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Building a culture of assessment in the speech of Finnish as a second language teachers

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This study examines the construction of an assessment culture in the discourse of teachers of Finnish as a second language and literature at the broad level of the work community. The research material consists of thematic interviews conducted in 2021 (N=9). The interviews have been analysed by means of interpretative discourse analysis. The construction of an assessment culture is the sum of many elements. In this study, these components are described by three dominant discourses: the discourse of direction, the discourse of goal-direction and the discourse of shared expertise. Based on these discourses, it can be concluded that the construction of an assessment culture should be based on assessment guidelines that are commonly shared in basic education practices. The cornerstone of this is pedagogical participation and open discussion of assessment principles and practices between different members of the working community. This requires a dialogical interaction within the work community. Through this, it is possible to achieve a common assessment culture. A new way of building a culture of assessment requires a new kind of community building, an opening up of assessment concepts, a clarification of curriculum texts and cooperation across disciplines.

Keywords: Assessment culture; pedagogical action; discourse analysis; Finnish as a second language and literature

1 Introduction

In fifteen years, the Nordic linguistic landscape has become increasingly multilingual. The Nordic countries are living with the fact that first-generation immigrants are a permanent part of the primary school population. There is always a new group of first-generation school-age immigrants. This has inevitably changed our views on what language skills are and what language competence means in concrete terms (Ahlholm, 2020). The Nordic Council of Ministers' declaration (Nordiska ministerrådet, 2007) called for a coherent Nordic language policy, including the right to study the language of one's country of residence and to acquire the language skills necessary for social participation. Closely linked to this is the principle of equality in the assessment of language skills. The ideals of equality and equity are therefore part of a common Nordic language policy. Nordic

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curricula have been developed in the 2010´s within a language pedagogical framework and more recent Nordic research treats students with an immigrant background as multilingual (e.g. Beiler, 2021; Rosén & Wedin, 2015; Tarnanen & Palviainen, 2018).

In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture (FNBE) drafts legislation and government resolutions related to general education and coordinates the activities under its remit. The Finnish National Agency for Education (Opetushallitus, hereinafter FNAE) is an expert agency under the remit of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Agency is responsible for developing education and the national core curriculum for basic education. In our basic education system, the subject of mother tongue and literature is divided for the Finnish language into the Finnish language and literature (FLL) curriculum and the Finnish as a second language and literature (FSLL) curriculum. In addition to the Finnish as a second language and literature curriculum, the subject of Finnish language and literature includes curricula for Swedish language and literature, Sámi language and literature, Romani language and literature, sign language and literature, Swedish as a second language and literature, Finnish for Sámi speakers, Swedish for Sámi speakers, Finnish for sign language users, Swedish for sign language users, and other students native languages and literature. This study focuses on teachers of Finnish as a second language and literature (FSLL teachers) and their students, i.e. learners who study according to the Finnish as a second language and literature syllabus and use the abbreviation FSLL students. According to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNAE, 2014), the following perspectives are also considered when determining the need for a specific curriculum:

> *The student's basic Finnish language skills have deficiencies in one or more areas of language proficiency, meaning that the student's abilities do not yet enable them to participate equally as a member of the school community in daily interaction and schoolwork, or the student's Finnish language skills do not yet enable them to study according to the Finnish language and literature curriculum* (p. 355).

The teaching arrangements for FSLL students are based on their learning needs. If the student is assigned to the Finnish as a second language and literature curriculum, their progress and performance are assessed in relation to the objectives and criteria of this curriculum. When planning the objectives and content of education for students who have moved to Finland during their basic education, consideration must be given to the students' previously acquired knowledge and skills, as well as their current level of language proficiency (FNAE, 2014, pp. 354–356).

The foundation of FSLL students' instructional arrangements is their individual learning needs. If a student's syllabus is Finnish as a Second Language and Literature, their progress and performance are assessed in relation to the objectives and criteria of this syllabus. When planning the educational goals and content for students who have arrived in Finland during their basic education, it is essential to consider their previously acquired knowledge and skills, as well as their current level of language proficiency (FNAE, 2014, pp. 354–356).

According to the FNAE, evaluation must adhere to the general principles of assessment at every grade level. These principles state that all assessment must be diverse in terms of both content and methods. It must account for students' varying ways of learning and working. Students' different developmental stages, capabilities, and other potential factors that may hinder demonstrating competence must also be considered when planning assessments. Additionally, assessment must be equitable, transparent, participatory, systematic, and consistent. It should be based on the objectives and criteria specified in the curriculum (FNAE, 2020b, pp. 4–6).

The competency level of students with an immigrant background has been a topic of active discussion. A recent report (Pulkkinen et al., 2024) revealed that, according to the results of the PISA 2022 study, there is a significantly higher proportion of low-

performing students among those with an immigrant background compared to the native population. Although the PISA study is not directly based on curricula or solely measures knowledge acquired in school, the performance of students in the PISA test also reflects the success of the goals of basic education. For immigrants, particular emphasis is placed on the knowledge and skills they will need in upper secondary education, working life, and more broadly in functioning within Finnish society (Pulkkinen et al., 2024, p. 108).

Research also shows that the variation in proficiency levels of FSLL students within schools was statistically significant (Kalenius, 2020; Leino et al., 2019). In addition, FSLL students who leave primary school are less prepared for further education (Kalalahti et al., 2017). Research evidence that assessment treats students differently (Hildén et al., 2016) turned the spotlight on teachers' assessment skills and assessment culture. At the same time, while interest in language teachers' assessment competence has also become a topical research area worldwide (Harding & Kremmel, 2016; Popham, 2018), research on the construction of assessment culture has received less attention.

Recent surveys and studies (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022; Venäläinen et al., 2022) show that the learning outcomes of FSLL students at the end of basic education are on average weaker than those of students who speak Finnish as their mother tongue. It has also been pointed out that there are areas for development in the quality of FSLL teaching, the organization of teaching, and the assessment of language skills. According to research, FSLL teachers do seek collegial support for their assessment decisions, but despite this, the assessment criteria attached to the FSLL curriculum criteria (FNAE, 2014) for the FSLL subject area were seen as abstract texts. The implementation of assessment is therefore not only about how individual teachers apply the norms and regulations set out in the curriculum. The essence of assessment lies in how common practices support the teacher's assessment work.

