

# WHAT IS THE RANGE OF SUPPORT FOR FINNISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN WEST MICHIGAN?

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The principal objective of this paper was to find out about the range of support that is provided to Finnish language learners in the West Michigan area. The availability to maintain the mother tongue in a foreign land can sometimes seem like an insurmountable task, especially if resources are lacking. This study used an ethnographic method of interviews, observations, and conversations with Finns living in the West Michigan area. The most prevalent resource that most of the interviewees wanted was more time and/or financial ability to travel to Finland for longer periods of time and to do so more often. Watching films and/or DVD's in Finnish was the most popular resource requested. The findings conclude that most Finns in the area are generally satisfied with the resources they have, but that time and money do play integral roles in the availability, or the lack, of many of the resources.

**Keywords:** resources, Finnish, language, range of support, ethnography

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What is the range of support given to Finnish language learners in West Michigan?

By

Taru Nieminen

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Bilingualism and the Global Community**

With the world well into the age of a global community, it is time for learners of all ages to embrace the age of bi-literacy. The ability to communicate in more than one language can only enhance a person's view and experience of the world. That is not to say that as long as an individual has a concept of different cultures existing in the world she couldn't be successful in the ever-growing globalization of the 21<sup>st</sup> century without actually being able to converse in two languages. Dual language learning and bilingualism have been a hotly debated issue for decades. Some argue that learning two languages at once only makes it difficult for a child to communicate in either language successfully, but others argue the complete opposite: children who learn two or more languages simultaneously have an advantage over their peers in many aspects of language learning, brain development, and task completion and even are less susceptible to Alzheimer's (Krashen 2010; Dreifus, 2011). However, for a child to become equally bilingual in both languages, requires a great deal of effort and resources. Furthermore, as François Grosjean noted in his book *Bilingual, life and reality*, "Bilingualism is not the burden or the problem it has been made out to be by some, but neither is it the complete bliss that others would have us believe" (2010, p. xvi). This study concentrated on the

part of it not being the absolute greatest oddity in the world, but a constant and normal way of life with many drawbacks; yet being able to offer as many, if not more, rewards and cultural experiences only available to a bilingual person.

This ethnographic study examined the resources and the range of support that are available for a child to become truly bilingual in both Finnish and English in the United States, and specifically in the West Michigan area. For the purpose of this study, resources are labeled as any source of supply, support, or aid, especially one that can be readily drawn upon when needed. Range of support refers to the extent to which, or the limits between which, variation is possible, and how a person, family, establishment, institution, etc. supplies and provides things necessary for existence [for language learning to occur] (Merriam-Webster Online, 2012). Although the study mostly concentrated on the bilingual side of the language and its resources, the study does involve other knowledge based ideas which enable us to survive in our West Michigan Finnish society and since ethnography is defined as a portrait of a people and their habits collected through fieldwork, this would then need to involve all aspects of life. These aspects include, but are not limited to, for example,

the “many of the rules and principles we unconsciously follow (how to greet someone, what is the common good, when to speak, whom to follow) [and] are based on cultural learning that is transmitted to us, often without [an] awareness on our part” (Harrison, 2010 p.15).

Harrison (2010, p. 176) connects with the following: “Language is what makes society possible, by binding humans together into groups;...it serves as a token of ethnic identity and belonging, as visible and obvious as ritual scarring.” This is so true: even if visiting

Disneyland in California; you can pick out the Finns, not just by their attire, but by the spoken word, as Finnish is one of a kind in the Finno-Ugric language families.

The most common way to become bilingual is for a parent to teach a child the parent's native language. This of course would not be the official language spoken in the country the child is living in. Being bilingual involves many aspects of one's life. For example, when a person moves to a foreign country and as most often is the case, the language of that new homeland generally becomes the language mostly spoken during everyday business transactions, the new language does start to "take over" one's native language in many ways. This happens whether one intends for it to do so or not. It is a natural occurrence and after a while, a person might even start to dream (day or night) in the new "home" language. The choice of language can also affect decision-making biases and the emotions felt when the foreign language is selected (Keysar, Kayakawa & An, 2012). When a person has different feelings about the same thing, but thinks differently when something is said in a certain language or a certain way, the phenomenon is known as the framing effect (Sedivy, 2012). A blogger named Al stated in response to Sedivy's *Discovery* magazine's online article: "Hm, I am bilingual and I do tend to curse in my non-native language, whereas in my native language I never do!" The decision-making biases are covered in the study conducted by Keysar et al. and reveal that "the framing effect disappears when choices are presented in a foreign tongue" (2012, p.1). Yet, in many instances, a second language learner can even be dismissed from jury duty due to the prejudices of many towards a non-native English speaker. However, there have been studies that indicate that when a person thinks in a foreign language, they incur less bias (Keysar et al., 2012). This begs for a question to be

raised that bilingualism should then be considered an advantage and a valuable resource in a jury duty situation and many other situations, instead of the reverse. The perception in the United States that “speaking English is valued for its perceived link with liberty, freedom, justice and wealth” and in contrast bilingualism is a “characteristic of the poor, the disadvantaged, and the unassimilated immigrant and... even that other languages are sometimes seen as linked to terror, injustice, poverty, and other societal problems” (Baker, 2006, p. 385).

### **Purpose**

This study includes the results of the research which was conducted via parent and student interviews, observations, conversations with Finnish language learners, education databases (ProQuest), and personal experiences. The study explains the range of support which is given to Finnish language learners in West Michigan. This portrait of people delves into the many different types of support parents give their children while living in a country in which their {parent(s)} native language is not widely spoken. Most people who are bilingual agree that knowing two or more languages is an advantage. Alison Motluk (2002) borrowed Charlemagne when she proclaimed that “to have a second language is to have a second soul” (p. 34). As a qualitative study, the purpose of this thesis research was to find out the different resources used but at the same time not to disregard any one type of resource as invalid. As Servet Celik (2007) so aptly put it: “not all educational concerns emanate from variables that can be gauged with numbers or analyzed through statistical procedures.... [rather] some problems call for an evaluation through the appraisal of merit, value, or worth of a phenomenon” (p.103).

