

The Home Language of Finnish-speaking Children in Sweden: Project Digitalisera-Revitalisera

Background

There are 200,000 Finnish-speaking inhabitants in Sweden and Finnish is one of Sweden's official minority languages. Huddinge Municipality is one of the 23 Finnish language administrative regions, which means that children there have the right to speak Finnish in pre-school. There is also a Finnish pre-school in Huddinge, which is open to all children – not just Finnish-speakers. However, in spite of that, many Finnish children go to Swedish-speaking day care/pre-school groups. To investigate ways to improve support for minority languages, the University of Uppsala and the municipality of Huddinge instigated the Digitalisera-Revitalisera project, led by Research Director, Petra Petersen. All pre-schools that used Finnish had the opportunity to participate in this Digitalisera-Revitalisera project and 12 pre-school groups from the municipality of Huddinge participated did so.

The research data were collected from three pre-schools. With the aid of Skype and tablet computers children were given wider access to Finnish children's culture and Finnish children's songs. The tablet computers enabled multimedia communication with other day care centres in which the language of communication is Finnish. However, this type of project requires not only pedagogical support, but backing for the development of such working methods, for example, because Skype calls were used for communicating in Finnish, setting up the practicalities of that required some preliminary work. For example, the sharing of Skype numbers must be made in advance and who to call and when needs be agreed on and scheduled beforehand. Skype is obviously required and so are tablet computers – as there was also a need to communicate with children and grandparents who lived abroad. The advantages of digital technology and the Internet for such language support is that they facilitate a meeting place and provide a democratic arena. Thus, this research offers children who speak a minority language practical experience in the use of digital media as well as practical experience in communicating online beyond a nation's borders.

Digitalisera - Revitalisera Project: the practical implementation of the project

Petra Petersen's Digitalisera-Revitalisera project affords children the opportunity to move around and play and talk in their native language. There were about 15 pupils in the pre-school groups – in groups of five or six. The children were able to talk and dance and be interconnected via Skype. They also chatted and discussed with each other, and told and came up with fairy tales in their native language. In the photo above Petra Petersen.



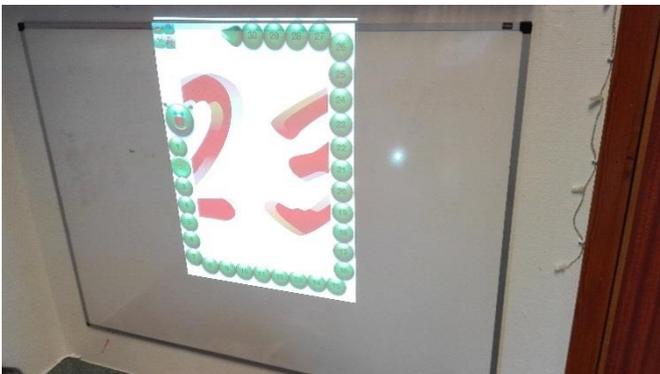
Petersen has researched other minority languages and used digital projects to do so. However, Finnish has received particular attention and led to her being interviewed on Sisu, Finnish-language radio, and in local Finnish magazines in Sweden. Petra's research experiments and her activities to find better ways to support the use of minority languages have continued for three years, so far. She sees the use of minority languages in pre-school and day care as being related to the issues of equality and democracy. Her research has also been used for determining day care and pre-school material supplies. More importantly, because this project is practical and relatively easy to implement, it is significant for maintaining minority languages and also for promoting integration into Swedish society. However, such projects must be planned and be pedagogically correct.

Teachers at day care and pre-school have, however, complained that they do not have enough time to conduct such research experiments and projects. The solution to that has been to schedule Finnish-speaking activities into their weekly events' timetable. Parents were also encouraged to increase the amount

of activities they undertook in their own language. For example, Finnish parents in this experiment read Moomin stories at home.



The children became very interested in the Moomin stories, which led to other children in the pre-school environment wanting to hear the Moomin stories in Finnish. This results in the increase of equality between children, while also encouraging children to learn words from the languages spoken by others in their group. The easiest words to learn were numbers. In the photograph, all the children in the group – native and non-native speakers – can follow the same story on a whiteboard.



From theory to practice and experiment

Petersen's research can be applied in Finland as well. For example, in the suburb of Hervanta, in the city of Tampere, many children are also taught their home languages at school; the languages include Albanian, Armenian, Bosnian, Kurdish, Persian, Somali, Russian and Vietnamese. Playing and singing in their own native language actually strengthens a child's self-esteem and integration into Finnish society. The Skype discussions and songs are relevant and significant for children, demonstrating the importance of learning and the having the means of creation in their native language. As planned teaching, this research into digitally enabled, mother-tongue education revealed the importance of facilitating multi-literacy through information and communication technology and using technology to participate in and influence the field of activity (National core Curriculum 2016). The first experiments in Finland between two day care/pre-school centres began in January 2016. The home language of the preschool children is Russian. However, this research model is also suitable for rarer languages – spoken by children whose day care centres are located far away from each other – because connections can be built via Skype or Adobe Connection. In the Russian language groups, a teacher involves the children by using Adobe Connect to enable them to play and sing with each other for approximately 30 minutes at a time. The children attend two day care/pre-school centres in Hervanta.

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