



## Historical literacy and contradictory evidence in a Finnish high school setting: The Bronze Soldier of Tallinn

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**ABSTRACT:** This article revolves around three key issues. First, over the last 30 years, the traditional approach to history teaching as memorization of facts and chains of events has been changing. Currently, the Finnish national core curriculum fixes the focus of history teaching on students' critical and historical thinking skills. However, the curriculum leaves a lot of maneuvering scope for schools and individual teachers, but teachers seemingly still emphasize content over skills with too little focus on historical thinking skills. Second, Finland has so far been lacking in research on students' historical thinking skills, even if they have been adopted as an important part of the curriculum. What existing research there is shows that only a few students are able to evaluate the information available and make sense of contradictory interpretations of past events. Third, this article reports an experiment that aimed at offering students more opportunities to develop their historical thinking skills and at the same time evaluated their historical thinking ability. The case chosen was confrontation in Estonia between ethnic Russian and Estonian population around historical interpretations of the so-called Bronze Soldier that led to unrests and violence in Tallinn in 2007. Our research points out that Finnish students have weaknesses in their text skills. Furthermore, analysis of these weaknesses emphasizes a need for research that would examine what kind of interventions change how students learn and how their ability for historical thinking can be improved.

**KEYWORDS:** historical thinking, historical literacy, history teaching, Finland, high school students, critical thinking skills

### Introduction

History as a subject is more than just facts about the past. Working with documents that can be interpreted in several ways or that contain contradicting evidence comprises an important part of historical research (Seixas & Morton 2013; Wineburg 2001; Lee 2011). The traditional approach to history teaching—the memorization of facts and chains of events—has changed over the last 30 years. This has resulted in part from the linguistic turn in history. Ever since Hayden White (1973) suggested that historiography mirrors literary writing and emphasizes “narrativity,” the traditional tenets of historical objectivity have been increasingly challenged. This has resulted in an emphasis on the role of interpretation in the process of historical inquiry. The historians' turn towards language, particularly in the 1980s, did not fail to have an impact on the objectives and practices of history teaching.

The linguistic turn in history was followed by a new emphasis on the interpretational nature of history. This led to changes in the curricula of Finnish primary and secondary education in the 1980s, but it was especially influential during the 1990s. Earlier, the curricula

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were more clearly content based, which meant that competence in history required a good rote memory. Since the 1990s, however, history teaching in Finnish *general upper secondary schools* (hereafter: high schools)<sup>1</sup> has been based on skill-based curricula and instruction. Today, competence in history requires that students know how to determine causes, present their reasoning, and consider the authenticity of the evidence. The stated focus of history teaching is to develop students' critical and historical thinking skills (National Core Curriculum 2003; Rantala 2012).

Jukka Rantala (2012) has pointed out that these changes in the Finnish history curriculum are manifested in two effects: history itself has become more popular, but at the same time, it has become a more difficult subject. The traditional memory-based history was easier to master, because the information provided was static. The "new history" requires the student not only to know the content, but also to be able to deal with the uncertainty of information (Rantala 2012).

Teaching in Finland is based on a national core curriculum, which is determined by the Finnish National Board of Education. It defines the objectives and core contents of different subjects, subject groups, thematic subject modules, and student counseling. It also specifies the principles of student assessment but leaves a lot of maneuvering scope for schools and individual teachers. The present national core curriculum for the upper secondary schools was approved in 2003. According to it, history learning is strongly skill-oriented, and its main objective is to teach students about the nature of history, which means that attention will be focused on critical analysis and interpretation of information (National Core Curriculum 2003, 180). At the moment (2015), the core curriculum is being revised, but is not expected to bring major changes.

