more personal, and any desire to please (Dörnyei and Dewaele 2022: 10–11) the researcher or the eventual audience of the study is likely the greatest there. In fairness, online surveys are more likely to elicit honest opinions than other approaches due to their enhanced anonymity (Dörnyei and Dewaele 2022).

Table 1: Measures used to evaluate sample representativeness in terms of student number and geographical region[3] (N=75, n=35)

	Target population	**Completed sample**
Number of ABE students per institution		
first quartile	12.00	17.00
median	36	42
mean	68	81
inter-quartile range	79.50	117.50
Geographical region of the institution	% (frequency)	% (frequency)
Southern Finland	30.7 (23)	22.9 (8)
Western and Inland Finland	22.7 (17)	25.7 (9)
Eastern Finland	18.7 (14)	22.9 (8)
Northern Finland	10.7 (8)	11.4 (4)
Southwestern Finland	9.3 (7)	8.6 (3)
(Finnish) Lapland	8.0 (6)	8.6 (3)
Total	100 (75)	100 (35)

The research was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and in adherence to current ethical guidelines by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) and EU data protection legislation. Informed consent was obtained, participants were informed of their rights, and their privacy was protected rigorously during data collection, handling, and storage. The responses were analysed in group form to ensure respondent anonymity, apart from open-ended items where each respondent was given a unique, randomised pseudonym (P1–P35).

[3] The geographical distribution is based on the operating areas of Finnish Regional State Administrative Agencies (AVI 2024). A more granular classification was avoided to maintain respondent anonymity, given their small numbers. Hievanen et al. employed the same well-defined six-region scheme in their 2020 report on ABE (Hievanen et al. 2020: 53), and for the same reason.

Table 2: Measures used to evaluate sample representativeness in terms of type of institution (N=75, n=35)

	Target population	**Completed sample**
	% (frequency)	% (frequency)
folk high school	34.7 (26)	40.0 (14)
general upper secondary school for adults	17.3 (13)	17.1 (6)
vocational college	13.3 (10)	8.6 (3)
adult education track at general upper secondary school	13.3 (10)	2.9 (1)
basic education school	12.0 (9)	14.3 (5)
other, such as adult education centre	9.3 (7)	17.1 (6)
Total	100 (75)	100 (35)

4. Findings

This section presents the results, which are contextualised regarding the national core curriculum and previous studies. Section 4.1 addresses the local implementation and circumstances of language education in Adult Basic Education, while section 4.2 focuses on principals' perceptions of the current state of ABE foreign language education.

4.1 Final phase foreign language studies at ABE institutions

Firstly, the foreign language offerings in ABE seem to be predominantly restricted to English. During the school year 2020–2021, all institutions (100%) in the sample offered advanced syllabus English studies, with no other advanced syllabus foreign languages available (Q10, n=32). This finding aligns with earlier Finnish research across different educational levels (Pyykkö 2017: 24–46), which showed a high proportion of advanced syllabus English learners in primary schools (~90%), lower secondary education (>99%), general upper secondary schools (~99%), and that approximately 93% of Finnish vocational education students study English.

When this finding is juxtaposed with data from another survey item, a notable pattern emerges. At two institutions, students were reported to have studied their first language (L1) as an advanced syllabus foreign language (Q8, n=31). Given the earlier result that no other languages were offered apart from English, this suggests that English L1 speakers were not always exempted from English lessons in ABE. According to EDUFI (2017: 50–53), such exemptions can be granted to students with comparable prior studies or competencies through a competence test while still allowing them to earn a basic education certificate.

