

## OPENING OF THE HEINOLA SEMINAR

Kalevi Pohjala (National Board of General Education)

Dear Friends,

I have the honour and pleasure to welcome you all to the Seminar on Language Testing in School at the Heinola Course Centre for the coming three days. This seminar is connected with the 8th International Language Testing Symposium and the AFinLA Symposium which were both held at the University of Tampere during the weekend. The theme of the Tampere conferences was Language - Knowledge and Skill.

As Finland had undertaken to arrange the 1984 Symposium the Finnish representatives of the IUS, Dr. Viljo Kohonen from the University of Tampere and Mrs. Hilka von Essen from the Commercial College of Heinola, contacted me and asked whether the National Board of General Education was interested in arranging another seminar on language testing in Heinola. The National Board of General Education and its Course Centre in Heinola were naturally very glad about the offer and decided to take advantage of the presence in Finland of testing experts from so many countries as this would provide an excellent opportunity to compare current practices and trends in the field. In order to arrange this seminar on testing we formed a planning group which consisted of 5 persons: Viljo Kohonen, Hilka von Essen, Lauri Ollila, Head of the Heinola Course Centre, Kalevi Peltola, the course assistant of the centre, and myself.

The planning group is grateful for financial support from the Finnish Ministry of Education, the British Council, the America Centre, the Goethe Institut, the Nordic Language and Information Centre and the University of Tampere. This assistance made it possible for us to invite 13 foreign guests. The seminar is thus an international event: there are participants from 11 countries.

The majority of the participants here, some 55, naturally come from our own country. The invitation to the seminar was sent to all teacher training departments and teaching practice schools of our universities, the Educational Research Centre of the University of Jyväskylä, the Matriculation Examination Board, all the 11 provincial governments, the Finnish Foreign Language Teachers' Association and about a dozen local educational authorities whose experimental schools have been involved in innovations. Through their representatives we will be able to disseminate the outcomes of the seminar widely in our country.

A conference like this is very important from the Finnish point of view at the moment. It is necessary to be aware of international trends in the field of foreign language teaching. Besides, we are undergoing a time of rapid changes in language teaching. Goals and contents of teaching are changing or have recently changed, new teaching methods are being developed and

the new technology is bringing new possibilities for language teaching. In view of such developments, it is necessary to evaluate the current practices in language testing.

In accordance with the new school law we are going to give up ability grouping in the teaching of foreign languages and mathematics in the comprehensive schools from the beginning of the next school year and we are going towards more heterogeneous teaching groups. To make this possible we revised our syllabuses for foreign languages in 1982. In these official documents emphasis has been shifted on to communicative language teaching. This means that evaluation will also be carried out according to one and the same syllabus for all learners. We have therefore had to experiment with new testing procedures in a number of schools. In those schools the emphasis has been transferred away from the comparison of students towards criterion-referenced assessment. Learning is in the first place evaluated with reference to the goals set for the teaching, and the students' results are compared with their earlier records. It is important to support the students in their learning task while it is less important to compare and classify them, though this is also needed to some extent. The task of the comprehensive school is above all to create such learning situations that every student can work as fully as possible according to his ability and conditions of life.

Post-comprehensive education, both in senior secondary schools and in vocational schools, is also undergoing major reforms affecting both the administrative framework and the contents of teaching. Both these reforms were similarly preceded by experimental work. As a result of the syllabus reform another big change can be expected in the late 1980's concerning foreign language tests in the matriculation examination, which students take at the age of about 19. The current test types include multiple-choice in reading and listening, a structural gap-filling test, and a short essay. Multiple-choice tests are difficult to set at suitable level of difficulty: some have been too easy, others too difficult. Besides, the theoretical basis of using the technique as a measure of communicative abilities can be questioned. A further problem is the backwash effect of testing on classroom practices. A lot of research and development work is being done in the field of testing both at the comprehensive schools and post comprehensive schools in Finland, and you will hear about these Finnish experiences during the seminar.

The seminar will focus on discussing the current state of the art of language testing within a communicative goal orientation in school. I hope the seminar will provide some answers to the following questions:

- current views of testing communicative competence
- current practices in matriculation exams - what can we learn from each other?
- criterion-referenced testing and graded objectives and tests for mixed-ability groups
- accuracy, fluency and comprehensibility in language use

- open-ended comprehension questions - how to ensure interrater reliability?

The international exchange of experiences and information is an important goal of the seminar. I believe the Heinola Course Centre will provide a pleasant environment for sharing information and learning from each other. To disseminate information further, our purpose is also to publish a report about the seminar in spring.

The programme is quite tight. We have as usual arranged some evening programme: the reception of the town of Heinola in honour of our foreign friends today, and tomorrow evening a visit to the new municipal theatre of Lahti. Those who want to see the first performance of the play *Lysistrata* are asked to sign their names on the list later today.

Monday will be a day of theoretical input, Tuesday will cover practical applications and solutions and Wednesday will be a time for summing up.

I hope you will enjoy your stay here and the conference will be a rewarding and stimulating experience to all of us. Once more, welcome to Heinola.