Although the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education and the upper secondary school has since the early 1990s emphasized an understanding of the nature of history, changes in teaching practices have been minor. Several reasons for this can be found. Firstly, textbooks hold a strong position in Finnish school culture (Törnroos 2004, 32-34), and even though they may contain attempts to try to teach analytic skills, they without exception stress content knowledge and pay little attention to the nature of history. Furthermore, even though teachers are allowed to choose the textbooks they use and to customize their teaching, they still quite commonly follow the textbook. Secondly, teacher-centered orientation is strong in history teaching, and the teachers' basic ideas about what history is and how it should be taught have not changed. Even when new methods like co-operative learning are used, the basis of history teaching is still content oriented (Rautiainen 2013; Rantala 2012). Thirdly, it has proved hard for teachers to change their teaching methods. It is difficult especially for novice teachers to find a proper balance between substantive and procedural knowledge in their teaching. Moreover, experienced teachers commonly stick to their familiar teaching habits. They might not see the point of following the latest didactic discussion, or they may lack sufficient skills to teach procedural history and hence continue to teach in the way they have always done (Rantala 2012, 203-204). The little research that exists also shows that only a few students are able to evaluate the information available and make sense of contradictory interpretations of past events (Rantala & van den Berg 2013; Veijola & Mikkonen 2015; Kouki & Virta 2015).

Both substantive knowledge and conceptual thinking as well as the interplay between them are essential in the learning of historical thinking. As Rantala (2012, 203) states, "The dichotomy of content versus skills is not valid because both are needed in developing students' historical thinking." Historical thinking skills, then, form the basis of the nature of history as a discipline and its criteria for the formation of knowledge. Peter Seixas and Tom Morton (2013, 2) write that the basic question about historical thinking is "How do we know

what we know about the past?” There is no single answer to this question. Historical thinking is a creative process without a universal structure that would apply to all cultures at all times. Seixas and Morton have pointed to six concepts of historical thinking that constitute a framework for helping students to think about how historians transform the past into history, and guide them toward constructing history themselves. These concepts are historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension (Seixas & Morton 2013, 4; see also VanSledright 2004).

Historians’ knowledge of the past is largely bound to texts. After the linguistic turn, the complex ways in which historical meaning is constituted, transmitted, and transformed have become more apparent (Toews 1987). Instead of simply regurgitating textbooks in order to learn history, students have to read different kinds of texts and make interpretations based on them (Schleppegrell & de Oliveira 2006). Different scholars have offered slightly different definitions of historical thinking. However, all research on historical thinking comes down to documents as key elements to examining how students understand and make sense of the past (e.g., Ashby 2005; VanSledright & Afflerbach 2005; Gago 2005).

Reading itself is not a simple or neutral process. When reading sources, the reader has to realize the manifest contents of a text, which means that he or she needs to understand concepts, the structure of the whole text, find out the underlying messages, detect bias, and finally draw conclusions. Literacy also includes the dimension of writing and communicating as an active participant in a society, the ability to express ideas effectively (Virta 2007). Apple (2000, 42–43) points out that it is not enough to possess technical literacy or even functional literacy; critical literacy is needed, because knowledge is not neutral. Thus, in history, the concept of literacy is much broader than simply “reading and writing” (Virta 2007). In Finnish school contexts, historical text skills are defined as “the ability to work with documents that have a historical context, the skill to read (analyze) texts produced by past actors and to produce valid interpretations about those uses.” (Rantala & van den Berg 2013, 395; Opetushallitus 2014, 415). When historical text skills and historical literacy are defined like this, they overlap with historical thinking skills. In this article, we propose that historical thinking requires historical text skills. Furthermore, by observing students’ historical text skills, it is possible to understand their historical thinking skills.

In Britain, the Schools Council History Project has focused on historical thinking skills since the 1970s (Laville 2004, 172–173). This approach spread beyond Britain, reaching Finland in the 1990s. Educational research has shown an increased interest in the learning of history, particularly since the early 1990s. It is perhaps illustrative of the fluid nature of the field that the terms used to describe the aims of history education have fluctuated: for example, *historical thinking* (Seixas 1993, Wineburg 2001; Husbands 1996; VanSledright & Franks 2000; Seixas & Morton 2013), *historical literacy* (e.g., Lowenthal 1997; Lee 2011), *historical reasoning* (van Drie & van Boxtel 2008), and *historical consciousness* (Rüsen 2004; Von Borries 1997; Lee 2004). Van Drie and van Boxtel (2008) point out that some authors relate historical thinking and reasoning to historical literacy and consciousness. In our research, we have adopted the terms “historical thinking” and “historical literacy.” We believe that historical literacy is an essential tool (although we acknowledge that it is more than just a tool) for developing historical thinking skills.