Number of courses offered and duration of foreign language studies

The total number of offered final phase foreign language courses varied from institution to institution, the mean being 9.3 (Q11, n=29), more than the eight courses suggested in the national core curriculum (EDUFI 2017: 149–155). The most typical number of foreign language courses was ten (by eight out of 27 institutions). Considering a minimum of 20 language courses are required to graduate from ABE with a basic education certificate (see section 2.1), the heterogeneity in the number of foreign language courses may be indirectly contributed to by the varying practices regarding exemption from second national language studies (Q7, n=31). At 42 per cent of ABE institutions, all foreign-language speakers are exempted from second national language studies. In comparison, 39 per cent of the institutions exempt some, and 19 per cent exempt no such students Q7, n=31). The exemption from second national language studies is based on Section 18 of the Finnish Basic Education Act concerning 'special teaching arrangements' where completing the entire syllabus would be 'unreasonable for the pupil in view of the circumstances and prior learning' (Finlex 1998b).

The duration of the foreign language studies affecting final assessment is shorter in ABE than in Finnish basic education (Q9, n=30). Typically (see Table 3 below), final phase studies in ABE last 1.5–2 school years (17 out of 30 institutions), while at ten institutions, they take 1–1.5 school years (Q9); in Finnish basic education, the final assessment is based on grades 7–9 in lower secondary education (EDUFI 2020), which typically take three years to complete.

Table 3: Reported typical final phase duration for ABE students who are foreign-language speakers (Q9, n=30)

Typical duration for final phase	**% (frequency)**
1–1.5 school years	33.3 (10)
1.5–2 school years	56.7 (17)
2–2.5 school years	3.3 (1)
2.5–3 school years	6.7 (2)

Starting level testing practices

The practices vary in starting level testing as ABE students transition into the final phase: 12 (out of 32) institutions test all students in some way, 11 test a portion of students but not all, and 9 test none (Q13, n=32). English competence is tested for by 78 per cent of institutions in transition phase testing (Q14, n=23). However, English is only the third most common tested competence behind language of instruction (~96%) and mathematical competence (~91%) and is followed by learning skills (~22%) and second national language competence, which is tested for at the start of the final phase by a single institution (Q14, see Table 4 below). The national core curriculum (EDUFI 2017) lacks specific instructions on how starting level testing or transition phase testing should be conducted (regarding, e.g., skills or competencies to be tested); however, the EDUFI website links to a freely available set of starting level testing material (Tredu 2023) for English, Finnish, and mathematics, produced by a pan-institutional project in 2016–2019. In the national core curriculum, EDUFI states that a student entering the final phase should have sufficient skills and knowledge and that the starting level for each student must be determined as their personal study plan is laid out (EDUFI 2017: 13–14, 36–37, 50–51, 123). In 2020, Hievanen et al.'s report recommended that EDUFI start designing testing material to be used when students transition to the final phase, listing English, Finnish, and mathematics as potential competencies to be tested (Hievanen et al. 2020: 138).

Table 4: Competencies assessed in final phase starting competence testing, showing percentage and frequency of respondents testing for respective competencies (Q14, n=23)

Competencies assessed in starting competence testing	**% (frequency)**
language of instruction	95.7 (22)
mathematical competence	91.3 (21)
English	78.3 (18)
learning skills	21.7 (5)
second national language	4.3 (1)
foreign language other than English	0
other subject / other competence / don't know	0 / 0 / 0

Teacher qualifications

The survey responses indicate that foreign language courses in Finnish ABE are typically taught by teachers who meet the national qualification requirements (Q12, n=35); in 30 out of 35 institutions (85.7%), the foreign language teachers are qualified. The percentage seems relatively low in the Finnish context, as Taajamo and Puhakka's (2019: 20) report showed that 96% of the teaching personnel in Finnish lower secondary education are qualified. Finnish legislation imposes qualification requirements for subject teachers that include the completion of pedagogical studies but also a master's degree, as well as at least 120 credits of studies in the main teaching subject and 60 study credits in other teaching subjects (Finlex 1998a). It should be noted that principals were asked to disregard any possible short-term substitutions when responding to this survey item.

