

# My child does not speak my language but understands it perfectly

By Soile Pietikäinen

*When I was working on my PhD research at the Finnish Saturday School in London back in 2008-2012, from the very beginning the parents kept on telling me: "My child understands Finnish perfectly".*

## "My child understands Finnish perfectly"

Everyone was saying this and those most keen to stress this point were the parents whose children did not speak Finnish.

I was scratching my head. Back in 1997 in my research with Finnish-Italian families in Turin I had learned that when children do not speak Finnish, they also understand very little of it.

For a researcher this gap between what I had seen in another piece of research and what the parents were telling me about their own children presented a methodological challenge:

- How can I know how much Finnish these children understand?
- What do the parents really mean with this omnipresent phrase?

The first task I posed to myself was:

Could I prove with empirical evidence that all the children described by their parents as "understanding Finnish perfectly" actually understand Finnish spoken to them by anyone but their own parent?

There were two ways in which I could approach this question: I could talk with the children myself and I could observe them taking part in the Saturday school class taught in Finnish. So, I started doing both straight away.

## Did the children understand the teachers?

I observed classes of children between the ages of 6 and 8, making notes about how each of the children reacted to the teacher and to their peers. I also observed how they collaborated (or not) between children. Finally, I noted down behaviours that could be indicators of different levels of listening comprehension in the classroom.

When the class was playing a physical game or engaged in drawing or colouring in, everyone was taking part. But when the teacher spoke to the children, not everyone was able to listen. There were always one or two children who lost concentration in less than 20 seconds of the teacher starting to speak in Finnish.

These children's eyes were not fixed on the teacher. Their gaze wandered around the room. Soon their body began to turn as well. In less than a minute the teacher was telling them to sit still. The teachers routinely either translated from Finnish to English to these children or addressed them individually in English.

I marked these children as probably understanding hardly any Finnish at all.

"My child understands Finnish perfectly" could sometimes mean that the child did not understand enough Finnish to follow any teacher instructions.

Most children followed the teacher well for several minutes before becoming tired. These children often paired with someone next to them to ask what was said and they received translations from other children.

In my notes I wrote them down as understanding quite a lot of everyday spoken Finnish, but as struggling to understand the wider vocabulary and the more demanding content and style used by the teacher, compared to the language of everyday parenting at home.

"My child understands Finnish perfectly" could also mean that children were able to understand most things a primary school teacher was saying and that they were actively able to seek translations when they needed them.

Then there were some children who gave the quick-fire translations and answers to others.

These children followed the teacher effortlessly and got bored when something had to be explained to the others – unless they were allowed to do the explaining themselves, which instead was rewarding to them. Sometimes they interpreted to the teacher what the other children were trying to say in Finnish when teachers struggled to understand.

In my notes I wrote that these children had a native-like or almost native-like comprehension of spoken Finnish language. They also had a sophisticated understanding of the challenges less confidently bilingual children were facing. They expressed frustration for not being challenged to learn. They also expressed empathy that pushed them to act as helpers to both children and teachers.

"My child understands Finnish perfectly" could sometimes be an observable factual statement referring to an age-appropriate native speaker proficiency. These children really did understand effortlessly everything their teachers said in Finnish to a group of children.

## Did the children understand me?

The next step was to test by talking to the individual children during the break, whether they would also understand me in a simple one-to-one conversation. That was easier said than done.

Why? Because it was certainly not the children's priority to talk to me!

Children's priorities during break time were:

- 1) Get a parent to buy a cinnamon bun,
- 2) Eat the cinnamon bun,
- 3) Run around with other children and,
- 4) Go to the toilet.

None of these activities were suitable moments for research interviewing.

My opportunities were at the end of the Saturday School, when people were preparing to go home. There was less eating and less running. Children often had to wait for a parent who was still talking to the other adults in the café.

Then I would find children sitting on their own on the stairs, with their coat on, bored, counting the minutes.

In these brief moments I had chats with children whose parents had entered their family into the research. The children knew me as another mum, as my children had been going to the same Saturday school for years.

I would start with a simple greeting. My thinking was that starting from a "Hello! How are you?" would give everyone a solid start.

It seemed to me that all children understood the social meaning of the greeting, but surprisingly, none of the children was able to give the correct answer in Finnish.

All children, even those whom I just described as native speakers, made the same mistake.

I know. This is weird. One would think that a greeting like this is the simplest thing ever. You need it all the time. You learn it by heart. It never changes. It is supposed to be an automatic exchange, so well-rehearsed that it just rolls off our tongue.

Apparently, it's not that simple. I'll explain.

In Finnish we say "*Hei. Mitä kuuluu?*" (Hello. How are you?) The correct answer is "*Hyvä*" (Fine). Yet our London-born children do not reply with "*Hyvä*". Instead they all reply with "*Hyvin*" (Well).

This is a mistake a child in Finland would never make. I checked by asking several parents and teachers in Finland if they had ever heard a child answering like this. They had never heard such an answer. They thought I was daft for asking.