## Implementation

The data used in this research is linked to a course held in a Finnish high school. We had compiled a set of assignments that were used in the course “The history of the Soviet Union/Russia and the USA.” The other author of this article was also the teacher of this

course. Typically for courses in a Finnish high school, it lasted 38 hours (5 hours a week over 7 weeks). The main idea of the course was to combine problem-based learning with ICT. One part (unit) of this course was a document-based exercise dealing with the events surrounding a statue called the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn and particularly with different interpretations concerning these events in 2007. This part was used for collecting the data for this study.

The course was tooled to offer students opportunities to develop their historical thinking skills and simultaneously make it yield research data about their abilities in historical thinking. Most of the existing studies about historical thinking have used data based on materials compiled solely by the researcher, allowing little room for students to gather and process information as researchers themselves. We wanted to create a more open and genuine research framework. For this purpose, we planned a unit in which students worked with source material consisting of texts and pictures and also had a chance to use the internet throughout the course. They were also given an opportunity to present and check their interpretations with a university scholar who is a specialist in the subject (and also the other author of this article). One important part of this exercise was that students needed to make subject-related questions that they would present to the specialist. The idea was that they would not only get more information in this way but would also learn to pose questions that would direct them towards alternative interpretations (see also Reisman 2012, 240).

The Bronze Soldier is the informal name of a war memorial featuring a Red Army soldier in Tallinn, Estonia. It was erected by Soviet authorities on September 22, 1947, three years after the Red Army returned to Estonia during WWII, on the site of several war graves. The official name of the memorial was originally “Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn.” This was considered too controversial after Estonia became independent in 1991, and it was therefore changed to “Monument to the Fallen in the Second World War,” which reflected the fact that Estonians fought in both the German Wehrmacht and the Soviet Red Army. In April 2007, the Estonian government relocated the Bronze Soldier as well as the remains of the Soviet soldiers (after exhumation and identification) to the Defense Forces Cemetery in Tallinn. Political differences over the interpretation of the war and the Soviet period in Estonia that the monument symbolized had, even before 2007, led to controversies between ethnic Estonians and the community of multiethnic Russophone post-WWII immigrants living in Estonia, and between the Russian and Estonian governments. The dispute surrounding the relocation peaked with two nights of riots in Tallinn, a weeklong blockade of the Estonian embassy in Moscow, and cyber-attacks on several Estonian organizations.

The students received a material pack compiled by the authors containing two pictures of the monument, two news items about the situation related to the dispute in 2007, excerpts from a book *Pronssisoturi* [The Bronze Soldier] (Johan Bäckman, 2008) and a copy of the oath sworn by the Pioneers who guarded the statue during the Soviet era, a tradition revived by the pro-Russian activists during the riots in 2007. Texts were of different lengths and styles. The longest excerpt (722 words) was from Bäckman’s book. The oath was 119 words, and news items were 115 and 350 words. Both news items were from a regional, independent newspaper *Turun Sanomat*, based on information from the Finnish News Agency and printed three days after the riots first began. Photographs depicted the statue, the first one in its original place and the other after the statue was relocated.

The texts contained contradictory facts and interpretations. Johan Bäckman’s book for its part was a polemical—even propagandistic—description of the dispute, and the situation in Estonia regarding its Russian minority. It was quite obviously one-sided, demonizing the actions of the Estonian government and making the Russians innocent victims. All the texts were in Finnish, the students’ native language. The students were also given six groups of questions to answer, which were to be answered over a period of six consecutive 45-minute-

long lessons spread over several days. Throughout the course, the students could use laptops, tablets, and their smartphones for acquiring information.