## **Chapter descriptions**

The study is presented in four more chapters as follows: chapter two is a literature review of ethnographic studies as well as the benefits of bilingualism. It also delves into the very important aspect of language preservation, another hotly debated issue in today's society. Some people believe that there should be one universal language, so business transactions can be dealt with easier so as to not to have any misrepresentations or misunderstandings. Chapter three is a description of the study; how the study was conducted, the setting, introduces the participants and the researcher, as well as discusses the instruments and processes of data collection. In an ethnographic study, the setting is wherever the language is spoken and/or where the resources are. The next chapter delves into the actual results of the study and gives the reader a picture of the ethnographic study conducted with all the possible (mentioned by participants) resources found for Finnish language learners in the West Michigan area. The last chapter is an in depth discussion of the results and possible future implications of the findings in the study. As I researched bilingualism, multilingualism, and the available resources, I found dozens of blogs about the subject as well as a nice amount of books, newsletters, and websites on the subject. If you are interested in books or articles, my suggestion would be to simply enter "bilingualism" on the search bar and start reading; I was definitely intrigued and surprised by the results.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Language Preservation and Ethnography

Preserving one's language heritage is usually an individual choice, although in some instances, the pressure to either preserve or not can be overwhelming. It is a constant struggle for people who are living in a rural community to preserve their native language in an area where they might be the only one speaking that particular language (Fighting a linguistic landslide, 2001). However, we must be reminded that "keeping one's heritage language is every person's right" (K. David Harrison, 2010, p. 177) and with that being said, how *do* we preserve that right? With the information age and the internet, the resources might seem to be plentiful, but the learners, children and adults alike, are not afforded holistic and authentic experiences with the language. For example, there is a fabulous website called [www.USASuomeksi.com](http://www.USASuomeksi.com) ([www.USAINFinnish.com](http://www.USAINFinnish.com)), yet it is mostly relevant only to those living in the particular area of Florida where it is published. Susanna Suhonen (2008) gives credit for Finnish language preservation to the many *Suomi-koulut* (Finnish Schools) that have sprouted around the North American continent and around the world to maintain the Finnish language skills of immigrant Finns and their families. Finnish Society ([http://www.suomi-seura.fi/site\\_v3/](http://www.suomi-seura.fi/site_v3/)) provides backing for Finnish Schools around the globe through memberships which includes, but is not limited to, monetary support, representation in government, books, website links, and seminars about the Finnish language for teachers, students, and parents. Unfortunately, there is a dilemma to preserve one's specific native language for countless immigrants who move to the United

States, as the American society does not always treat non-English speakers with a gentle hand. Celik (2007) found that the Korean speaking parents he interviewed felt that learning to speak English was much more important than preserving their native language with the children. The parents opted to speak only English to their children; even at home although it has been shown through research how important and beneficial keeping one's heritage language can be (Pearson, 2008). Attrition, the inability to speak one's native language due to non-use, is a very real phenomenon as "immigrants who seek to assimilate to another culture may go decades without speaking their mother tongue" and therefore have let the language of their new homeland "infect their mother tongue" so they can barely remember common words let alone converse fluently (Harrison, 2010, p. 98-99).

When faced, and coupled with, educators and policymakers who do not believe in dual language learning, children can definitely have apprehensions about speaking their native language at home, or anywhere else for that matter, as told by one kindergartner: "Marcy told me that if you use Spanish words in school...the teacher punishes you" (Soto, Smrekar, & Nekkovei, 1999, p. 4) and, on the same note, we have educated administrators and educators who will go so far as to ask the parents to not speak their native language with their children at home. Richard Rodriguez had the following experience: "...nuns from his Catholic school came to his home to ask his parents to stop using Spanish with him" (as quoted in Grosjean, 2010, p. 176) therefore it is crucial that parents and professionals alike "who are involved with bilingual children, learn about bilingualism" (Grosjean, 2010, p. 177). K. David Harrison (2010, p. 13) states in his book *The Last Speakers* that "'English Only'" is one of the most intellectually ruinous

notions ever perpetuated upon American society, and one of the most historically naïve. We have always been a multilingual society, even before we were a nation” and many might be equally surprised to “discover that in the U.S. the language diversity index...[is] at 35% [-lower than Canada’s 55%] but higher than those of two-thirds of [certain] European countries, like France, Germany, Greece, and the U.K.” (Pearson, 2008, p. 4). What a difference in these children’s lives the teachers, intellectuals, and family members could have made if they knew the benefits of learning two languages.

At the opposite end of the spectrum on the discussion of preserving mother tongues and fighting for bilingualism are, for example, the articles written by Monica Porter and Alison Motluck. In their research and findings, the enriched life children have far outweighs any of society’s preconceptions of bilingualism. Porter (2004) interviewed parents who feel that they have to speak their native language to their children to be able to “express thoughts and feelings that I knew I could only communicate to them in the language in which my mind works”. Harrison (2010) noted that if one was to ask a bilingual person to choose between his mother tongue and the active (or prominent) language spoken, they would sense a loss either way. Prominent or active language is referred to as the language the person(s) speak(s) more than 50% of the time during the day. Scientists have argued for centuries on the concept of whether “our picture of the [Universe] depends on our native tongue,” or as Dan Slobin believes, “The brain is shaped by experience” as well as the observations we make in our daily language journey (as quoted in Motluk, 2002, p.35). Boroditsky (2010) affirms that “beyond space, time, and causality, patterns in language have been shown to shape many other domains of thought” and that new cognitive brain research “is showing that in fact, language does

profoundly influence how we see the world” (para 6). If this is so, how can we measure the resources needed for the brain to work in a certain way? At the same time, how can we convince ourselves that we already know what we are about to do or say in our “native tongue” even if we haven’t learned it explicitly? This is what the new generation of scientists, like Slobin, are trying to convince us of. And then, if the research shows that bringing children up in a bilingual situation is such a benefit, where are the resources? As Marjukka Grover explains: “Multi-lingual families are in constant need of guidance...because bringing up children with more than one language can be a real struggle” (Porter, 2004, para. 13). Sami, Grover’s son, admits that when there is no support network around you, it can be extremely frustrating to try to speak your native tongue with your child (Porter, 2004, para. 19). This has definitely been proven many times, as parents relate that it is “too hard” to speak Finnish to their children when they are the only ones for miles that speak that language. Agreed, it can be overwhelmingly difficult, *however*, the benefits far outweigh the struggles; even when your children decide to answer you in their now dominant language, just keep on persisting with your native language! And yes, believe it or not, *one day* they will thank you.

Porter (2004) regrets that she did not teach her sons Hungarian and she feels that she has, in fact, denied her children the Hungarian language connection and in doing so, her sons “bemoan the fact that [she] never taught them Hungarian, as they would love to take their girlfriends to Budapest and [*chat with their relatives*]” (para. 3). Teaching children their parent’s native language should be considered an investment that pays off in more ways than one. As Kathryn Lindholm-Leary (2000) quotes the National Alliance of Business: “Companies value talented people of diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and

abilities to help them compete, grow, and innovate in dozens of countries...” and Nadine Lichtenberger, a mother teaching her children English while living in Austria, agrees: “...they will have the ability to communicate with a broader range of people” (n.d., ¶ 3). Not only that, but many languages “adapt and equip their speakers with tools to describe, divide, and manage the local environment and its resources” (Harrison, 2010, p. 52) and, therefore, the fear of a child not being able to communicate in both languages competently, has been proven to be unfounded.