There has been considerable interest in defining the various factors related to teacher assessment skills. The best known is probably the TALiP (Teacher Assessment Literacy in Practice: A Reconceptualization) model developed by Xu and Brown (2016), which provides a hierarchical structure of the components of assessment literacy. The TALiP model concretely outlines the different components that contribute to the formation of an assessment culture. I discuss the TALiP model in more detail in section 2.1.

The study of the evaluation culture is therefore justified because, ultimately, it is about the reliability and consistency of evaluation. FSLL assessment should be free from randomness or other external factors (Sadler, 2009), such as who is assessing the FSLL learner's language proficiency. Assessment is always subjective, and curriculum texts have been found to be open to interpretation. The introduction of assessment criteria requires mutual reflection and open discussion within the working community. This idea is supported by research evidence that effective collaborative practices play an important role in the introduction and interpretation of end-of-course assessment criteria (Kauppinen & Hellgren, 2021).

Research shows (Shapiro-Lishchinsky, 2011, pp. 649, 655) that teachers face various ethical dilemmas in their work almost every day, which are related to their decision-making and actions in different situations. These dilemmas are part of the teacher's professional development, as addressing and resolving them contributes to the development of ethical competence, which is especially needed in assessment work. Ethical competence is crucial for teachers, since it guides their decision-making, ensures fairness and justice, and protects students' well-being and equality. Assessment is also one of the most effective pedagogical tools for teachers to guide student learning (Andrade et al., 2019) and, when well implemented, it helps FSLL students to improve their Finnish language skills and thus, their learning outcomes. From these perspectives, it is important to explore the assessment discourse of teachers of FSLL and, at the same time, to gain insights into the meanings of assessment and the related relationships

within a culture of assessment. The aim of this article is to examine the construction of an assessment culture in Finnish basic education. The target group are teachers of Finnish as a second language and literature.

2 The theoretical background of the research

The theoretical background of the study examines the construction of an assessment culture as part of a teacher's work. Assessment is part of teachers' work and pedagogical expertise (Looney et al., 2018). The underlying issues related to assessment reflect teachers' personal learning, knowledge, attitudes, values, and the assessment culture in which teachers work. The culture of assessment has been found to influence how teachers construct their approaches to assessment and how they teach and assess (Brown et al., 2011). The Xu and Brown TALiP model (2016) is a conceptual framework designed to explore and understand Teachers' Assessment Literacy in Practice (TALiP). The model provides a comprehensive approach to examining the factors influencing teachers' assessment practices in real-world contexts. It highlights how assessment literacy is not just a matter of technical knowledge but also shaped by contextual, cognitive, and affective factors (see Figure 1).

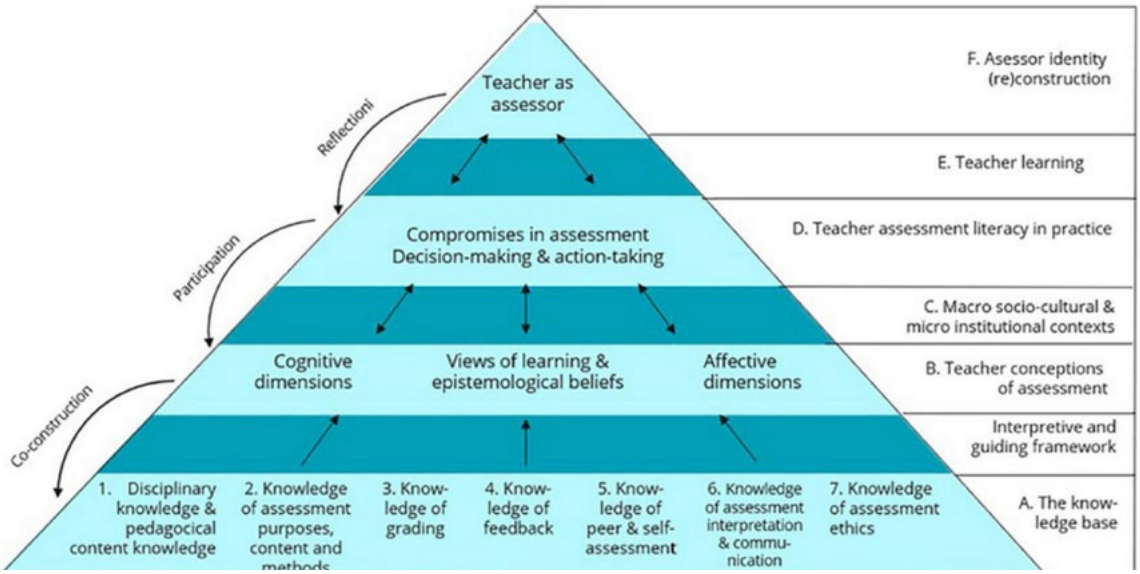

Figure 1. TALiP Model (Xu & Brown, 2016)

At the core of the model is the knowledge base, which consists of seven elements: (1) subject-specific and pedagogical content knowledge; (2) knowledge about the purpose, content, and methods of assessment; (3) knowledge of grading; (4) knowledge of feedback; (5) knowledge of peer and self-assessment; (6) knowledge of interpreting and communicating assessment results; and (7) knowledge of assessment ethics. The model describes the development of assessment competence through the interpretive and guiding framework, which shapes teachers' conceptions of assessment. Teachers operate within macro-level sociocultural communities and micro-level institutional contexts, and the context influences the assessment practices that teachers adopt. The TALiP model provides a nuanced and practical lens for understanding the multifaceted nature of teachers' assessment literacy, emphasizing the interplay of knowledge, cognition, emotions, and context in shaping effective assessment practices.

In the Finnish educational context, assessment culture is associated with shared understandings of the purposes and tasks of assessment, and with participation and discussion between those involved in assessment. The clarity of assessment tasks and

feedback, adherence to agreed assessment principles, reliance on criteria and diversity are features of a good assessment culture (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2015). In Finland, teachers' assessment activities are guided by the national curriculum framework established by the Finnish National Agency for Education. The documents governing teaching and assessment significantly impact teachers' conceptions of assessment and how they implement assessment. Three core perspectives build on these competencies: cognitive, affective, and instructional perspectives. These perspectives inform teachers' practical actions and decision-making, which are affected by the school context and teachers' sociocultural environment (Atjonen, 2021; Mäkipää et al., 2021; Xu & Brown, 2016). In Finland, teacher autonomy has been made possible by the relatively low stakes of assessment, and Finnish teachers can largely decide their own classroom assessment practices due to the absence of teacher accountability systems related to assessment (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2025; Nieminen et al., 2024).