Question groups in the assignment were built to incrementally deepen the students' understanding of the historical research process. The idea was to teach them to work like historians. First, they were asked to try to contextualize the pictures and texts and link them to past events. Then, they had to itemize the content and, after that, look for possible contradictions found between the texts. Finally, the students were asked to write their own conclusions about the Bronze Soldier dispute. The questions eliciting their answers gave quite explicit hints that the Bronze Soldier dispute contained controversial views. The idea was that this would lead the students to focus on differing interpretations. Ultimately, students were asked to reflect upon their work, findings, and the whole process.

Before students wrote their own conclusions, they were given a chance to ask questions from a university scholar related to the documents and findings made by the students. Questions were drafted beforehand during the lessons. The teacher did not collect the questions in advance, although some of the students wanted to check their questions from the teacher before the scholar was contacted. Contacting took place via a video conferencing system. Students were familiar with both the system and the scholar through previous similar sessions during the course when the university scholar had explained the situation in Estonia to the students by, for example, giving them facts about the population of Estonia, underlining that it is an ethnically heterogeneous country. Scholar explained how the statue was important to Russian identity in Estonia. After consulting with the scholar, students were asked to write their own analysis of the situation and answer to the question "What was the Bronze Soldier dispute about?" Throughout the process, students produced written answers that we have been able to use as the data to examine their learning processes, not just their final analysis. The teacher was present throughout the course and assignments were written at school.

The data were collected from 11 high school students from an average Finnish high school of about 300 students. Six of them were female and five were male. The students were 17–19 years old, and they were all Finnish native speakers. The idea of the course was that students would work independently with the teacher acting less as the specialist and more as their guide to research, answering questions when students needed to consult someone. Students were aware that their answers would become part of this study. They had a right to refuse their answers from this study, but no one declined. Students wrote their answers alone, but they were allowed to discuss with each other during the whole process.

In order to check the limits of what was possible, we had 13 history students (7 male and 6 female) at the University of Jyväskylä do the same exercise and act as a reference group a few months later.<sup>2</sup> The selected students were history majors who were studying to become history teachers. They had all studied history for at least two years and a few had longer periods of study behind them. This group did basically the same exercise, but with less time for contextualizing, and without a chance to check their interpretations with the specialist scholar. Furthermore, they had altogether only 60 minutes to complete the whole task. We assumed that they would have basic knowledge of the research area in question and be familiar with historical analysis and the nature of history.

## **Results**

For the analysis, we used the framework introduced by VanSledright and Afflerbach (2005, 2-4) to recognize different aspects related to students' historical thinking. They point out that the analysis and assessment of the nature of sources draws on at least four closely interconnected cognitive activities that begin with close critical reading. These activities are

attribution, identification, perspective, and reliability. *Attribution* involves recognizing that a source is an account constructed by an author for a particular purpose. It also requires locating the historical context of its author. *Identification* involves knowing what a source is: what type of account it is (a primary or secondary source, a diary, a letter, a newspaper article, etc.); when it was created; and what the grammar, vocabulary, and spelling is like. *Perspective* involved a set of judgments about the author's social, cultural, and political position, which, according to VanSledright and Afflerbach (2005, 2-4), is difficult because ascertaining the author's perspective or personality often takes the form of reading between the lines or below the surface of the text. *Reliability*, too, calls for judgment. Judging the reliability of a source involves comparing it with other sources from the same period or context.

We added one more level, *novice*, below these four, in order to reflect the fact that students might fail to consider the reliability of sources. Wineburg (1991) points to several differences between expert and novice ways of reading historical texts. Typically, novices seek only to know (content knowledge); they ask what the text says (facts); and they assume neutrality and objectivity in texts. It is also common that novices ignore word choice and tone, and when they make their own summaries, they try to tell the "truth" and sound as certain as possible. However, instead of dividing readers to novices and experts, we considered it expedient to have several categories for measuring students' ability for historical thinking.

The data were analyzed by dividing the students' reports into five levels: 0) Novice (sees the sources as neutral information; does not see them as artifacts created by authors); 1) Attribution (recognizes that someone has drawn up the source for some particular purpose); 2) Identification (identifies the nature of the source and can tell if it is a primary or secondary source); 3) Perspective (is able to associate the source with a historical context and to compare the sources); and 4) Reliability (is able to assess the reliability of the sources and compare them). It is important to notice that attribution and identification often go together (VanSledright and Afflerbach 2005, 4). Typically, several of these activities occur simultaneously when an expert works with sources.