### **Benefits of Bilingualism**

So then, what are the benefits of being bilingual? Listed here are just a few: second language reading protects your heart (Wu & Thierry, 2012), bilinguals are less likely to have Alzheimer’s (Krashen 2010; Dreifus, 2011), using your second language reduces bias (Keysar, Kayakawa & An, 2012), bilingualism presents itself in enhanced mental flexibility in the form of divergent thinking (Pearson, 2008) and in addition promotes intercultural understanding, peace and cultural awareness (Baker, 2006). Wu and Thierry’s (2012) study suggests that the chosen language’s emotional content affects conscious language selection in bilinguals and therefore “protects” the heart from certain emotional stresses. It has been noted that many bilinguals choose their second language as the language to speak and/or write when dealing with certain aspects of their lives. For example, as noted earlier in the introduction, people often choose their non-native language to curse in or to discuss private topics; somehow we are deciding that this method is less embarrassing. Dreifus (2011) found through her interview with Ellen Bialystok that “normally aging bilinguals had better cognitive functioning than normally aging monolinguals” (para. 8) and that even though bilingualism does not prevent

Alzheimer's, it does mean that bilinguals can function at a higher level even with the disease taking over their brain as well as discovering that the onset was often "five to six years later than those who spoke only one language" (para. 9). Keyser et al. (2012) have shown that speaking and thinking in your second language actually reduces bias enough to be significant in decision making. Along the paths of thinking and brain activity, we have Barbara Zurer Pearson (2008), who in her book titled *Raising a Bilingual Child; a step-by step guide for parents*, discusses not only the emotional benefits as Wu and Thierry have, but also considers the effects of bilingualism on divergent thinking. In her chapter regarding the Benefits of Childhood Bilingualism, she states that "divergent thinking is considered to be one of the basic elements of creativity" and that "bilingual subjects thought of more uses for typical objects...and generated more possible solutions to problems" as well as being able to "generate three times more high-quality hypotheses for solving science problems than the monolingual students" ( p. 23). Colin Baker (2006, p.124) indicates that learning a second or third language "breaks down national, ethnic, and language stereotypes...as the world becomes more of a global village, with more sharing of experience and mutual understanding", molding the individual into a more culturally sensitive person.

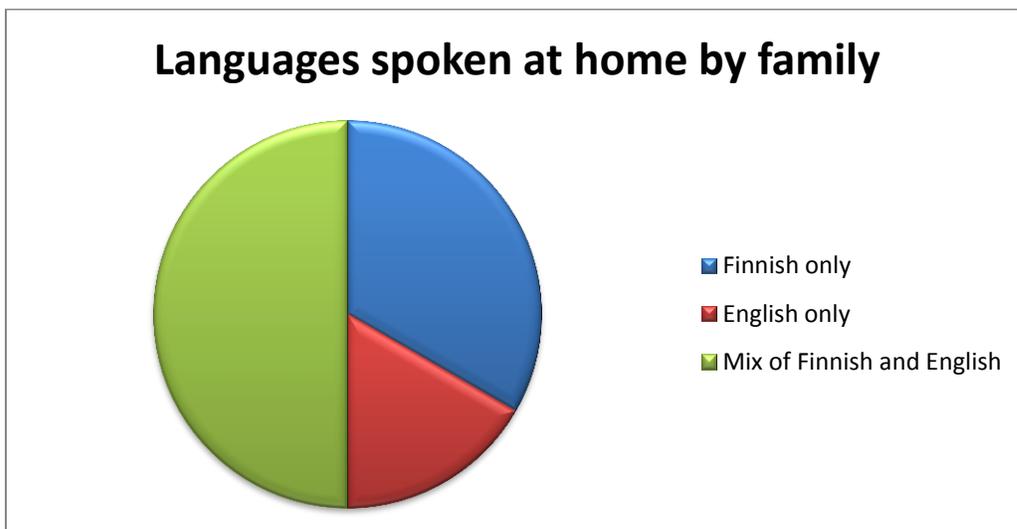
### **Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry**

This study aimed to find the type of support given by parents to Finnish language learners in the West Michigan area and will help the West Michigan Finnish School teacher provide more appropriate materials to her students. The population is a mix of 4-20 year old students living in the West Michigan area along with their parents as interviewees. At least one of the parents of the student(s) speaks, reads, listens, and

writes fluent Finnish as the mother tongue. About half of the parental units have both parents as native Finnish speakers, the others consists of the following mix:

**a.** one parent speaks Finnish only at home, the other English only, **b.** one parent speaks both Finnish and English mixed in the home, the other English only as the primary language, and **c.** single parent household: Finnish is spoken. The table below depicts the languages spoken in the home of the Finnish School students broken down by families.

**Table 1.1 Languages spoken at home by family**



For interpretation of the references to color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this thesis.

This study used a convenience and purposive sample. The study was conducted via interviews of the parents and students. The sample population of students consists of five female and seven males with 96% being Caucasian and 4% of mixed races, and where the parents interviewed are all of Caucasian descent. This parental mix included both the ones who speak Finnish as their first language as well as the native English speakers; 11 Finnish natives and four English natives. All subjects for this study live in the West Michigan area.

Techniques of data collection included interviews, observations, recorded conversations, and documents. But as Genzuk (2003) states in his guide for ethnographic research,

There is no one way of interviewing, no single correct format that is appropriate for all situations, and no single way of wording questions that will always work. The particular evaluation situation, the needs of the interviewee, and the personal style of the interviewer all come together to create a unique situation for each interview. Therein lie the challenges of depth interviewing: situational responsiveness and sensitivity to get the best data possible (p. 6).

Therefore, it would have been hard to come up with questions that would have fit all the situations, and especially the interviewees. Many questions were at the ready, but the interview process steered its course to whichever spectrum it took us in the realm of support parents and children were willing to share. Adding to Genzuk's guidance, Tony Whitehead, Professor of Anthropology considers [some] of the ethnographic attributes to include the following:

- Ethnography is a *highly flexible* and *creative* process
- Ethnography is an *interpretive*, *reflexive*, and *constructivist* process
- Ethnography is the process of *discovery*, making *inferences*, and *continuing inquiries* in an attempt to achieve *emic validity* [and that]
- Ethnography is the study of the *socio-cultural contexts*, *processes*, and *meanings* within cultural systems (2005, p. 4).