Assessment is always linked to a context and actors, i.e. it is part of the common culture of a community. The perceptions that have shaped assessment culture have been shaped by changes in education, societal values and the culture of the subjects themselves, among others (Nieminen, 2019; Xu & Brown, 2016.) Various contextual factors influence teachers' perceptions and practices of assessment and, consequently, assessment culture. Teachers' perceptions may reflect societal and cultural views, but also the goals set for assessment in their own work communities. Teachers' perceptions also reflect the influence of curriculum criteria. (e.g. Barnes et al., 2014; Brown, 2011; Fulmer et al., 2015). The basic education curriculum criteria (FNAE, 2014) encourage the development of a culture of assessment. Changing assessment practices can be challenging, as the culture of a company's assessment culture will change as the type of assessment practices, we have established become more established. (Deneen & Boud, 2014; Virtanen et al., 2015).

2.1 The role of the teaching community in the development of an assessment culture

The whole teaching community contributes to the emergence of an assessment culture. Investing in the social reality practices of the teaching community pays off, as research shows that high-quality interaction improves teachers' relationship with their work (Admiraal et al., 2012; Wang & Tarn, 2017). It is worth remembering that the Finnish school institution has an associated teaching profession, based on higher education, specific competences, and professional terminology (Heikkinen et al., 2020). The teaching profession is strongly associated with a culture of doing things alone (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016), yet the importance of a community atmosphere as part of the school community and its activities is considered important (see FNAE, 2020a). Assessment culture and assessment policies play a significant role in the environment where teachers exercise their agency. Assessment simultaneously guides and constrains teaching, both supporting and restricting teacher agency (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2025). Interaction between teachers can be seen as a built-in function of the organization, strongly influenced by the school environment (Ivy, 2020). The focus of this study is on FSLL teachers, but the working community in the secondary school consists of a large community of subject teachers. Assessment is present in every curriculum, and it is therefore important to look more broadly at the construction of a culture of assessment across the teacher community. In this way, it is possible to build a culture of assessment where teachers with different expertise can express their views on assessment (Midthassel et al., 2000). Members of the teaching community come from different walks of life, which leads them to interpret meaning in different ways (Johnson, 2004). Social groups are part of the culture, which manifests itself in different ways of articulating the world. Members of the work community act not only as individuals but also as members of different

cultural and social groups (Gee, 2014). Thus, this study focuses on the meanings FSLL teachers attach to the culture of assessment and its construction.

One concept that describes the work and level of interaction of a teacher is agency. According to Maclellan (2017), agency is the most important pedagogical asset of a teacher. The experience of agency implies that teachers have the possibility to influence both their own work and the school. Teachers' agency is influenced, among other things, by teachers' different conscious and unconscious personal beliefs about students, teaching, assessment, and the purposes of education (Priestley et al., 2015). Teacher agency is highly context-dependent and is always enacted through the interaction between the individual and the environment. Agency can be examined from an ecological perspective, in which case it refers to making choices between the prevailing educational policies, school, classroom, and conditions. The ecological perspective emphasizes that different professional environments provide different opportunities for teacher agency. (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2025; Priestley et al., 2012; Tao & Gao, 2017.) Laivuori et al., (2024) have proposed a classification of teacher agency in reforms, identifying four distinct agency profiles: high professional agency, reduced collective efficacy, active help-seeker, and commitment to mutual agreement. The key differences between these profiles relate to teachers' sense of collective efficacy and their tendency to either value common rules or question them and seek help.

This autonomous approach to work is therefore seen as professional autonomy, which is one of the attractions of the teaching profession. The assessment culture based on teachers' autonomous pedagogical activities is still strong. However, cooperation, co-planning, and interaction are emphasized in teaching (Heikkinen et al., 2015). Principals and leaders play a key role in developing a culture of assessment, as their actions can strengthen interactive working methods and increase the well-being and inclusion of the whole community (Venäläinen et al., 2020, pp. 161–162). In this study, pedagogical action is understood as a broad community-based process (Dinham et al., 2018; Komulainen & Rajakaltio, 2017; Raasumaa 2010). In the broad pedagogical action framework, the principal is seen as an enabler of teachers' professional development (Plessis, 2013). The broad pedagogical action approach includes elements essential for curriculum leadership, such as goal setting and developing a sense of responsibility in the work community (Bendikson et al., 2012).

Teaching is expert work. Expertise and collaboration in general require skills from professionals that Edwards (2011, p. 13) has termed relational expertise. Relational expertise involves confidence in one's own expert knowledge as well as the appropriate use of both one's own expertise and that of others (Edwards, 2011, pp. 33–34). The culture of assessment is not a static state but is shaped and developed through the interaction of the work community. Assessment culture is often described as relatively unexplored (Maki, 2010), and it is therefore very important to respond to this need for research.

3 Research design

The aim of this study is to investigate how teachers of Finnish as a second language and literature speech about assessment culture and its construction. The research questions are as follows:

1. What meanings do teachers attach to the construction of a culture of assessment?
2. What elements of the construction of a culture of assessment do teachers express in their speech?

3.1 Data collection and participants

The aim of this article is to examine the construction of an assessment culture in Finnish basic education. The target group are teachers of Finnish as a second language and

literature. The data was collected in spring 2021 as part of the PhD process, but the current manuscript is a completely independent study. The informants in this study (N=9) have implemented FSLL teaching and assessment according to the current basic education curriculum criteria (FNAE, 2014). I have depicted (see Figure 2) in a diagram the timeline related to the implementation and realization of the national core curriculum from the perspective of informant participation. All informants were involved as early as the preparation phase starting in 2012, as well as in the actual implementation stages during 2017, 2018, and 2019. The first final assessment was conducted in the spring of 2020. The data collection took place in 2021.

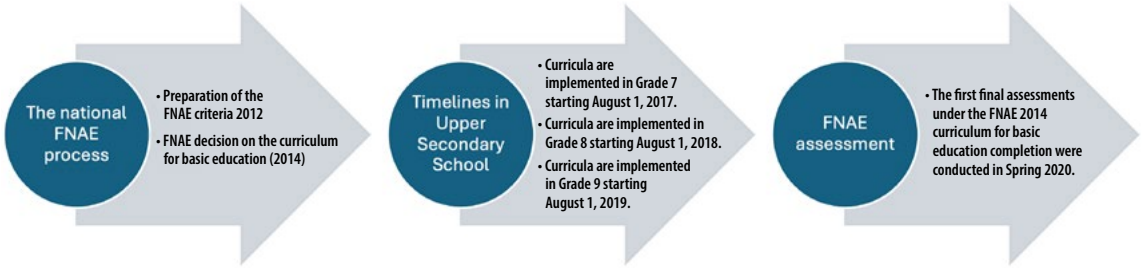

Figure 2. Implementation and timeline of the National Core Curriculum from the perspective of informants

The informants have been part of the local working group of the current curriculum (FNAE, 2014). They had also been on the ground when the curriculum was introduced in 2016 and have been involved in the first final assessment in FSLL in 2020. The informants have practical experience from different periods of the curriculum cycle. One of the informants retired at the time of data collection but was able to carry out the final assessment in spring 2020. The vice-principals' job description included teaching hours and administrative work related to curriculum reform in terms of assessment.