Both the high school and the university students' texts were analyzed using this framework. University students were used merely as a reference group that would exemplify what was possible. In the analysis, we were fairly strict and required quite a lot from answers in order to reach certain levels. Thus, for example, when a student displayed some ability to identify a single source as written by someone, this was not enough to reach this level. Students had to evaluate sources as a whole and compare them with each other. Practically all students made some comparison between the sources when asked but rarely included this in their final analyses. Furthermore, it was quite common among the high school students' texts that they recognized only some of the sources as having a writer.

	Novice	Attribution	Identification	Perspective	Reliability
High School students	5	6	1		
University Students			9	2	2

Figure 1: Level of students' cognitive activity

One of the 11 high school students reached the *Identification* level (as shown in Figure 1) and was able to question the reliability of the sources, but even he failed to contextualize the

texts, which would have been a prerequisite for proceeding to the next level. Six students reached the *Attribution* level, and five were *Novice* readers. Typically, the students were able to identify the type of text in question as “a newspaper article” or “an excerpt from the book,” but they did not recognize that someone had written it for a particular purpose. Another interesting finding was that the students did not refer to any sources when they were writing their own analyses about what the dispute was about. Moreover, most of the high school students failed to use the “memorial guards of honor oath” altogether, which was the only primary source given. Only the reader who attained the Identification level, one of those who reached the Attribution level and two Novice readers, seemed to pay any attention at all to the oath. However, it needs to be pointed out that university students had similar problems. Even though they routinely described the content of the source as asked, none referred to it as part of their analysis, suggesting that it was too much to ask high school students to pay attention to it.

In the third part of the exercise, students were asked to itemize the content of each text and identify possible contradictions. Students were also asked to consider the reliability of the information and ask which source (text or person) they felt was most reliable and why. University students were apparently used to controversies in source materials. Subjectivity in Bäckman’s text in particular was easy to discover for them. More striking, however, was that news items were dealt as neutral sources of information. It was no wonder, then, that high school students had even more problems evaluating the reliability of the sources. They were able to evaluate the information mainly to the extent of when, where, and by whom the sources were produced. As for considering the credibility of the sources and authors’ intentions, if at all, they pointed out to a source that for them seemed to be incompatible with others, most typically Bäckman’s book. Thus, it seemed that they tried to find a source that ran counter to others. After discovering this, they tended to think that other sources were correct, providing the right version of events.

The newspaper articles present the relocation of the statue in a more neutral way [than the book written by Johan Bäckman]. (HS Student 11, F<sup>3</sup>)

Bäckman’s research gives only one researcher’s opinion about the events. ... Both news items are fairly neutral. (HS Student 2, M)

Perhaps I trust the text written by a specialist more than those newspaper articles or texts in the internet. (HS Student 3, M)

The author’s opinion may appear in the book and the attitudes of the authors can tinge [the presentation of] the matter. (HS Student 3, F)

Common to all these answers was the fact that although the students tied their answers to the texts to some extent, their answers seemed rather extraneous to them. Only one student was able to analyze the sources more deeply:

Bäckman’s (subjective) book, *The Bronze Soldier*, tells the story of the Bronze Soldier in a very aggressive way (for example, the choice of words: “nondescript platitude,” “Blitzkrieg against the dead”) and is sometimes even hostile. He [the author] feels that the exhumations were a sacrilege, and he is sure that everybody thinks like he does. He also thinks that the relocation of the statue was a military operation. Furthermore, he thinks that the riots surrounding the statue dispute were caused by “fascist leaders,” while the newspaper articles mostly adopt a more objective position. (HS Student 10, M)

This student’s answer shows his ability to back up his argument with this source. More typically, however, students’ answers contained isolated fragments from the sources.