Centered on these classic ethnographic methods, the research took its course as the fulfillment of this study.

### **Reliability, validity, and data analysis**

Due to the nature of the study, reliability is almost impossible to include, however, Nahid Golafshani (2003, p. 598) has dubbed reliability to being as close to “truthfulness” in studying and reporting research findings. Documents, lists of books, videos, and magazines were collected as a sampling of resources. Observation of the people and their actions served to validate data collected. The sources of extraneous variables might have included the inability to generalize the information gathered as the interviewees are a tight-knit community of friends and family. Some of the threats to the internal validity might have included whether the researcher was able to convince the population that a “good” will come out of the study; in some cases, there might have been negativity associated with “digging” into other’s lives especially since Finnish people are, in general, very private. As many resources as possible were recorded and were used to formulate tables and graphs to show the range of support. The bigger part of the thesis is in a narrative style which is the most widely used in ethnographic studies.

## CHAPTER III

### DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

#### **Setting**

This study was conducted with interviews before, during, and after Finnish School, as well as in the subject's houses at a chosen time. Most interviews were either conducted at the location of the Finnish School; we try to meet in a different person's house each week, but the "official" and "mailing address" location of the school is at 373 Norwood, Rockford, MI. Subjects were able to choose their interview location, so as to give them the most comfortable place. Any and all of the persons, seemed, however, quite comfortable in any of the locations selected; the Finnish nature of making each other feel at home might have something to do with that. I took notes during our Finnish School sessions as well as made observations of behavior and/or resource discussions. The subjects for this ethnographic study were chosen based solely on their attendance of the West Michigan Finnish School, which the researcher is the director and teacher of. This study involved the resources of the Finnish language learners in the West Michigan area.

#### **Participants**

The interviewees consisted of the following peoples: 10 adults and 11 children. Of the adults, three speak both Finnish and English at home, and three speak English only to their child or children. The families consist of five two parent families and one single parent family. The two parent families are split with two families consisting of both parents speaking Finnish as their native language and three families with one parent as a

Finnish speaker and the other a native English speaker. The single parent family is a native Finnish speaker. It was interesting to note that some of the native English speaking parents were not interviewed. Unfortunately, I was unable to make contact with two of the families depicted in the proposal. They both visit our Finnish School infrequently; distance for both is more than an hour's drive one way.

Of all the children, three out of the 11 were born in Finland, one in Germany, and the rest all in the United States. Only one of the children has attended formal school in Finland, one other has attended day-care. All others (9) have attended only English speaking establishments with the exception of the West Michigan Finnish School.

Within the levels of the children, one is fluent in all forms of Finnish having attended school in Finland. Another is mostly fluent in all forms and receiving instruction in spelling and writing. Three are fluent in spoken Finnish, and either fluent or intermediate with listening skills. The rest are fluent in only one area and intermediate and/or beginners in the rest. The observations were made purely on a broad basis where the Finnish School teacher gauged the level of each student without any formal testing; questions were asked and answered to the best of the student's ability in each skill throughout several sessions of Finnish School. The students were not aware that the "testing" was happening as I did not want them to have any anxiety over it. The results are depicted in Table 1.2: Fluency level of Finnish School learners.

**Table 1.2 Fluency level of Finnish School learners**

Student	READING	WRITING	LISTENING	SPOKEN
1	Na	Na	F	F
2	I	M	F	F
3	I	I	F	F
4	B	B	I	F
5	B	B	I	F
6	F	F	F	F
7	I	I	F	F
8	B	I	I	I
9	B	B	B	I
10	I	I	F	F
11	B	I	F	F

**F=Fluent, I=Intermediate, M=Moderate, B=Beginner, N/a=not of age**

### **Researcher's Role**

The West Michigan Finnish School was started after an accidental English phrase came out of my mouth while I was speaking to my children on a January day in 2009. My children looked at me in utter amazement and laughed nervously. I myself, could not believe what had happened! I had never spoken English to my children, unless it was to translate something and that would only happen to ensure clarified instructions or something extremely important. Not that I thought it would be a bad thing to speak English to my children, but I have prided myself in speaking *only* Finnish to them since birth. That very moment, I decided to start a Finnish School to ensure that other Finnish speakers in the area (mainly children) would be able to retain their native language. Of

course, we have always been in contact with all of the Finns in the area, but not on a constant basis and never in a formal learning format, just to get together for parties and important events.

**Assumptions.** As in an ethnographic study, having the role of the insider researcher, one has to maintain the naiveté which allows one to analyze the information in such a way as not to assume what for example the answers of the participants might be. As this researcher was part of the study, it is almost impossible to remain unbiased towards the investigation, however, as noted through Wu and Thierry's study (2011): when using the non-native language to make decisions and theorize, the effect of bias is reduced significantly. I would then have to believe that since I am writing this in English (my second language) that the preconceived notions I might have for the benefits, and the lack or abundance of resources, can be contrived as only, and merely, restatements of facts gathered in this ethnographic study.

### **Instrument and Processes of Collecting Data**

The data collected in the study was qualitative in nature and included interviews with a collection of approximately 10-14 questions per interviewee. The quantity of the questions asked depended on some of the answers given; many of the questions involved sub-questions (anywhere from 2-5) related to the original question. As an ethnographic study, many data was collected through observations as well as group and individual conversations during Finnish School or other meetings with the participants. These included, but were not limited to, phone conversations and e-mails; most were regarding Finnish School and/or whenever the study and/or its components came up. Observations

during Finnish School included keeping track of whenever parents and students spoke Finnish or English during the school or any other occasions when the participants met.

Frequently, I noticed that students would change to speaking in English during Finnish School if I “let them” i.e. if I did not ask or correct them in any way to speak Finnish, they would continue in their prominent or active language. As a reminder, prominent or active language is referred to as the language the person speaks more than 50% of the time during the day. In this case, the children all attend English-speaking American public schools or other establishments (like day care) where only English is spoken. The question of *value* is one of the biggest indications of whether a child is willing to learn and *keep* learning a language which is not their active language. The speakers of the heritage language must

establish ‘motive and opportunity’ for the minority language...and find ways to give children enough reasons for them to *want* to use the minority language and opportunities for enough exposure to it for them to be *able* to learn it (Pearson, 2008, p. 124).