Interviews were conducted using Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet platforms, and the interviews were recorded. The interview material was 26 pages of transcribed material (Times New Roman 12, line spacing 1) with a total word count of 8556. For the data examples, the participants in the study are numbered H1, H2, H3 and so on in consecutive order. Next, I briefly characterize the teachers interviewed (N=9) with some background information related to their qualifications, teaching experience, and area of residence:

H1 works as a teacher in a medium-sized city in southern Finland. H1 has worked as an FSLL teacher for his entire career. He has less than ten years of teaching experience. In his current job, he works as a vice-principal. He teaches a few FSLL subjects and assesses the students in the group he teaches.

H2 is a teacher in a medium-sized town in southern Finland. H2 had more than 20 years of FSLL teaching experience.

H3 is a teacher in a large city in the West and Central Finland. H3 has more than 10 years of FSLL teaching experience.

H4 is a teacher in the Southern Finland region. H4 has almost 20 years of teaching experience, less than five years as an FSLL teacher.

H5 is a teacher in the region of Southwest Finland. H5 has more than 15 years of teaching experience, less than 10 of which as an FSLL teacher.

H6 has been an FSLL teacher for a long time in a large city in south-west Finland. H6 is a vice-principal, but his job description includes weekly FSLL lessons and assessment of the students he teaches.

H7 works as a teacher in a medium-sized city in Southern Finland. H7 has more than 20 years of teaching experience.

H8 is a teacher in the region in Southwest Finland. H8 is a qualified special needs teacher and has more than 20 years of teaching experience.

H9 is a qualified language teacher and works as an FSLL teacher in a town in Southern Finland. H9 has more than 20 years of experience in FSLL teaching. He retired in spring 2020 and was part of the first final assessment of the FSLL in the new curriculum period.

3.2 The discursive approach

The approach of this study is discourse analytical, meaning that it examines how language and discourses construct social structures (Gee, 2014; Jokinen et al., 2016). Discourse research based on social constructionism views language as a situational, multilayered, and functional resource, meaning that the same phenomenon can be described using various expressions. The focus of the study is on social practices (Jokinen et al., 2016; Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019). In this study, the context is broadly examined at the level of the work community, with language use being integrated as a central part of the community's activities. Language use is also considered to construct the functioning of the work community. The focus is on the meanings shared by the work community. I understand discourses as relatively systematic relationships of meaning that, on the one hand, are constructed in social practices and, on the other hand, construct social reality (Jokinen et al., 2016, pp. 34–35).

Different agency is essential in interpretive discourse analytic research, as social practices are the focus of analysis. Interpretive discourse analysis is interested in the processes of construction and construction of the self. For example, we can examine how the roles and professional identities of speakers interact to construct assumptions about the characteristics, rights, and duties of actors. These positions may vary widely across different systems of meaning. Therefore, self and others may be defined in different discourses in contradictory ways (Jokinen et al., 2016.) In interpretive analysis, contexts are of great importance and discourse analysis is used to determine how and what kind of construction assessment culture is described and what kind of meanings teachers give to the phenomenon under study.

In this study, material is considered as a socially produced text in social practices, contexts, and situations (Phillips & Hardy 2002, pp. 3–4). The philosophical starting point of discourse analysis is social constructionism (Burr, 2015; Jokinen et al., 2016). The central assumption for the setting of the research question is that reality is socially produced through human interaction. Discourse studies, rooted in social constructionism, approach language as a situational, multilevel, and functional resource. The same phenomenon can be described in different terms, with social practices being the main object of study (Burr, 2015; Jokinen et al., 2016; Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019).

3.3 Analysis of the data

The starting point of the analysis was to see the information conveyed by the data as contextual descriptions of the issues related to the construction of assessment culture, not as objective representations of the social reality of the work community (Jokinen et al., 2016). The concepts used in the linguistic analysis were sentence types and speech functions such as statement, question or command. In addition, I examined the text from the perspective of modality, i.e. how the teachers described the reality or possibilities of the situation in their speech. I also looked at the metaphors used in the text. Table 1 shows a simplified example of the discursive analysis process.

Table 1. Simplified example of the discursive analysis process

	Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3
Statement on the data	"The discussions and training probably helped - first we went out of our way and took on everything that was pushed." (H1)	"The teacher's personality was the big one, because even today there are still teachers in the building who have very traditional assessment methods in place." (H8)	"The FNAE sets a clear goal to aim for, boundary conditions and clear guidelines for the development of an assessment culture." (H6)
Analysis Unit	Joint trainings and discussion there	Cooperation with colleagues/ assessment climate	Curriculum interpretation/ ambiguity
Coded theme	Pedagogical leadership	Common understanding of the assessment criteria	The importance of the curriculum
Discourse	Discourse of direction	Discourse of goal-orientation	Discourse of shared expertise.

The starting point of the analysis was to describe the information conveyed by the material as contextual descriptions of the construction of assessment culture. In the first phase, I color-coded meaningful statements (252) from the material, aiming to form an overall understanding of the discursive contents of the material. A total of 21 analytical units related to the meaning-making and construction of assessment culture were identified. An analytical unit refers to a statement that, as the analysis progresses, is assigned to a specific theme (Ruusuvuori et al., 2010). Themes emerged from the content of individual statements.

I compared the contents of themes derived from individual statements with the contents of other statements. This process identified statements that shared commonalities within the same theme or led to the creation of new themes. The material was analysed from both linguistic and contextual perspectives, reflecting the dual functional focus of discourse analysis: the mere analysis of linguistic features is insufficient; it is also necessary to examine how language use constructs social reality (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019). The theoretical tools for linguistic analysis included subject and predicate, their placement in statements, and sentence types. Useful concepts included modality, which describes the speaker's assessment of the possibility of a situation occurring, as well as the use of the passive voice and zero-person sentences, with the latter being more generalizing in nature. The analysis examined the overlaps, similarities, contradictions, and hierarchies of discourses through analytical units, discourses, and context, forming a comprehensive understanding of the analysis (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019).