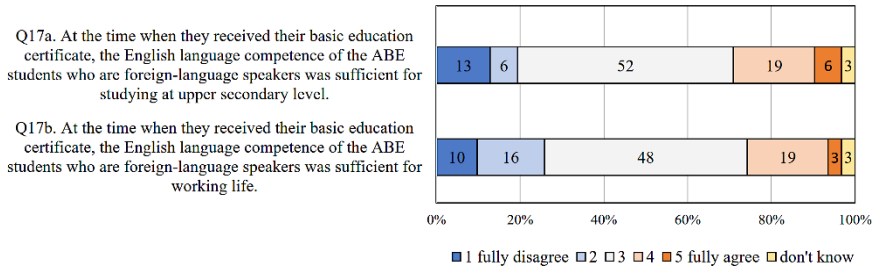
4.2 Principals' views on language education

This section presents principals' perspectives on language studies in Finnish ABE. The discussion explores principals' views on the quality and content of language courses, necessary adjustments, and potential support interventions at the national level.

Overall, principals did not strongly agree or disagree that their graduates' English competence is sufficient for work or studying at the

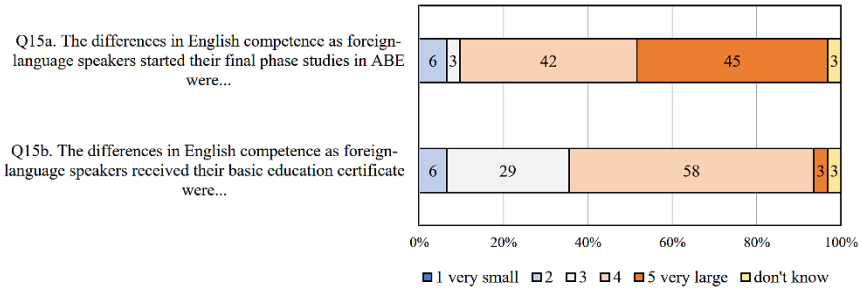
upper secondary level. On a scale of 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree), the average response to whether graduates' English competence is sufficient for upper secondary studies was 3, with only two respondents fully agreeing (Q17a, n=31, see Figure 1 below). Similarly, only one respondent fully agreed that graduates' English competence is adequate for working life, with a mean response of 2.9 (Q17b, n=31). These results suggest that principals are not entirely convinced that ABE is successful in its educational task regarding English, as the overall aim of ABE is to facilitate transitioning to further education or employment (EDUFI 2017).

Figure 1: Sufficiency of foreign-language speaking ABE students' English competence as perceived by principals



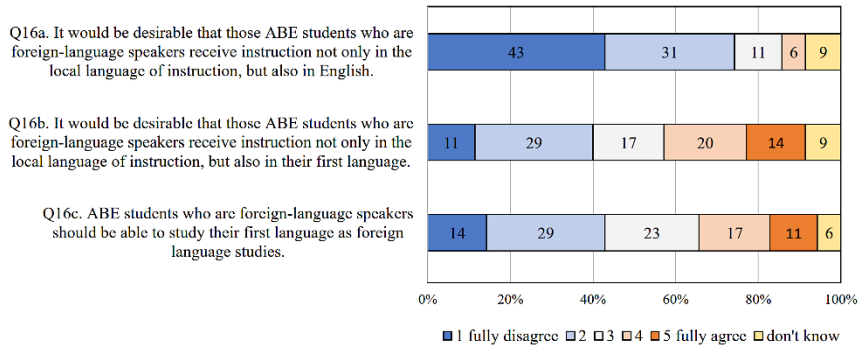
Additionally, principals assessed the heterogeneity of students' English competence at two stages: the start of the final phase and at graduation. Initially, the perceived heterogeneity was high, with a mean response of 4.3 on a scale of 1 (very small) to 5 (very large), but this decreased to 3.6 by graduation (Q15, n=31, see Figure 2 below). The combined results indicate that while there is a perceived increase in the homogeneity of students' English competence by graduation, overall confidence in the adequacy of their English skills for future needs remains lukewarm.