During one Finnish School session, I asked the students if they were able to choose a book to read, would they choose Finnish or English as a self-selected choice book, they all chose English. Their reasoning was that although most of them felt that they had the ability to read the Finnish book, the English books were easier and as one student commented: “Who would we discuss these books with then?” The implication was that the students are all at different levels of reading (in both Finnish and English) and therefore, all would be reading a different book. Although I tried to motivate the

students by saying that we could all tell each other about the books, there seemed to be no interest. The endeavor was not abandoned, however; we tried again and whether it was the persistence of it, or the fact that the students and their parents were told about recent research about heritage language reading that did the trick, it does not matter: the same students that had a few weeks prior given blank looks and a resounding “no thanks” were at least *thinking* of reading in Finnish! Once again, unfortunately, the lack of resources, and the inability to get the latest young adult book (*Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins) into the hands of one of the children, flattened the enthusiasm like a soufflé taken out of the oven too early. Tied together in a neat package with this, we (adults) must remember to take into account the child’s perspective on the value of the second language: we cannot “assume that our own desire to use the language will translate automatically into the same desire in your child” (Pearson, 2008, p. 125).

### **Data Analysis**

Data was broken down by categories by each interview question, where applicable and manageable, making detailed lists and tables of the resources provided to Finnish language learners. As with ethnographic studies, assumptions were made due to immersion, but were also clarified through further questioning during interviews, observations, and discussions. “A great deal of pure description” of the results and the experiences of the participants will balance the analytical part of the study to provide “an interesting and readable final account” (Genzuk, 2003, p. 9-10).

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS OF THE STUDY

#### **Types of resources**

What types of resources do we then probe ourselves into when we are living in a foreign land and especially when the resources aren't as plentiful as you would like for them to be? We devour each magazine we can get our hands on, whether last month's issue or something from years ago. We often read books in a genre one might not normally read; even technical manuals and instructions you receive with a new blender or a coffee maker are studied with utmost reverence! When one finds a new way of learning or saving one's mother tongue, it can be just as exciting as it can be frustrating: for example finding a new website in Finnish or about Finland, and realizing you can't use it for one reason or another. The amount and types of resources found through the study were varied. Books (Finnish, English, and other languages), magazines (subscriptions and otherwise acquired), electronic devices and media, travel and speaking as a whole were the resources most often mentioned by the participants.

**Books.** The amount of Finnish books ranged from 100 to 500 with an average of 225. The books range from children's books to novels, from biographies to encyclopedias as well as bibles. The books also included many popular Finnish comic books, for example the *Donald Duck Pocketbooks*. These are wildly popular in Finland; it seems that everyone has at least a few in their homes. They use a lot of slang, though, and are quite hard for the immigrant children to read. The Harry Potter series can also be hard for the children to read in Finnish, however, many read it first in English, and therefore are able to use context clues and recollections from the English books to help with the Finnish editions.

The following Finnish books were explicitly mentioned:

- Encyclopedias
- Dictionaries (Finnish//English/French/German)
- Bible
- *Aku Ankan Taskukirjat* (Donald Duck Pocketbooks)
- *Miina & Manu*
- *Koiramäki*
- *Tieto ja Tekniikka* (Science and Technology)
- *Mauno Koivisto* –a biography
- Finnish Poetry
- Elementary and secondary school books (k-12)
- *Asterix & Obelix* (comic books)
- War themed books (specifically Finland's wars)
- Romance novels and series
- Mysteries, both originally in Finnish as well as translated into Finnish
- *Harri Potteri* (Harry Potter)
- Riding/horse books

The *Miina & Manu* books are almost a staple in the Finnish language learning aspect as far as children's books go both here in West Michigan as well as in Finland. They are a series of children's books with simple language, varied topics interesting to children, as well as having some of the books with the Finnish syllabication blended in for easy

readability. Each family had some in their possession, had had some at one time, or had read the books with their children in Finland or here at one point or another.

English books: 100-500; with an average of 250. English books were very similar in genre as the Finnish books and just as varied. Each family seemed to concentrate on the genres of books they were familiar with. The exceptions for this were the books the younger adults were reading. Many were reading English language books from libraries and schools; the books consisted of the newest and more popular releases. Of course we cannot disregard the fact that the children are attending English speaking schools and therefore are required to read certain books in English. We must also remember that even though we call the children bilinguals (because they are) they are, nevertheless, not attending a bilingual educational program, yet are “defined by their experience with more than one language and culture” as bilinguals (Brisk & Harrington, 2000, p. 3).

Other languages: In all, one family had 100 French language books in different genres. The mother had lived in France for a number of years, and is, as a matter of fact, a multilingual and a translator by profession. Other language books consisted of only four Spanish dictionaries across the interviewed families. This is not to say that other language books are not read, but most often borrowed from the school or public libraries or provided by the educational establishments the children attend.

**Magazines/ subscriptions.** Half of the interviewees mentioned that they get at least one Finnish magazine subscription delivered to their house from Finland. “Meidän Perhe” [*Our Family*]<sup>1</sup>, ”Juoksija” [*Runner*], ”Kotivinkki” [*Home Tips*], “Meidän Koira”

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are direct translations from Finnish made by the author with no attempt to make them sound “Americanized” or to rhyme in English.

[*Our Dog*], “Lastenmaa” [*Children’s Land*], and “Prinsessa” [*Princess*] were mentioned as paid subscriptions. Other magazines that families get are for example the free magazine that some of the banks in Finland (e.g. Osuuspankki & Nordea) sends out to their customers on a quarterly basis. With a paid membership, the West Michigan Finnish School receives “Suomen Silta” [*Finland’s Bridge*] six times a year. Family and friends were mentioned more often as supporting the magazine resources: suitcases are laden with past issues of the person’s favorite magazines. Some even read Finnish magazines here that they would not read in Finland; that is how valued they are. Years old issues are also not a problem-just to get to read a magazine in Finnish is enough; it doesn’t matter if you are reading a three year old Christmas edition in the middle of the July heat- it is just as valuable.

**Electronic devices/ media.** Most families had anywhere from 10 to 50 DVD’s of Finnish films or children’s videos in their collections. Unfortunately, the “country-coding” of DVS’s prevents many from watching them at all here in the U.S. Each country or region has a code which restricts the viewing of DVD’s on DVD players for that country or region only. There is technology that can override this, but it is illegal. Some have been successful in viewing their movies with a simple and cheap DVD player bought from Meijer, but not all of us have been able to have been as lucky to have found that player. It doesn’t seem to be any particular brand; it just needs to have an ON/ OFF switch for the specialized viewing.

Many families noted that listening to CD’s (especially children’s songs) was a pastime that was most generously afforded time when the children were little. The ones that have small children now do listen to the songs more often; the older (teenage)

children have almost stopped listening to Finnish music altogether, unless they are in Finland or Christmas music is playing during the holiday. Rap music in Finnish seemed to be the one genre that teenagers would actually listen to and a few of the more famous Finnish rap singers were mentioned: Cheek and Mc Mane. Listening to Finnish pop music is now readily available through several internet sites; you can listen to “live” radio stations, although some are restricted to Finland only. While writing this, I have drawn inspiration from “Radio Suomi Pop”; it also provided a non-distractive background noise; surprisingly I was not able to concentrate on writing [in English] if I was listening to English songs or if the TV was on behind me.