Back in London the children in my research often said their "Hyvin?" rather slowly and hesitantly, as if not quite knowing what was expected of them, or even not knowing what I was asking and why.

Seems like a small mistake to make. But it was important for me to be clear if they had understood the question or not?

I was, after all, trying to figure out to what extent they "understand Finnish perfectly". So, what did their answer mean?

**Hypothesis 1:** Maybe the children correctly interpreted the question as a polite greeting enquiring about their wellbeing. Maybe they were frantically trying to remember the right way to say it? Maybe their incorrect answer should be interpreted as a fragment of a complete correct phrase: "Minä voin *hyvin*" (I feel well)?

**Hypothesis 2:** Maybe they misinterpreted the question as being about their sense of hearing? "*Mitä kuuluu?*" could be misunderstood roughly as "What can you hear?" If the children thought that I was asking about their hearing they could correctly answer that their hearing was just fine, thank you very much! The correct grammar for that answer would in fact be "*Hyvin*".

From the level of ease or discomfort expressed by children in saying that single word "*Hyvin*" I decided if I could ask more questions in Finnish and what kind of questions to ask.

I would ask open-ended questions ranging from something extremely simple like "Where's mum?" to much more demanding opinion questions about the day's lesson topic.

These tiny conversations - lasting less than one minute – confirmed the observations from the classroom.

Children who had not been able to follow the teacher appeared not to understand anything I said in Finnish. I had to translate into English. Otherwise they were not able to respond. In English they were at their ease and socially confident.

The children who seemed to have a good listening comprehension in the class handled these little one-to-one conversations well. They were back in the familiar domestic register of everyday adult-child talk. These children definitely understood down to earth practical questions and put in their best effort to give me answers in short simple sentences in Finnish, spoken with their distinctive English accent and some foreigner's grammar.

The children who behaved in the classroom like native Finnish speakers reacted by giving fast fluent answers and taking off, clearly regarding my questions far too boring and irrelevant for

them to engage for longer than was absolutely necessary, unless I had caught their imagination fast enough by a slightly cheeky question. That is not my strong point, so mostly they were off pretty quickly.

### Don't parents know their own children?

The children's listening comprehension varied just as much as their spoken Finnish. Yet all the parents confidently stated that their own child understands Finnish perfectly.

Did this mean that...

**Hypothesis 1:** The parents were lying?

or

**Hypothesis 2:** The parents did not know what their child understood?

Surely neither of these could be true? It felt arrogant and simplistic to entertain such possibilities. Instead, I decided to assume that...

**Hypothesis 3:**

*The parents were indeed accurately describing their home life. When the parent spoke to the child in Finnish, the child appeared to understand.*

*But **what** were the parents actually saying at home and **how** were the children really reacting to it?*

That is a juicy research problem to solve. If one could answer this question, maybe it would be possible to teach bilingual parents to copy the most successful bilingual families? That would be great, wouldn't it?

I decided to ask families with children at very different Finnish language skills levels to let me record real life parent-child conversations in their homes to find out exactly what the parents were saying and what did the children understand and say themselves.

*How do parents and children understand each other when the children's linguistic proficiency in the parent's language varies this much?*

I wanted to discover:

- How much Finnish do different parents speak at home?
- What kind of Finnish do they speak?
- For what purpose do they use Finnish?
- How do they speak it?
- How do we know that the children understand?
- How do children respond?

- When do children respond in Finnish?
- What correlates with children's level of bilingualism?

I spent the following three years studying that. The children in my study were aged from 5 to 15. I followed four families into their homes, community language schools, in some cases to their church and sometimes into the mainstream school too. I spent countless days at community events, Saturday School and church to observe how children and parents use language in our community and found out a lot about how bilingual parents really interact at home with their school-aged children.

The Bilingual Activation Methodology that I developed to help children speak a language that they appear to understand, but do not speak, is based on this research experience.

*In this blog you can read more stories from my research and from my community education work in the Finnish community in London from 2000-2017.*

PS:

While I was writing this article my 18-year-old son was folding laundry in the next room. I went to him and asked: "Mitä kuuluu?" "Hyvää", he answered with correct grammar.

I asked him if he remembered how all the kids at the Finnish Saturday School used to answer with the same mistake. Sure, he said, everyone said: "Hyvin". Why do you think that was, I enquired?

After thinking for a while, he came to the conclusion that everyone understood the social meaning of the greeting. That was obvious from the context. They knew that the answer should be some sort of version of the Finnish word for "Good" – but were unsure of which version.

Looking back to his childhood memories my son thought that all the children had to think, and everyone made the same mistake, based on their dominant language English. **In other words, the children had not learned this extremely common greeting sequence off by heart.**

That suggests to me that the **volume and frequency** at which the children of our community engaged in this everyday greeting was insufficient for automation of the correct answer. Hence, they had to think it through every time before answering.

The mistake was a sign of processing a thought. In fact, mistakes are signs of thinking. This is why mistakes are so important in learning - but more about that another time.