These units of analysis were summarized into eight distinct themes: 1. Pedagogical Leadership, 2. Pedagogical Practices, 3. Shared Understanding of the Basis for Assessment, 4. Common Guidelines for Procedures, 5. Shared Understanding/Collegiality, 6. Everyday Practices, 7. Common Understanding of the Assessment Criteria and 8. The Importance of the Curriculum.

These themes collectively illustrate the meanings that FSLL teachers assign to the construction of an assessment culture. The themes were further distilled into three primary discourses:

1. The Discourse of direction
2. The Discourse of goal-orientation
3. The Discourse of shared expertise

The interpretation of these discourses lies with the researcher, as they are not direct elements of the analysed material but are instead, constructed as frameworks for understanding social practices (Jokinen et al., 2016). The focus of the analysis is on how these discourses manifest and actualize in the teachers' social practices, offering

insight into the dynamics of assessment culture development. I examine the content of discourses in more detail in subsections 4.1–4.3.

4 Results of the study

According to the results, the main discourses that describe the construction of an assessment culture are 1. The Discourse of direction, 2. The Discourse of goal-orientation and 3. The Discourse of shared expertise. Figure 3 provides an overview of the discourses of building an assessment culture.

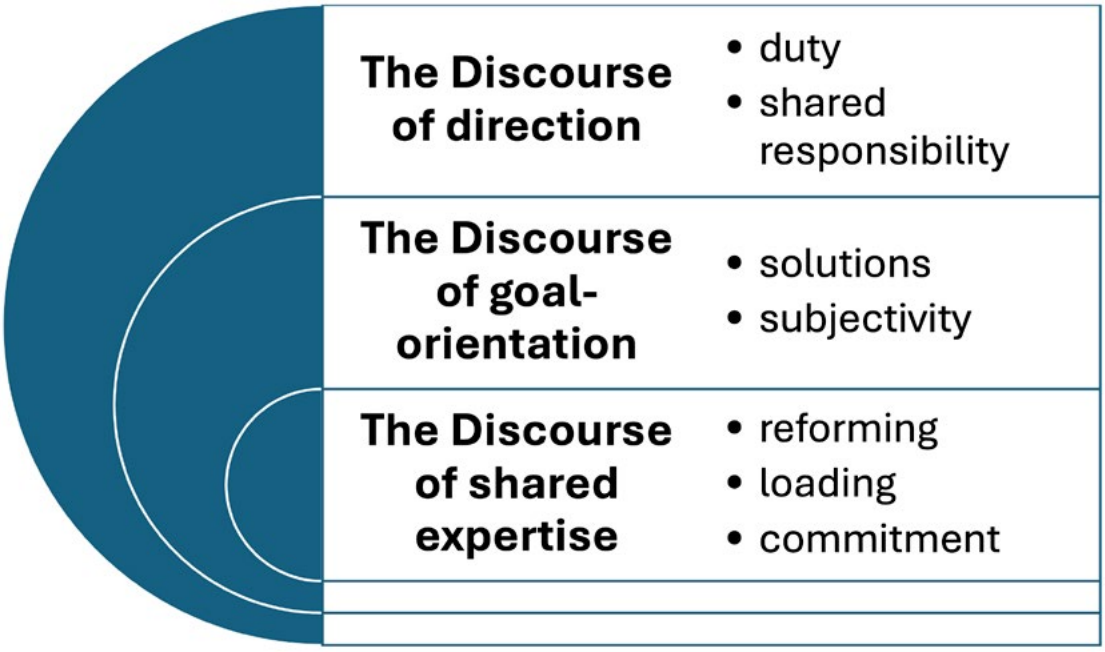

Figure 3. Description of the construction of the assessment culture in the FSLL teachers' discourse.

It is noteworthy that the relationships between and within discourses are not neutral but contain tensions (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen, 2019). The diagram shows that interactional relationships are dialectical in nature and consistently exhibit relational tensions, which also evoke various emotions (Baxter, 2011). Relational tensions associated with emotions are often observed in situations where there are multiple alternative ways to act (Mikkola, 2020), as is the case in the formation of an assessment culture.

4.1 The Discourse of direction

At the heart of the discourse of direction lies the openness of the work community, which serves as a prerequisite for promoting professional collaboration and interaction (Mikkola & Nykänen, 2020; Wang & Tarn, 2018). Teachers expressed the significance of pedagogical action through emotional or attitudinal expressions, as illustrated by H6 in the following extract:

> *There were no discussions in those meetings; they were just reviewed and presented to us. Our culture didn't change. The principal stuck to their own line, and we had no say in it. The assessment guidelines were changed, and no further consideration was given to it* (H6).

The impersonal expression "they were just reviewed and presented to us" (Hakulinen

et al., 2004, §1348; hereafter VISK [*The Big Finnish Grammar*]) portrays the pedagogical activities related to building an assessment culture as general actions affecting the entire school community. However, the use of the pronoun "they" distances the actors from the decision-making process. H6's statement emphasizes the lack of individual agency and describes decision-making as an externally determined process. The described change in the assessment culture appears as an accelerated individual performance with minimal community involvement. H5's narrative reflects a dichotomous perspective:

> *We went through things together, and the principal has been involved in creating the criteria. We've had extensive discussions about this* (H5).

On the one hand, the pressure related to assessment practices, and on the other hand, the opportunities enabled by collaborative leadership. The principal is depicted as a facilitator of professional development, yet their role is also defined through the power dynamics between teachers and the principal (McWorthy & Henningsen, 2014). These interactions guide concrete assessment decisions within the school and bind the pedagogical purpose to the broader school community:

> *I got the blessing for my solution, that we had made the right decisions, and I was doing the right thing. I got like an approval that this is the way to go* (H4).
>
> *We were open to changes in our work and tried new ways* (H1).

The use of approvals by H4 and H1 as modal expressions illustrates the interaction between internal and external factors in assessment decisions. Here, modal expressions emphasize varying degrees of certainty, obligation, or possibility (VISK, §1551). Trust within the work community emerges as a key theme, and shared discussions at the team and school level provide the foundation for a collective assessment culture. H9 highlights the teachers' need to be heard by both the principal and the work community:

> *Yes, we've shared good practices during team meetings, within subject groups, and across the entire school. These have been implemented successfully. We've also had discussions across subject boundaries. Of course, there are subjects where group-specific assessments don't work* (H9).