Everyone mentioned Skype, the free online video chat. A minimum of once per week usage was mentioned by all families as the basis of their most frequent “Finnish lessons.” Parents and children alike talk to grandparents, friends, and relatives. Facebook is another modern resource mentioned as a way to keep in touch with family and friends not only in the U.S. but certainly in Finland and around the world as well. A few mentioned that they even have their Facebook account set up to read in Finnish as well as having changed their iPod language to Finnish. Texting is most often done in Finnish between children /parents and other Finns whenever possible. Most have first English and then a Finnish message immediately following on their voice mail accounts.

***Board games and puzzles.*** Surprisingly, board games and puzzles as resources were mentioned but twice. Everyone was keener on thinking about the more technologically advanced versions like video games and internet resources. This is not to say that the Finnish families do not play board games or put together puzzles; when prompted, the response most often was: “Well, of course...I just didn’t think about it.”

**Travel.** Traveling to Finland was touted as the number one way to learn, teach, and keep the Finnish language alive. Even Finnish speaking parents noted that they observed how much they continually “forget” in between visits even with all the resources available, including having been born and raised in Finland and speaking and listening to the language on a daily basis. Whenever possible, all families try to visit Finland at least every other year. Family and friends, who visit the United States, are a frequent phenomenon in the West Michigan Finnish community. Each family responded that they have a minimum of at least one visitor at least once per calendar year; most have many more. Many mentioned, lightheartedly that “you send one out the door and bring the next one from the airport before you have time to wash the sheets!” All joking aside, the visitors were mentioned as an extremely important part of the families’ Finnish language conservation, if not perhaps the most important one; family, friends, and the extended family connections serve as a remarkably strong support system so that no one is isolated in their Finnish language learning.

**Speaking Finnish/ urgency to preserve.** As mentioned in chapter three, only one of the participant children has actually attended schools in Finland and therefore has learned the academic language of both Finnish and English through his studies. All the other children are attending or have attended “English speaking only” schools here in the United States. It does need to be said, at this point though, that all parents mentioned that all the children but one spoke only Finnish until age three whether they lived in Finland or here, and whether they heard English or not. Only when introduced to a “set” place (day-care, pre-school, etc.) where only English was spoken, did the children start speaking English as well. This goes even for the times that the same children were

playing with English speaking friends: until about age three, parents said that the children would speak only Finnish. Many of the children were surprised and even delighted to learn this through the interviewing process: they had, at one point, been fluent in Finnish! Even though I was hesitant and thought about interviewing the children and the parents separately at first, I am so glad I decided to take the “shorter” route of interviewing everyone in a family together. Just seeing the joy on the children’s faces when they heard, and realized, that they had once, and *could* once again speak Finnish, was amazing. Saville-Troike (2006) reiterates this in her book, “appropriate social experience, including L1 input and interaction, is thus a necessary condition for acquisition” and *that no matter what level of proficiency has been reached*, “language development usually begins to slow sharply at about the age of puberty” (p. 15) therefore, urgency in preserving the heritage language is of the utmost importance.

Of those families and/or parents who started to speak Finnish to their children from birth, 80% are still using Finnish as the dominant language in the home<sup>2</sup>. Faced with sometimes what seems like an enduring task, the continuous language teaching and speaking should be praised. Yet those who made the decision to no longer speak Finnish, whether consciously or unconsciously, should not be shunned and several extremely valid reasons were given. To protect privacy and to retain integrity, those reasons will not be given here although they were freely discussed during the interviews. Speaking and/or listening is an integral resource for language learners, but as the interviews revealed, it becomes increasingly harder as the children progress in age. Language shift (or linguistic assimilation) happens whether one wants it to happen or not. This transpires especially

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<sup>2</sup> “Finnish-American” (a mixture of Finnish and American) will inevitably be part of the language, and sometimes, English does “take over” as the “easier” language to speak.

when there aren't many other Finns for the parents or children to talk to or listen to. The fact that when children start school or daycare in which the main language is not the mother tongue but rather English, no matter how much you speak Finnish to your child, that language now becomes the active language for the child.

### **Healthy Language and Borrowing**

Not only are we as a Finnish-American community trying to preserve and maintain our language, but we are also embracing the fact that we do live in a community where our mother tongue is not the prevailing language, and therefore, are assimilating to the newfound language of "Finnish-American." We all have words that we don't either remember in Finnish or that cannot be translated from Finnish to English or vice versa. A recent visit to the Finnish Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, revealed a *Finnish-American Dictionary* written a few decades ago and now purchased for \$2.00. It was an interesting find; as we flipped through the pages we found many words that we use continually and with which we have made the conscious switch from a known Finnish or English word and made our own "new" word by borrowing. For example, the word "soccer" has become [*sokkeri*] and the word (running) "track" has become [*träkki*]; the previous words have become so ingrained in our normal everyday speaking that we don't even notice it. When it was pointed out to the two participants, we all had a good laugh. This seems to be an inevitable turn in a mother tongue that is trying to be preserved in a foreign country with not many speakers available. On a side note, it didn't seem to bother any of us that we have now started to use these words [*sokkeri* and *träkki*], as we do still remember and know the "real" Finnish words although every so often, each of us has to pause to think of the correct *Finnish* word. Yet, no matter how awful some of these

words sound to us Finns (and some are treacherous!) we must let the language “thrive...evolve...[and] change in a natural setting. New kinds of discourse, new uses, new words, and new speakers must be allowed to emerge freely and organically. These are the hallmarks of a healthy language” (Harrison, 2010, p. 90).

