

Skills in participation and social interaction (“fourfold matrix”)



How to get a grip on a student's language proficiency and to support its development?

Skills in participation and social interaction

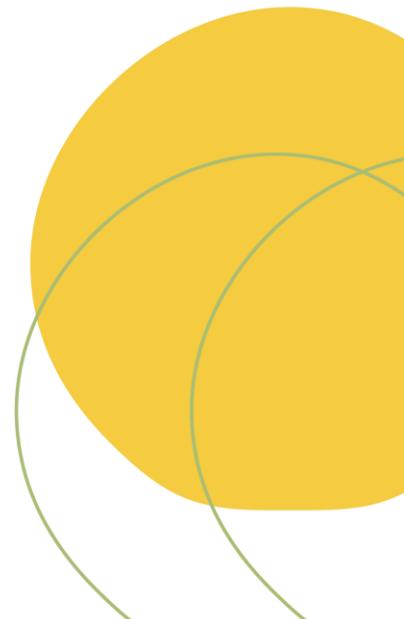
In this animation, we'll be describing the skills in participation and social interaction that a multilingual student, Hardi, has. Hardi has been studying in a Finnish mainstream classroom for two years after completing the preparatory instruction and is now in seventh grade. The different descriptors of skill on the fourfold matrix describe Hardi according to,

- how independently Hardi functions and to what extent he needs the guidance of teachers and classmates and
- In what kinds of situations Hardi can participate in. Concrete situations are often familiar and connected to everyday life, whereas abstract themes include for instance the contents of different subject matters.

The skill descriptors depict different branches of skills in participation and social interaction. It's important to make them concrete, because it's a totally different thing to be able to talk about the past weekend with your friends than it is to explain photosynthesis in a biology lesson. Our goal is to give tools to understand what kinds of skills your students have and what kind of support they might need from you as their teacher.

These skill descriptors show proficiency on a general level and as a teacher, you don't always know the students well enough to be **doing this kind of an analysis**. That's not something to stress over, though. We suggest that you think about what areas of language proficiency feel the most relevant with a student or group of yours. Then you can focus on observing their actions and need for support in relation to those skills.

It's visible in the matrix of Hardi's oral proficiency that the descriptors gravitate towards the left side, meaning that his skills are at the moment best **suited** to be communicating concrete themes. And he needs a lot of support in that too.



Moving on, let's take a closer look at the skill profile. We'll start off with the functions that Hardi is able to handle independently.

- Hardi is able to talk about his experiences, opinions and past events quite independently already. Often, they concern concrete themes, but he can also express more abstract thoughts when the themes are meaningful to him and he's interested in them. He has things to say about the political situation of his former home country or the decisions made by referees in his favorite football teams' games.
- He gives clear instructions in concrete situations, such as in P.E. when playing a ball game, he might shout "Pass to the side!" or "Throw it to me!"
- Hardi expresses his needs and feelings in everyday life: "I'm hungry, I'm tired, I'm upset."
- He also has a creative outlook on language and makes analytical observations of it. Often, he plays with language, makes up words of his own and builds new phrases when he's not sure about an appropriate expression. He laughs at funny-sounding Finnish words and makes comparisons between them and Kurdish curse words that sound similar.
- In group situations, Hardi seems to be actively listening to others, even though he, at times, loses focus over the lessons.
- Obviously, he can express even more abstract themes when a teacher or a friend encourages him to draw or act things that are hard to verbalize.
- Although Hardi is so creative with language, he seems to need support and encouragement in using his first language as a resource, for instance an online translator or a dictionary of his first language has helped in many ways.
- Conflicts seem to be problematic for Hardi. In situations that are agitating or surprising enough, he might ask, for example, "why someone's bullying", but more often he evades these situations by walking away or staying silent. The teacher's support is extremely important here – sometimes it's a matter of linguistic difficulties but most often it's about him not believing that he could have an impact on the situation: whether he has the mental stamina to work through similar instances repeatedly or not or even that he's entitled to defend himself. Participation is usually not about the individual's skills themselves but about the means of the entire group or community to allow its members to take part and to interact.



- In conversations, Hardi has troubles in getting – or fearing mistakes, taking – turns to speak and building his case on what has been said before. A teacher might support him by asking directly what he thinks about a certain topic and by helping him verbalize his points. The entire group’s support is again needed: how do the students give space for each other and how do they feel towards knowledge being built together, piece by piece. An individual student doesn’t need to have all the “right” answers readily available. Various opinions and expressions are allowed and accepted.
- Hardi is not active to comment on what others are saying or to make additional questions. He needs encouragement and linguistic models to aid him in conversation.
- The logical explanation of cause-and-effect relations takes a lot of support and modeling. When discussing the more familiar and concrete themes, Hardi can explain causal relations in cooperation with a friend, but in more abstract themes, he needs a clear model to imitate.

To sum up, it can be said that Hardi

- Is able to talk about various things that are connected to his own everyday life and interests.
- Has a creative outlook on language but can’t make use of all his resources (for example, his native language) independently.
- Needs support in many group situations.

Descriptors on the matrix:

- Reacts to different situations naturally and builds his speech on what has been said
- Takes turns to speak and is able to keep them
- Comments and asks questions
- Expresses his needs and feelings
- Tells about and describes his experiences, opinions and events
- Explains cause-and-effect-relations logically
- Gives instructions
- Manages in conflict situations
- Uses different kinds of resources for communication
- Plays with language and makes up words of his own
- Attempts to make use of words in his native language