Shared practices and trust serve as cornerstones in building an assessment culture. Expanding the arena of interaction requires teachers to step out of their roles and take responsibility as representatives of the entire organization. The assessment culture is built around mutually agreed-upon matters, as H2 notes:

> *And then we have put a string around our necks so that it is written in the school curriculum that to pass the course, you must do all these things* (H2).

The use of language focuses on concrete meanings, such as goal-oriented performance. On the other hand, shared responsibility is described as a burden "a string around our necks" referring to the strain that assessment places on current daily life and the necessity to concretely accomplish and assess every listed course objective. Thus, the "string" also symbolizes a limitation on personal agency. The construction of an assessment culture is a system of thought and action that guides the implementation of assessment and how the community perceives the goals and tasks of assessment (Maki, 2010).

The discourse of the planner includes duties and shared responsibilities, which are reflected in teachers' discourse as differences of opinion. In the construction of an assessment culture, attention was drawn to the varying pedagogical practices. At the same time, practices were built together within the work community and teams. Work communities operate differently in different school contexts. Previous studies on Finnish curriculum reforms have shown that the organization of curriculum processes has varied (Holappa, 2007; Tian & Risku, 2019). The role of collaboration has been considered central in these reforms. Teachers who have felt strongly involved in the reform process have

been found to have a structured and clear understanding of the ongoing development work (Holappa, 2007; Pyhältö et al., 2012; Tian & Risku, 2019). On the other hand, teacher agency also influences the practical application of curriculum intentions (Maclellan, 2017), and agency enables the development of assessment practices, as teachers have few restrictions on experimenting with new methods.

4.2 The Discourse of goal-orientation

The construction of an assessment culture is concretized through the discourse of goal-orientation. The shared understanding of the work community regarding assessment is manifested as clear objectives (Mikkola & Valkonen, 2020), which materialized in the sharing of meaningful practices and their outcomes as follows:

> *The curriculum has succeeded from the perspective of assessment, both in terms of assessment culture and new assessment criteria, because assessment is no longer just about an '8'. Now, assessment also includes minimum requirements, which is really important* (H2).

H2 highlights that the building blocks of shared assessment are mutual understandings of the relationship between assessment and its criteria. The reality of everyday school life emerges in a social construct where language plays a central role. A shared conceptual foundation is also essential for developing professional dialogue among teachers. It was shown nearly thirty years ago (see Joyce & Showers, 1988) that developing a shared language and a conceptual framework is one of the key goals of teacher collaboration. In this discourse, the curriculum's significance is strongly seen as providing solutions and definitions. The construction of an assessment culture was also described metaphorically by H3:

> *It is a pillar, a tool, and a safety net. The city worker's shovel – sometimes it's used for work, and sometimes you lean on it* (H3).

The metaphorical expression "a pillar, a tool, and a safety net" equates the construction of a shared assessment culture with a valuable objective, while communicating that a fair assessment system is a critical part of basic education. The metaphor also illustrates the curriculum's role as a guiding document — a tool that facilitates solutions. Ricœur (2000) defines metaphor as a multidimensional linguistic act that in one sense refers to the use of new and creative expressions to describe something. The use of this linguistic resource in this context emphasizes positive meanings: documents guiding the assessment culture are seen as resources that make teachers' work easier and provide solutions for practical assessment measures.

FSLL teachers emerge as responsible actors who make independent decisions regarding their work and approach curriculum texts with a focus on finding solutions. However, FSLL teaching involves reconciling conflicting elements, such as personal skills, content, materials, teaching arrangements, and curriculum requirements. The assessment culture is built around many compromises. FSLL teachers, like other teachers, must recognize the impacts of their assessment practices and conceptions:

> *Individual curriculum assessment criteria alone are not sufficient to standardize results in the absence of national standardized tests, leaving the comparison group inevitably as the group with which the individual teacher works* (H6).

H6 emphasizes that teachers strive to establish common guidelines for the assessment culture, which is critical for its development. Xu and Brown (2016) argue that broad and comprehensive assessment competence requires reflective work from teachers regarding assessment and its concepts. For FSLL teachers, this means first identifying their own assessment conceptions related to the FSLL curriculum and openly discussing them at the community level. This approach facilitates the development of a shared assessment

culture within the work community. Adopting and applying new research findings in practice also enhances pedagogical content knowledge (Rättyä, 2017). The goal-directed discourse puts a face on how the different elements of building a culture of assessment are seen as distant, making the discourse appear as an external obligation rather than an internal element and necessity of the teachers' work.

> *This is where the language-conscious approach is coming into its own. Here, not everyone is used to teaching in such a way that it must be considered in all teaching* (H9).

H9 points out that supporting multilingualism and growing up multilingual are general objectives and present in different ways in the teaching and assessment of all subjects, but language-sensitive teaching is still in search of its place. The goal-directed discourse contains a precise message that achieving a coherent assessment culture would require clear, shared understanding of assessment concepts and assessment consequences at both individual and national levels. It is essential that the workplace community can reflectively share its own perceptions of language skills and thus, of language assessment.

4.3 The Discourse of shared expertise

The construction of an assessment culture gains its significance through commitment. This is reflected in statements that highlight discussions on assessment criteria across subject boundaries. Additionally, the atmosphere within the working community and its commitment played a significant role in achieving shared goals. Particularly, the importance of collaboration throughout the working community was emphasized in discourse describing commitment. Discussions on good cooperation, support, and unified assessment criteria demonstrated a positive atmosphere in the working community. Furthermore, transparency in assessment for students was also emphasized, enhancing commitment to fair assessment processes at all levels:

> *We have gone through the assessment, so we have good cooperation, and quite similar assessment criteria have also been used with subject teachers* (H8).

H8 explains that culture of assessment is built through interaction among colleagues. However, transforming the assessment culture takes time and is not a straightforward process. Ideally, developing an assessment culture is a collaborative project for the entire working community, where everyone's voice is heard. Each teacher contributes to building an assessment culture through their daily teaching choices, which are part of a larger whole. Involving students in the assessment process has been a significant step forward, adding credibility to the rationale behind assessments as H5 reflects:

> *Assessment has become clearer for students since it's been opened up to them. Self-assessment and peer assessment have shaped the overall process, and students better understand where they stand* (H5).