Figure 2: Principals' responses regarding perceived heterogeneity in student English skills



Foreign-language speakers (see section 2 for a discussion on this term) account for 95.5% of ABE students (Q5 and Q6, n=35). In 19 of the 35 institutions, foreign-language speakers comprised 100% of the student population (Q5 and Q6). When asked about the media of instruction (languages employed in classroom teaching), most principals (34 out of 35) reported that their institution uses Finnish only, and one institution uses both Finnish and Swedish (Q3, n=35). Therefore, foreign languages are not currently used as media of instruction in Finnish ABE. Principals were asked (Q16, n=35) to agree or disagree with two items regarding the use of non-local languages of instruction (see Figure 3 below). When it was suggested that ABE students should be able to study using English as an additional medium of instruction complementing local languages of instruction, on a scale from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree), the mean of responses was 1.8 (Q16a). The mean of the responses was 3 when principals reacted to the suggestion that students' first languages could be used as additional languages of instruction (Q16b). The results indicate that principals are unwilling to welcome foreign languages as instructional languages. This is unsurprising as local languages of instruction are set up as the norm, although not exclusively so, in Section 10 of the Finnish Basic Education Act (Finlex 1998b). Furthermore, EDUFI instructs education providers via the national core curriculum that ABE should 'support the student's growth […] towards membership of Finland's linguistic and cultural community' (EDUFI 2017: 28, my translation), which seems to encourage the varied use of local languages.

Figure 3: Principals' responses regarding languages of instruction and students studying their first language as a foreign language subject



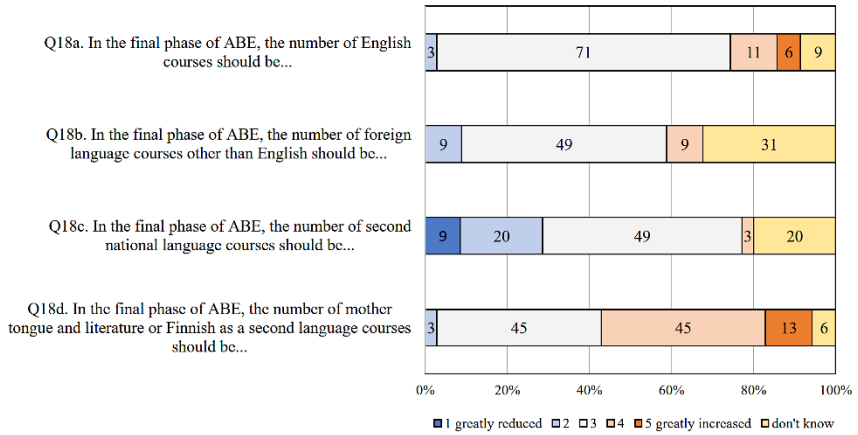
Overall, principals were neutral on whether foreign-language speakers should be able to study their first languages as foreign language subjects in ABE (Q16c, n=35; see Figure 3 above); the mean of responses was 2.8 on a semantic differential scale from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree). Notably, five respondents fully agreed with the proposition, while four fully disagreed. The survey item was designed in response to an EDUFI report (Jauhola 2012), which recommended enabling ABE students who are foreign-language speakers to replace their foreign language studies or second national language studies by studying their L1 (Jauhola 2012: 83). The steering group responsible for the survey-based (n=52) EDUFI report described the language syllabus in Finnish ABE as 'very burdensome' (Jauhola 2012: 83, my translation) for foreign-language speakers and suggested that supporting ABE students' L1 studies would be a systematic way to diversify Finland's language reserve. In the present study, one principal (P26) indicated that students might benefit from formally studying the L1s and that their first languages could, at least, be used as languages of instruction in social studies. However, another respondent (P6) identified an ethical problem, as the students' linguistic backgrounds are so varied that it would be challenging to incorporate the L1s comprehensively as media of instruction or as language subjects. This respondent thought such changes would potentially lead to inequality among students:

> Teaching one's first language would be important, but organising that is challenging, because just this year, there are 33 languages. Supportive instruction has been organised for the most prominent language groups in cooperation with certain

> organisations. Here, too, the challenge will be equality because it will not be possible to organise in all languages [sic] (P6).