### **Time and money as a non-restrictor on availability of resources**

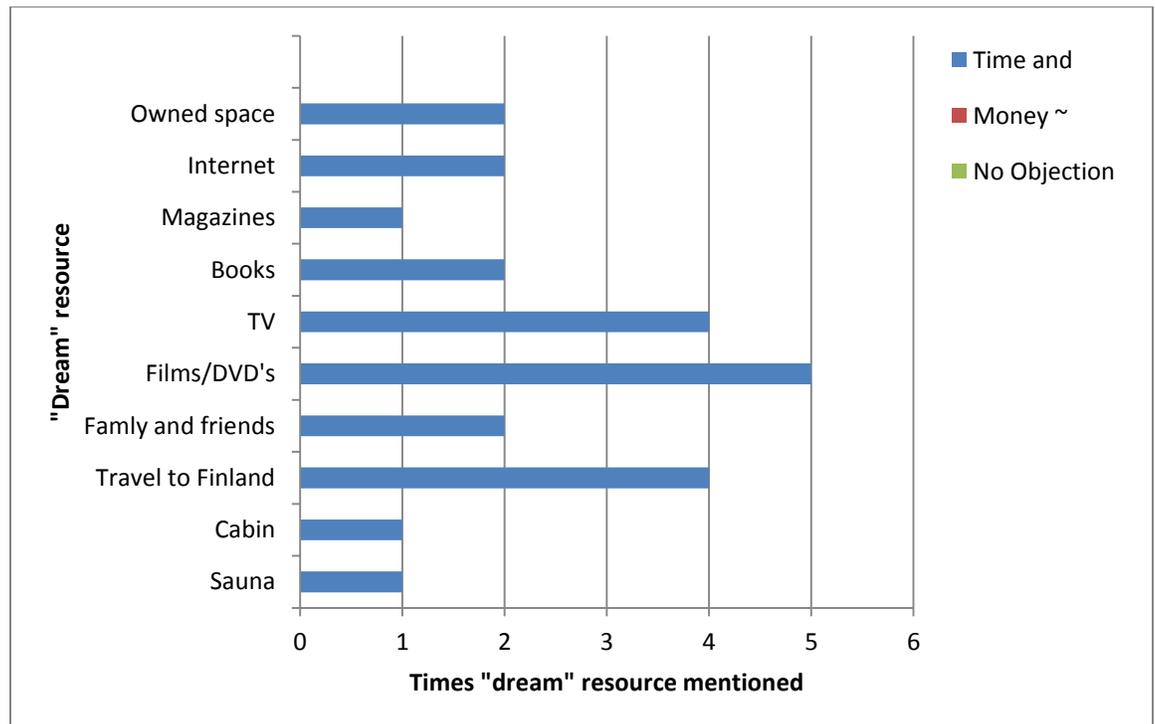
When the question of time and financial resources came up, many of the participants sighed and then started their list: travel to Finland, sauna (by the lake), films (movies on DVD), Finnish TV etc. Travel to Finland was the first mentioned by 90% of the interviewees. The ability to stay in Finland for longer periods of time was also mentioned by all as a definite and particularly important resource; almost all indicated that visiting Finland (but surprisingly not living in) was the best way to learn the language. Everyone, parents and children alike, agreed on this being the number one on their list of ways to learn Finnish. Along with that came the realization of how much they liked the fact that family and friends visited them here as well, and of course, how much more Finnish they spoke while someone was visiting.

Surprisingly, second on the list was to be able to watch movies and DVD's (Hollywood films, Finnish produced/directed films, TV shows, documentaries etc.). Many commented on the fact that although they had many Finnish movies in their libraries, they were unable to view them due to the country-code restrictions imposed on viewing availability of DVD's. Very close to the movie watching resource request was the ability to watch Finnish TV. As with many American TV series, most popular Finnish TV shows can now be purchased on DVD, however, the country-code restrictions

comes into play again. The notion of possibly being able to one day watch the shows via satellite was mentioned by three people, however, they doubted whether this would happen anytime soon for them to enjoy the effects.

As the interview pool was a limited one, it came as no surprise that magazine and newspaper subscriptions, books, internet (websites), and a cabin (with sauna) were mentioned only a few times as a possible resource. One resource that two interviewees mentioned was the necessity of having a “place to call our own” as in a rented/ owned space for the Finnish language learners. Many others also noted this as an excellent idea, when prompted to think about it. As a note, all of the above in the piece are dreams where “time and money are no objection”. The chart below depicts the number of times each “dream” resource was mentioned by all interviewees.

Table 1.3 Time and Money ~ No Objection



## **Traditions**

Finns are known as “Christmas people” and although expected, it was still wonderful to notice that Christmas with all its traditions was number one on everyone’s list. This was true even with the native English speakers; there was no hesitation from anyone, including the children, when asked about the traditions in their households. Christmas and the Finnish traditions that go along with it were itemized in detail and were re-mentioned after other traditions were listed. Specifically everyone mentioned the many traditional foods and that Christmas is celebrated on the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>. Overall, most emphasized that you *do not* stray or deviate from any of the Christmas traditions and that most are also spoken or implemented in Finnish. And even though stores are open here during “our Christmas” it is almost unheard of to go to the store anytime between the 24<sup>th</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup>- this is the time of “Joulurauha” [*Christmas Peace*].

**Other Traditions.** Whether we actually group the following into the “traditions” category, these actions/ non-actions, and verbal/ nonverbal rules define the Finnish way of life. For example, without prompting, all Finns take off their shoes as they enter the house of another Finn; this happens without thought and with no hesitation. The only exceptions would be if there were either many Americans (or other foreigners) present, or a special occasion was taking place (for example a graduation party) and everyone was wearing semi-formal or formal attire. Very rarely does any Finn go to another’s house without having something to bring along [tuliaisinen]; most of the time this is a bouquet of flowers or possibly a baked good. There has not been one Finnish School so far where someone didn’t bring something small to the host and/ or for everyone to share. One of the language driven actions that takes place is to greet the host with a “päivää”

[afternoon], “iltaa” [evening], or at least a “moi” [hello] when you meet them, whether at the front door or in the kitchen. Many of my children’s American friends have received a scowl when they just walk by me as they enter my house; my children are left to explain why they (the friends) are required to greet me: “That is just the way it is, please do it so we can continue to my room.”

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

#### Vanishing language through assimilation

K. David Harrison (2010) spoke of his Cree language experience and how he lost all his vocabulary he had learned up to the age of three:

But none of the vocabulary stuck once Cree vanished from my life at age three, when my family moved back to the United States. Though I listened to those

Cree gospel songs for years afterward...I never picked up any more Cree (p. 24).

Is three the magical age? At least three of our interviewees mentioned age three and when questioned, the reasons for not continuing to speak Finnish to their children were varied. Nonetheless, each was puzzled about the age of three- what happens in our brains? Is it really like in the movie *Look Who's Talking Too* where two-year olds have a language of their own and seem to know more than us adults, but as soon as the third birthday rolls around, their brains “switch”, erasing all memory of a different language spoken. Or is it just happenstance that the people in this study happened to stop at age three? Pearson (2008) did mention that it seemed that children under the age of three...”lose the language if it is “out of service” completely within a short period of time” ( p. 268). I believe that might be worth a look from both a linguistic and bilingual point of view.