Expressions such as "clearer," "opened," and "understand" reflect the expansion of collaboration with students. These expressions are characterized by modal features that indicate evaluations of the plausibility or necessity of a situation. Modality reflects the positive or negative alternatives to a situation and sometimes denotes obligation (VISK, §1551). H5's statement reflects a change in the assessment process and highlights the opportunity to expand collaborative efforts with students.

While the increased collaboration and invested time were demanding, they proved worthwhile as the construction of the assessment culture yielded positive results:

> *We went through everything more broadly. It was time-consuming and exhausting; we almost lived at the school while working through these issues. Discussions and training likely helped – initially, it felt forced, and we took in everything that was pushed at us. Gradually, things began*

> *to make sense, and collaboration proved beneficial* (H7).

H7 reveals that the counterpart to shared expertise has been "exhausting," with collaboration perceived as a time-consuming effort. Expressions like "felt forced" and "was pushed at us" indicate that the process was not the individual's deliberate decision but rather driven by contextual needs. Not all members of the working community understood the time and commitment required to achieve a shared goal. This highlights teachers' resistance to change on one hand, and a solution-oriented approach on the other. H7 portrays the level of trust within the working community. The speech focuses on solutions and positive experiences, emphasizing both the teacher's role and the importance of the entire working community in building an assessment culture. The language contains positive connotations such as "proved beneficial" and "began to make sense," rather than problem-focused discourse.

Collaboration in building an assessment culture has increased interaction and opened discussions within the working community, including pedagogical solutions and new teaching methods, as H3 indicated:

> *All methods are in use: students' home languages, videos, pictures. I think it's not a disaster if the structure falls apart. Even though there's a lesson plan, if a student brings up an idea or I get one during the lesson, we don't worry about sticking strictly to language. I've become more willing to adapt* (H3).

The discourse of shared expertise is dominated by forward-looking and optimistic expressions. New practices and a sense of relief characterize the shared vision resulting from collective dialogue. Siurua et al., (2020) also show that inclusion is built through collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, with dialogue between various stakeholders being essential. The discourse that justifies the value of the profession can serve as a favourable foundation for the appreciation of FSLL. Studies show that internal interaction within the working community and the flow of information particularly influence how ongoing reforms are implemented in practice (Ng, 2009; Pietarinen et al., 2017; Ramberg, 2014). The quality of interaction determines how willing teachers are to develop the school and commit to reforms (Jurasite-Harbison & Rex, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008). Changes in the assessment culture can be seen to have strengthened teachers' professional competencies in assessment.

5 Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how the culture of assessment is constructed in the discourse of FSLL teachers using discourse analysis. Three distinct discourses emerged from the study. These three discourses were 1. The Discourse of direction, 2. The Discourse of goal-orientation and 3. The Discourse of shared expertise answered the research questions: 1. What meanings do teachers attach to the construction of an assessment culture? and 2. What elements of the construction of an assessment culture do teachers express in their speech?

The Discourses of direction illustrate the meanings that FSLL teachers assign to assessment culture in their interactions within the teaching community. The results strongly emphasized the significance of interaction between the principal and the teaching community. The construction of an assessment culture requires deliberate pedagogical leadership based on constructive interaction between the principal and teachers (Lahtero & Kuusilehto-Awale, 2015). Key factors for success included effective communication, the establishment of shared goals, and mutual trust at all levels (Kocolowski, 2010). Additionally, equitable participation and collegial support enhanced inclusion and collaboration (Siurua et al., 2020), which concretized the development of expertise in professional relationships. Relational expertise involves the ability to learn from others and to purposefully utilize both one's own and others' expertise. This reciprocal

relationship was evident in the collaboration between principals, FSLL teachers, and subject teachers (Edwards, 2010).

Notably, a study funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Pulkkinen et al., 2024, p. 61) found that teachers of mother tongue and literature were the most likely to report changes in their assessment practices: 60 % of first-language teachers and 55 % of second language teachers expressed this view.

The Discourses of goal-orientation also revealed challenges in staff collaboration, rooted in the strong professionalism and autonomy of teaching. Many aspects of assessment culture may have been unconsciously internalized during teacher education, teaching practice, or work in different educational institutions using various teaching materials (Nieminen, 2019). The study showed that the diversity and contradictions of factors influencing assessment culture were reflected in how teachers constructed their own and others' agency in decision-making contexts. From an ecological perspective, teachers' previous experiences, identities, beliefs, and ideologies influence their actions during reforms (Willis et al., 2019; Ketonen & Nieminen, 2025).

The Discourses of shared expertise indicate that the construction of an assessment culture is the result of multiple interconnected factors. This was evident in how teacher agency appeared multifaceted in the discourses. Teachers had the opportunity to make decisions and choices related to their work based on their expertise. They actively negotiated the terms and content of their assessment work, influencing not only their immediate work community but also the broader organization. In their study, Ketonen & Nieminen (2024) examined tensions arising in teachers' perceptions of assessment following an assessment reform. The results align with the present study, as teachers expressed that the new assessment guidelines had led to the adoption of more diverse and innovative assessment methods.

However, the reform also brought tensions, as teachers felt caught between the need to provide comparable grades and the need to incorporate all learning objectives into grading (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2024). This was reflected in discussions where teachers addressed administrative instructions from principals and, when necessary, had the courage to challenge them. In Finland, teachers' assessment practices are guided by the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (FNAE, 2014). These guiding documents significantly influence teachers' perceptions of assessment and its implementation.

Xu and Brown (2016) state that assessment involves measuring the curriculum taught in schools, meaning that subject-specific and pedagogical content knowledge are essential components of assessment competence. This was evident in the results, particularly in FSLL teaching, where knowledge of assessment content and methods requires a shared understanding of what language proficiency entails, the subject's goals, and how these goals are assessed. The TALiP model highlights teachers' various perspectives on assessment competence. The findings revealed that both cognitive and affective conceptions, along with teachers' educational philosophies, were integral to their practical actions and decision-making. These practices were influenced by the school context and teachers' sociocultural environment (Xu & Brown, 2016; see also Mäkipää & Hildén, 2021). From an ecological perspective, coherent curriculum documents and support materials are key prerequisites for fostering teacher agency (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2025). The results support the view that schools should consciously promote interaction and trust within the work community. Similar observations have been made by other researchers, who suggest that psychologically safe interaction practices encourage work communities to express even conflicting views (Wang & Tarn, 2018).

The findings also revealed how teachers adopted different roles and attitudes in relation to their agency. This aligns with those reported by Ketonen and Nieminen (2025), who identified distinct teacher types such as enthusiastic implementers, willing adopters, and rebellious teachers. The agency of "compliant critics" was characterized by adherence to the reform, whereas "immune" agency was more difficult to identify.