Principals were satisfied with their current language course numbers (Q18, see Figure 4 below). When principals were asked to consider whether the number of English courses should be changed (Q18a, n=35), the mean of responses was 3.2 on a scale from 1 (greatly reduced) to 5 (greatly increased). The mean for foreign language courses other than English was 3 (Q18b, n=34). Concerning second national language courses, principals were typically slightly more supportive of reducing courses than increasing them, the mean being 2.6 (Q18c, n=35). The mean for mother tongue and literature courses was 3.6 (Q18d, n=35).

Figure 4: Principals' responses regarding changes to the number of language courses



Responding to the open-ended items Q19–21, some principals said they must consider students' educational burden when choosing which language subjects to provide. One principal (P26) suggested that English courses should be shifted towards the later stages of ABE studies because English studies might interfere with Finnish learning in the introductory phase. This and several other responses portrayed the language subjects as competing for course allotment and suggest a need for careful planning in ABE language education, e.g.:

> Teaching English in the introductory phase is helpful, and the students find it meaningful. However, it has been established that when there is a great need to

> practice Finnish letters and basic writing skills, it is better to start English by teaching oral skills. Reading and writing English is practised more only once Finnish vowels have settled in (P26).

> I have been mulling over whether Swedish should be omitted entirely for students of immigrant backgrounds, i.e., they would be automatically exempted from Swedish. Currently, this is not the case; some foreign language-speaking students study Swedish in addition to Finnish and English (P32).

> Many students who lack sufficient basic education/skills from their home country enter the final phase with such poor skills that they must focus on the essentials, and the optionality of languages, for example, remains secondary. Practically speaking, this means focusing on Finnish as a second language and English. For most students, it would quite simply be harmful to expand the number of languages taught in this phase (P6).

While some principals indicated they saw the current contents of instruction and the curriculum as adequate, others thought that the national core curriculum was too vague and that its learning goals were idealistic and unachievable by ABE students, e.g.:

> ABE goals are set very high for immigrants. For example, one theory course does not help one achieve the same skills as in compulsory basic education for minors. Could we admit this fact and change ABE so that it would better serve to improve the employability of adults in cases where the adult is not seeking to continue their studies? (P2)

> The curriculum is an unrealistic 'mission impossible' and is, currently, based on equal opportunities, not reality […] getting a certificate is an unrealistic and painful path for many, also for teachers (P3).

According to some principals, commonly available testing materials would help ABE institutions achieve better learning results in language education, and many principals indicated that having shared, nationally unified contents and materials of instruction would support them as they provide language studies, e.g.:

> Clarity, there should be a standard nationwide policy and materials, books […] uniform materials that correspond to the ABE curriculum regarding language. There is very little material for English, for example (P5).

> It must be considered that prior foreign language education is nearly non-existent for most students, and clear, nationwide course contents and materials of instruction [should be] given for, for example, 6–8 compulsory courses (P34).

Many principals saw solutions to improving language education in changes to the funding system. They suggested, for instance, that repeated courses should also count towards funding (P28) and that a study credit-based system would be better than the current course format (P3). However, the responses did not detail the mechanisms by which these interventions would improve the language studies.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This section reviews key findings while suggesting potential interventions and discussing promising directions for future research. The study identified key characteristics and discrepancies in advanced syllabus foreign language studies in Finnish Adult Basic Education. The exclusive offering of English as a foreign language subject in ABE reinforces the language's position as an auxiliary integration language, while the findings reveal that ABE principals share teachers' concerns regarding advanced syllabus English studies being overly challenging (Hievanen et al. 2020; Jauhola 2012) and are not convinced these studies sufficiently prepare ABE graduates for language needs in further studies or work.