Harrison discusses assimilation and retrieval of forgotten languages on pages 98-99 of his book:

Immigrants who seek to assimilate to another culture may go decades without speaking their mother tongue. Later, if they try to retrieve it, they may find their

knowledge rusty or deficient. As the neural pathways decay from lack of use, they cannot even string together simple phrases in a language they once commanded natively. They can barely remember common words, and the locally dominant language...has thoroughly infected their mother tongue...

On the other hand, some researchers say that even if you lose a language due to non-use, it is like riding a bike; you can switch your brain back to it and one should be able to get the language ability back (Pearson, 2008). Of course, there could be many different reasons as to why someone “forgot” or no longer “used” their native language. We can think of refugees or others who have met with excruciating mental anguish because of war or other conflict in their countries. Some, like for example Germans during and after WW II, and most recently, Tutsis in Rwanda, might want to forget their language due to those specific reasons, and *not* be identified as a speaker of the language. But the most important aspect of this should be, as Jared Diamond states in his article about language extinction, “Minorities struggling to preserve their language ask only for the freedom to decide for themselves—without being excluded, humiliated, punished, or killed for exercising that freedom” (para. 24).

### **Expected Resources and Ability to Converse**

So what type of resources can we expect to have? We should be ever vigilant in ensuring that the languages we speak do not disappear and although Finnish thankfully is not one of the disappearing languages of the world, it does need to be said that the *parents* of the Finnish immigrant children are losing their abilities faster than we would like to think. Just the other day, I had a long conversation with a friend about how much of her Finnish language she had lost and how frightening it seemed that she might not be

able to provide the “real Finnish” language experience to her child. It is important to note that conversing is becoming the most important type of resource of the Finnish language here in West Michigan.

**Finnish TV and e-readers.** A few months back, a conversation was started in the Ann Arbor area with another Finn and it was discovered by this researcher that Finnish TV is available for us here in the United States! One of the most requested resources has been found! It has been around for a few years, however, none of us here in West Michigan knew about it; you can even get a free two week trial through Facebook, Twitter, Google, or Yahoo. Today’s technology is amazing. Although we are very excited about this opportunity, it does come with a cost of about 98 Euros per year. That would amount to about \$130.00 using a rough monthly average currency conversion rate. You also have to wait for one 24 hour period to download the data from the site, so it is not live TV. Nevertheless, this has been one of the most exciting finds during this research. When this information went “viral” in our community, I would have to reason that <http://www.tvkaista.fi/> received many “hits” from the West Michigan area immediately following the announcement.

With the above find and the digital era, it would have been almost impossible to ignore that the very popular e-readers like Kindle, Barnes & Noble NOOK, Apple iPad, and several other tablets and readers, but the fact is that they would not/ did not make it into our resources pile. Once again, the readers are not all compatible with the downloadable books on a Finnish book-sellers’ websites like <http://ekirja.suomalainen.com/>. The only ones available for download are the Sony, Samsung tablets, and iPads, so for example the more reasonably priced Kindle, NOOK,

and Kobo Vox would not be able to support the e-books from Finland. Compared to the offerings of for example Amazon e-books, the selection for Finnish language e-books is unfortunately not as varied or as plentiful.

**Other resources.** Several other resources that were not mentioned but were noticed by the observer, were, but are not limited to, posters, vehicles with vanity license plates and/or Finnish stickers, household items and particularly furnishings and Finnish artifacts, photo albums, as well as festivals and other outings that can connect the language learner to the Finnish language. When met with a new situation and even new people, a child can learn the new vocabulary and develop their language skills and thus receive a “deeper understanding of the shared meaning of the words” (Baker, 2007, p. 16).

### **Future Questions**

Other questions that have come about through this research study are listed here, in no particular order, but it does need to be said that probably thousands more exist and would emerge if any one of these were to be studied. 1. How does the geographical area affect the learning/ preservation of the heritage (Finnish) language? 2. How much does the language change over the years in terms of assimilation and borrowing? 3. If given all the possible resources, will a student/ child be able to learn a language if there is no motivation? 4. Even if motivation exists, what are the “permissible” excuses for not learning or being able to learn a new/ existing language to proficiency? For the last question, I can serve as an example: I have tried to learn Spanish for years. I started with listening to and trying to understand some of the Univision programs on TV as a young mom in hopes of having my children learn Spanish on the side. One year later and after

moving, the program was no longer available on our channel selection. About 10 years went by and I started Spanish at the community college level, first as just a non-credit course, then two semesters of classroom learning towards a degree. I then tried learning through the Rosetta Stone-method, but to no avail. I have always had a strong motivation to learn Spanish; however, the prospect of not actually being able to use the language *at that moment in time* has been the downfall. Knowing this has made me take another look at the way we converse and work in the West Michigan Finnish School in the coming years. Conversational Finnish will be the main aspect, as I believe it will serve our students with the most usable of the language learning aspects. This study and research has shown that *speaking* one's heritage language seems to be more important than being able to write it correctly; that will come with time, if ever needed. Listening happens as a natural occurrence. Reading in Finnish will, of course, never be abandoned, as research has revealed that it is an instrumental part of knowing one's heritage language. The urgency in preserving the heritage language is of the utmost importance.

### **Closing Thoughts**

I close with a quote and an enquiry of mine: isn't it almost comical, that Noam Chomsky, whose theories on language proposed that there is a universal grammar among all of the world's languages and that these languages don't really differ that much can then be quoted as saying: "Language serves essentially for the expression of thought" ([www.sk.com.br](http://www.sk.com.br)). My thoughts exactly:

Language *is* the expression of the thought that you have –in *the language* you are communicating with.

-Taru Nieminen

## **APPENDIX**

## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- ❖ What type of books do you own in Finnish? English? Other languages?
- ❖ What types of resources do you provide for yourself and your child to learn/ retain their Finnish language skills? (TV/videos/films, computer (games, websites etc.), magazine subscriptions, specific learning tools, dictionaries, etc.)
- ❖ What is your education level? Your spouse's education level?
- ❖ How often do you visit Finland?
- ❖ Do you find that it is harder to speak Finnish to your child as they progress in age?
- ❖ Did you start speaking Finnish to your children when they were born? If not, when?
- ❖ Referring to the above two: if it has diminished/ increased since you started, why do you think so?
- ❖ Do you ever speak English to your children? Is there a specific reason, if you do?
- ❖ When your children have friends over, do you speak Finnish to your children or switch to English?
- ❖ Do you notice a time when you seem to talk to your children in Finnish more than other times?
- ❖ How long have you lived away from Finland? Were your children born here?
- ❖ Did your children attend school in Finland prior to you moving here?

- ❖ What types of resources would you like to have if there were no restrictions (money/time etc.)?
- ❖ What Finnish traditions do you uphold in your household?

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