Moreover, the high school students very typically tried to find “the facts” from the texts. That could easily be seen from the questions that the students put to the specialist. In fact, it was very hard for them to come up with questions to present in the first place. They were

much more used to answering than asking questions (see also Logtenberg 2012, 20). The questions the students asked indicate their strong focus on the history of events. They seemed to think that studying history means knowing dates, places, numbers, and names:

How many corpses were buried there? (HS Student 3, M)

Were there 12 or 13 corpses buried under the monument? (HS Student 9, F)

Some of the questions showed their confusion about the essence of what had happened:

Who was against the relocation of the statue? (HS Student 1, F)

Why were the Estonians rioting and against the relocation of the statue? (HS Student 6, F)

Even though the university students did not have an opportunity to present questions to the scholar, we asked them to pen down questions raised by the source material. Those university students who just identified the nature of the sources and summarized their contents posed questions that dealt mostly with content of the events:

How was the dispute solved? (Uni student 10, F)

What is the role of Russians in Estonia? (Uni student 11, F)

However, some of the university students were more able to pose questions that opened the door to a wider examination of the phenomenon:

How does Bäckman explain the “facts” that he claims? (Uni student 13, F)

How was the situation experienced in the Russian media? (Uni student 5, M)

Will events like Bronze Soldier become more common between Russia and its neighbors? What kind of relationship will there be in the future between Russia and those countries that were formerly part of its empire? (Uni student 4, M)

The ability to form questions is one of the most important parts of historical thinking. Developing deeper historical thinking and understanding begins with rich questions. As VanSledright (2014, 32-35) states, students are not able to pose questions if they are not used to doing so. Students need a deep understanding of history in order to know how to ask good historical questions. It is quite typical of novice learners that their understanding is too shallow to ask deep historical questions, and therefore the questions that they ask seem trivial. Logtenberg (2012, 34-38) points out that students who have the best background knowledge ask more questions. Even if the questions are so-called lower level questions, not very relevant considering the topic, this might lead them towards more relevant questions than not posing questions at all.

The students also tended to simplify the past into as few events and persons as possible and ignored those that they considered irrelevant. For many of them, the events of 2007 were completely detached from the situation after WWII, which was of extreme importance for the conflicting Russian and Estonian interpretations. The high school students' answers were vitiated by their failure to appreciate the chronological and topological context involved. They reported the events in 2007 but did not link their answers to the past, even though they had been pointed in that direction. Barton and Levstik (2009, 134-136) note that students quite commonly tend to simplify historical change. For many students, history is a very simple, single narrative. This seems to be supported by our findings.

When asked to consider the reliability of different sources, high school students opted for the written texts. At the same time, they had accepted interpretations from the scholar they had consulted during the process and repeated his interpretations, even copying the formulation the scholar had used. Even so, the students wrote that they placed most trust in the book written by Bäckman. They felt that since Bäckman's book was non-fiction, it had to

be factual, even if they had questioned the reliability of the book. This seems to be connected to deeper problems of understanding historical sources.

When the students noticed direct conflicts between the texts, they typically tried to eliminate them by creating simple narratives supported by selected facts. Almost all the students were able to describe what kind of sources were involved (e.g., “They were newspaper articles” or “They are from a book”), but when it came to contextualizing the texts, they took almost everything that was written as fact. The students were not used to dealing with historical interpretations, which must be historicized and contextualized. The students should have realized that what different texts are doing and what they are saying are two different things (Chapman 2011, 99; 102). What was most difficult for the students to understand was that in history, it is possible to accept more than just one interpretation at the same time (see Chapman 2011, 103).

As expected, the university students were much more familiar with reading source materials and analyzing them than the high school students. They all drew attention to the authors’ ways of writing. However, only two of the thirteen reached the highest level (*Reliability*), and two others were *Perspective* readers. The remaining nine students only achieved the *Identification* level. Unlike high school students, university students had considered the reliability of the sources and the perspective of the authors when reading them. Nevertheless, it was curious to note that even they saw newspapers as neutral and objective sources. Moreover, the oath taken by the monument guards was quite a hard source for many of them to contextualize. Typically, the students only summarized the content of both the oath and the newspaper articles and paid most attention to the excerpts from the book by Johan Bäckman. The difference between the high school and university students’ styles of reading texts emerged best in assessing how they read the texts written by Johan Bäckman.