ABE English is characterised by highly individualised learning pathways and abbreviated duration. The effectiveness of foreign language studies may be compromised (Cummins 2000) by the use of a recently acquired medium of instruction (typically Finnish). Principals also mention the lack of suitable testing materials and textbooks. Instructional materials used in ABE should consider the diversity among the student population without monocultural assumptions or Anglocentric biases (Tholin 2014; Thomas and Breidlid 2015). To uphold the constitutional right to basic education and maintain quality standards, governmental authorities should ensure the availability of appropriate materials.

The perceived challenges in English studies may partly stem from the disparity between the realities of ABE and children's lower secondary education. Teacher training and the core curriculum may foster unrealistic expectations of equivalency between the two educational settings. Considering the changing and complex role of English (Peterson and Beers Fägersten 2024), the rising trend in net migration to Nordics (Peterson 2024), and the fact that integrative education could lag behind changing immigration trends (Lilja and Vaarala 2015; Mustonen et al. 2021), future studies should investigate how well teacher training equips English teachers for ABE and the potential need for additional training.

Additional training and other interventions might not materialise if principals do not acknowledge the necessity of such measures or if they do not recognise their roles as pedagogical leaders (Lahtero et al. 2021). Svensson's (2021) study demonstrates that as interpreters of language needs and guidelines, principals wield significant influence in coordinating language education. The findings indicate that principals often maintain compartmentalised views of languages reminiscent of Krulatz and Dahl's (2021) results, which found the importance of English was downplayed. Many principals saw languages as competing for room in syllabi. A more holistic translanguaging approach (see, e.g., Juvonen and Källkvist 2021), viewing languages as interconnected resources, might enhance outcomes.

The idealistic, vague, and impractical national core curriculum (as described by principals) would likely benefit from more concrete examples of implementation. The core curriculum grants educational institutions significant flexibility in organising language studies based on perceived local and national language needs, which sometimes results in inequitable practices. Differing durations result in unequal learning opportunities between lower secondary education for children and ABE despite both leading to equivalent qualifications, and varied exemption policies and course offerings lead to inequality in learning opportunities between ABE students at different institutions. Current policies also often result in institution-wide exemption policies from second national language studies, though decisions should be made at the individual student level (Finlex 1998b). Aligning the curriculum with the practical language needs graduates face is essential to meet ABE's educational tasks (EDUFI 2017), and the funding systems should incentivise sustainable and ethical solutions that promote student well-being and high educational outcomes. Given the wide range of potential solutions allowed by the core curriculum, the scarcity of research on Finnish ABE is concerning. Without adequate evaluation, effective practices in language education may remain unrecognised and underutilised. As it is, the core curriculum results in uncontrolled experimentation with ABE students as test subjects.

Governmental actors should also ensure that instructions and documentation regarding ABE adhere to the highest standards of anti-discrimination, transparency, and clarity. Misleading or inaccurate language can negatively impact decision-making. During the study, it was noted that terms such as 'immigrant', 'foreign-language speaker', 'mother

tongue', 'second national language', and 'foreign language' often lack precise definitions and transparency in the national core curriculum. Future publications should avoid using euphemisms and conflation (e.g., Taylor 2019), and the discourse should be situated in realism. Authors drafting such documents and partaking in educational discourse should consider viewpoints such as racialisation (Ennser-Kananen 2021), abyssal thinking (García et al. 2021), and deficit discourses (e.g., Cushing 2023) to avoid similar pitfalls.

Future research should explore the language ideologies associated with ABE English and examine English's role as a non-local integration language in the Nordics. Investigating how these ideologies are propagated and how teachers perceive students' language needs are promising avenues for research. Studies should also assess how Finnish ABE graduates navigate diverse language demands in educational and professional settings. Additionally, examining how students' varied linguistic repertoires are leveraged as learning resources could provide valuable insights for the development of educational policies and instructional materials.