The results indicate that while teachers valued the goals of the reform, they had varying ways of approaching it and enacting their agency in practice (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2025).

The data analysis also highlighted that the reform of the Basic Education Core Curriculum (FNAE, 2014) has influenced teachers' perceptions of assessment and its implementation methods. It is important to note that FSLL is still a relatively young subject in Finland, and its integration into basic education is ongoing. Our understanding of language, language learning, and its assessment continues to evolve in an increasingly multicultural society. Despite the young age of the subject, it is encouraging to note that a research project funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Pulkkinen et al., 2024, p. 61) investigated the implementation of the final assessment reform in basic education between 2020 and 2022. The study found that teachers of mother tongue and literature, especially FSLL teachers, had the most positive attitudes toward the reform. The attitudes of FLL and FSLL teachers differed statistically significantly from those of teachers in other subjects. This result aligns with the findings of the present study, which highlights the promotion of a positive assessment culture.

6 Conclusions

This study has shown that open interaction is essential for the formation of cooperation in a teaching community. Collaboration between FSLL teacher and subject teacher requires an understanding of the importance of language skills as part of the internalization of subject content. A shared vision among educators is essential for building a common culture of assessment. The challenges of building a partnership are evident in the strong autonomy of teachers and the deep subject-specific knowledge taught. In this study, the Discourses of direction, goal-orientation and shared expertise produced by FSLL teachers described autonomy as a burdensome performance that was led from above. Syrjäläinen (2002) has also made similar observations, stating that teacher autonomy is an illusion and constitutes an educational smokescreen behind which teachers toil. Whether we are talking about teacher autonomy, or the subject matter of the subject being taught, it is crucial to understand the significance of the different background factors in one's work. In addition to understanding, teachers need interpersonal skills and open collegial cooperation. Siurua et al., (2020) have also made similar observations and found that assessment work was facilitated by collaboration between two or more professionals. However, this requires a change in the culture of assessment at school level and challenges the professional community (Sinkkonen et al., 2018).

The basic education curriculum (FNAE, 2014) also emphasizes teacher cooperation. This changes the teacher's work from traditional solo teaching to joint teaching and assessment. Assessment in FSLL is often challenging and creates pressure on the teacher's work (Atjonen, 2005), but by working together, the work of assessment can be shared. At the same time, there is an opportunity to mirror one's own vision with that of others in relation to the curriculum text. In fact, this study showed that the teachers' autonomy in relation to assessment is strong, despite the high level of ambition for the most objective assessment possible. Teachers' speech revealed that the teaching profession involves internal (e.g. values) and external (e.g. social relationships) factors that together influence how FSLL teachers view, feel, and understand curriculum assessment and their relationship to it (Davey, 2013; Stenberg, 2011).

All teachers play a key role in developing a culture of assessment. The role of FSLL teachers in making the different aspects of curriculum assessment visible is particularly important. To effectively bring about change in assessment practices, all school staff must be involved in the development of assessment. This is possible through commitment and the definition of a common direction. Kauppinen (2010) points out that curriculum interpretation relies on teachers' perceptions of texts as polyphonic sets of meanings,

in which several parallel dimensions of interpretation appear. Also in this study, FSLL teachers described curriculum texts as containing different levels of abstraction.

This study concerns one group of teachers, the FSLL teachers' talk about the construction of a culture of assessment. The interviewees worked in different workplaces and positions. A discourse analytical approach to the data provided detailed insights into teachers' attitudes towards assessment and its different meanings as part of their own teaching work as members of a work community. However, the study has limitations, as it consists of interviews with a single teaching staff and a rather small sample size.

The data analysed reflects themes related to the concept of assessment culture. Assessment is seen as a part of pedagogical activity, guided by both the curriculum criteria and the commonly shared assessment practices. Teachers' approaches to assessment in determining language competence were strongly linked to the objectives of the FSLL curriculum. Assessment culminated in the question of whether to assess FSLL students´ Finnish language skills or their mastery of the content of the curriculum being assessed. The teachers' expertise was emphasized at the same time as the collegial cooperation. The results support the idea that the culture of assessment should be consciously promoted throughout the whole working community. The key is to find a common vision of the components of quality and equitable assessment in the FSLL curriculum. This is made possible by open discussions among all members of the working group, a shared sense of urgency and the exchange of assessment information. In the future, it would be valuable to explore the perspective of other teachers in our primary education system, for example, regarding the interactional practices surrounding the construction of an assessment culture.

The opening of the FSLL perspective is significant, as in the future our teachers will increasingly assess and determine students' Finnish language skills at different levels of education. Our teacher training must also take this change into account and respond to the need for assessment training. It is gratifying that there is research available in which the TALiP model is used to describe the assessment competence of teacher students. The TALiP model served as the unit of analysis for the collected data and provides an opening for the development of assessment periods in teacher education (see Atjonen et al., 2022).

The culture of values affects all teachers, especially in countries where the teaching of a second language is an important issue. Almost all Nordic countries, in addition to Finland, teach their mother tongue as a second language to non-native students, which is why the results of this study can be applied to contexts other than Finland. It should be remembered that the second-language teaching along with the various forms of mother tongue teaching associated with it, have a history of half a century in the Nordic countries. It can therefore be assumed that the building blocks of the assessment culture are similar in other Nordic countries. However, this will only become clear with a more detailed analysis, which would involve a comparison of the assessment rates in the Nordic curricula and a comprehensive survey of second language teachers.

Despite its limitations, this study holds its place. Particularly, teacher education plays a crucial role in developing the assessment culture in schools and enhancing teachers' assessment competence (e.g., Xu & Brown, 2016; Atjonen et al., 2019). Research (Ketonen & Nieminen, 2024; Ketonen & Nieminen, 2025; Atjonen et al., 2022) shows that while reforms are necessary and tensions are inevitable, simply implementing reforms and leaving teachers and schools to deal with the consequences is not sustainable. This article does not aim to present individual solutions; rather, it serves as an opening for culturally sensitive assessment reforms. This research provides one interpretation of the factors influencing the construction of an assessment culture in the context of second-language assessment. However, the focus is not solely on the assessment of Finnish as a second language and literature, as the Nordic countries, for example, share a very similar education system. Therefore, this study serves as a valuable starting point for

broader discussions and further research, both in practice and in planning future teacher education and professional development for teachers.

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The author declared no conflict of interest to disclose.

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