Bäckman is known for his provocative pro-Russian statements. The texts written by him are very one-sided, and no Estonian viewpoints are presented at all. The newspaper articles seek for objectivity, but the opportunities to get information are limited, and the author’s viewpoint could be influenced by the interviewee’s opinions, standing, and walk of life. (Uni student 6, M)

University students’ answers pointed out that they had more content knowledge to support their arguments, for example, background information about Bäckman not possessed by any of the high school students.

What was maybe most clearly seen was that the university students paid more attention to the language used by the authors. Typically, if they felt that the language used was neutral, they did not focus on it. Their attention was drawn to the language when they felt that it was somehow unusual:

The relocation of the statue is represented as a violation and “as a spit in the face of the world.” (Uni student 6, M)

The government of Estonia speaks about “archaeological excavations.” Bäckman speaks about “the violation of the grave” and “the desecration of the monument.” (Uni student 7, M)

However, it can be clearly seen that while the university students focused on the language used by specific authors, the high school students generally understated the issue and ignored the authors. In general, the high school students read the texts like novice readers and the university students more like experts (see van Boxtel & van Drie 2004; Wineburg 1991).

The university students paid more attention to language of the sources, but they were also more accustomed themselves to using the academic language appropriate to the subject. Schleppegrell (2004) points out that subject information in schools is constructed in language that differs from the language we use to interact with each other in our daily lives. The higher the level they reached on the evaluation scale (figure 1), the more sophisticated was the language they used. The text used in one of the best analyses offers a good illustration of the

use of subject-based literacy. The student's answer to the question "What contradictions can be found between the texts?" shows that he not only introduced the sources and analyzed them but also paid attention to the use of the academic language that is typical of history writing:

The sources describe the events from very different angles: The guards' oath and Johan Bäckman's *The Bronze Soldier* do not question the function of the structure as a "symbol of liberation." Bäckman accuses the Estonians of the direct falsification of history. The Finnish press reports follow the Estonian perspective, which in turn is in direct conflict with Bäckman's views. The Estonian government talks of "archeological excavations," Bäckman of "desecration of a grave" and "destruction of a monument." According to the news media, contradictory information circulated about the fate of the statue, but Bäckman seems, in the book he wrote a year later, to be inclined to say that the statue was actually destroyed. According to the media, the Estonian government affirmed that the statue remained intact throughout. The Finnish press stayed fairly neutral or cautiously pro-Estonian, while Bäckman was strongly against the actions of the Estonian government. (Uni student 7, M)

This student seems to understand very well how to refer to sources and how to justify his own text by using the sources given. Even if his references contained small errors (there were no texts produced by the Estonian government, but rather, a news item that reported the Estonian government's stand) the writer still sounds very convincing. Moreover, this student demonstrates in his conclusion that he was able to analyze and contextualize the sources:

In this question, it is important to understand post-Soviet Estonia's interpretation of history. The answer depends on how legitimate one considers Estonian's reaction to the collapse of Soviet power and its memories to be. From the historical and perhaps purely rational point of view, the relocation of the statue might seem dubious. If, however, one takes into account the fact that many Estonians experience the Soviet power as traumatic, the emphasis on emotional experience seems more legitimate. The emotional experience among the Russian sympathizers was also strong, but an opposite one: they saw in the statue its original function as a monument to the battles against Germany. The sentiments [attached to the statue] are very different. (Uni student 7, M)

To him, history was not just the story of the past, but different interpretations. Monte-Sano (2011) points out that it is quite typical for novices to see history as fixed information, while experts see history as constructed accounts based on evidence that has been situated in context and interrogated for its reliability. This requires not only an understanding of the language used in the sources but also an ability to use appropriate language when writing one's own account, in this case the student's conclusion. In some ways, this student embodies the ideals introduced in the national core curriculum for high schools. However, he also had several years of studies in history at the university behind him. Therefore, it should not be surprising that he could read the sources, contextualize them, and understand the ways in which historical knowledge is produced. Furthermore, university students are a select group, with mere 10% of applicants being accepted in the first place. This is in line with the fact that one out of eleven high school students in our study could reach the same level as the majority of university students.