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Appendix: Survey items[4]

Q1. Type of educational institution (multiple choice: adult education centre / basic education school / folk high school / general upper secondary school for adults / adult education track at general upper secondary school / vocational college / other, what)

Q2. Are you responsible for ABE as principal, head of a division or similar title? (yes / no)

Unless stated otherwise, the following questions concern the 2020–2021 school year:

Q3. What was the language of instruction used in ABE? (multiple choice: Finnish / Swedish / other, which)

Q4. Which of the following phases of ABE did your institution organise? (multiple choice: literacy phase / initial phase / final phase / other, what)

Q5. How many ABE students studied in your institution?

Q6. How many of your ABE students were foreign-language speakers?

Q7. In the final phase of ABE, were some or all students who are foreign-language speakers exempted from second national language studies? (multiple choice: yes, all were / yes, some were / no / don’t know)

[4] The survey items were translated from Finnish to English by the present author.

Q8. In the final phase of ABE, did some or all students study their first language as an advanced syllabus (A syllabus) foreign language? (multiple choice: yes, all did / yes, some did / no / don't know)

Q9. How long did a foreign-language speaker typically take to complete the ABE final phase? (multiple choice: less than ½ a school year ('SY') / ½–1 SY / 1–1½ SYs / 1½–2 SYs / 2–2½ SYs / 2½–3 SYs / more, how many / don't know)

Q10. In the final phase of ABE, which languages were provided as advanced syllabus (A1 syllabus) foreign language studies? (multiple choice: English / Spanish / French / German / Russian / other language 1, which / other language 2, which / none / don't know)

Q11. For each advanced syllabus foreign language offered in the final phase,

a. How many were compulsory?
b. How many were optional?

Q12. Were the foreign language courses in ABE taught by a formally qualified subject teacher (disregarding such possible occasional cases where a non-qualified substitute teacher taught them)? (multiple choice: yes / no / don't know)

Q13. Did your institution use testing of starting competence at the start of the final phase of ABE? (multiple choice: yes, for all students / yes, for some students / no / don't know)

Q14. Which of the following were targeted in the testing of starting competence at the start of the final phase? (multiple choice: English competence / mathematical competence / other foreign language competence / competence in the language of instruction / learning skills / second national language competence / other subject competence, which / some other competence, which / don't know)

Q15. Please choose the option that best corresponds to your views on a scale of 1 to 5 (five-step semantic differential scale between 'very small' and 'very large' with the option 'don't know')

a. The differences in English competence as foreign-language speakers started their final phase studies in ABE were
b. The differences in English competence as foreign-language speakers received their basic education certificate were

Q16. Please choose the option that best corresponds to your views on a scale of 1 to 5 (Likert–semantic differential hybrid scale between 'fully disagree' and 'fully agree' with the additional option 'don't know')

a. It would be desirable that those ABE students who are foreign-language speakers receive instruction not only in the local language of instruction but also in English.
b. It would be desirable that those ABE students who are foreign-language speakers receive instruction not only in the local language of instruction but also in their first language.
c. ABE students who are foreign-language speakers should be able to study their first language as foreign language studies.

Q17. Please choose the option that best corresponds to your views on a scale of 1 to 5 (Likert–semantic differential hybrid scale between 'fully disagree' and 'fully agree' with the additional option 'don't know')

a. when they received their basic education certificate, the English language competence of the ABE students who are foreign-language speakers was sufficient for studying at the upper secondary level.
b. when they received their basic education certificate, the English language competence of the ABE students who are foreign-language speakers was sufficient for working life.

Q18. Please choose the option that best corresponds to your views on a scale of 1 to 5 (Semantic differential scale between 'greatly reduced' and 'greatly increased' with the additional option 'don't know')

a. In the final phase of ABE, the number of English courses should be
b. In the final phase of ABE, the number of foreign language courses other than English should be
c. In the final phase of ABE, the number of second national language courses should be

d. In the final phase of ABE, the number of mother tongue and literature or Finnish as a second language courses should be

Q19. Should the contents of ABE final phase language courses be changed? (multiple choice: yes, how / no, why / don't know)

Q20. Which national-level decisions or changes would improve the prospects of ABE institutions in carrying out and improving language teaching? (open-ended)

Q21. Other comments and feedback (open-ended)