## Conclusion

The majority of the high school students in our study were not able to properly address the reliability of the sources or to contextualize them. The students had problems, especially when analyzing conflicting documents. It was also very hard for them to "read between the lines." The students were able to find basic information, like what happened and when, fairly easily. It was much more difficult for them to understand why different people interpreted the situation differently and even attempted to rewrite the historical narrative. The majority of the students believed that history was something that had taken place in the past, and for them the

texts were direct evidence of what had happened. Their answers also showed that they were used to understanding history as a collection of facts. Some of them drew attention to small, even irrelevant, things like the number of corpses buried under the monument. Only a few students understood that the assignment was about working with different interpretations, not about trying to figure out what had taken place.

Schleppegrell and de Oliveira (2006) write that history is a subject that presents challenges to students and that this challenge is to a great extent linguistic. When studying history, students need to be able not only to understand the sequence of events and the role that the historical participants played in those events, but also to recognize the fact that interpretation is an integral part of all historical reporting and is built into every text. Many of the high school students and some of the university students found it quite difficult to recognize different interpretations. Instead, they strove to find out “who was right,” thus reasserting their belief about history as a single narrative. In order to reach higher levels of historical understanding, they would need to try to figure out why different people interpret events in different ways. For many people, history is a fixed story composed of predetermined facts; they may even regard it as the exclusive single story of the past (Seixas 2000). Although the Finnish national core curriculum has emphasized for years that the aim of history teaching is to develop students’ critical and historical thinking skills, they still tend to see history as the single story of the past; this suggests there are discrepancies between the curriculum and the classroom reality.

It has been pointed out (Brozo et al. 2013; Goldsmith & Tran 2013) how important it is to shift the focus away from the literacy-content dichotomy. Both content area skills and literacy skills should be developed. The danger in focusing to text skills is the reducing of history into loose tinkering with sources, with students being unable to contextualize them, or connect them into a broader framework. Content knowledge is needed for this. (Bain 2015) In this study, the university student with the highest level of historical literacy demonstrated good knowledge of the topic and different actors. However, most importantly, he showed the ability to gather a meaningful entity from these pieces, which would have been difficult without content knowledge. Afflerbach and VanSledright (2001) point out that the use of texts and sources in teaching may create opportunities for students to increase their historical thinking skills. Many students need help or coaching in order to understand that a particular text is part of a larger historical context or longer chain of evidence from which history is constructed.

Our study showed that the high school students were not able to work with contradictory texts without major guidance. In Finland, skills for working with individual documents have been taught in high schools for a long time, with an emphasis on teaching students to conduct external source criticism. However, our study suggests that this is not enough. The teaching of historical literacy would help the students to understand what history is and how historical knowledge is created. It is important to understand that every historical account has been told from some perspective that can be analyzed and assessed by using the tools of critical thinking. This would also help students to understand how history is used and misused. One factor is Finland’s textbook-centered culture, which needs to change. Textbooks lack multiple perspectives and fail to be truly multicultural. Virta (2007, 22) points out that “textbooks alone are not enough for teaching historical literacy.” It is of the utmost importance that different types of historical texts be used.

Thinking like an historian does not come naturally to students, but this skill can be developed. We find a lot of similarity between our findings and those of Nokes (2011). Nokes named four barriers that prevent the students from reading like historians: 1) a false conception of the discipline of history; 2) a simplistic view of the world; 3) limited or misapplied background knowledge, and 4) high demands on students’ cognitive resources. In

our research, all four features could be found with students aiming at simple narratives of the past: focusing on facts rather than interpretations; lacking knowledge about the context; and a great majority of high school students lacking in critical and abstract thinking required for the task. There is a need for further research to show what can be done to overcome these barriers with regard to both teachers and students.

One important area of future research would be to evaluate what kind of interventions change how students learn and how their ability for historical thinking can be improved. On the other hand, it would be equally important to evaluate teachers' attitudes: how they think about history and the way they implement the national curriculum. This would yield valuable information about possible discrepancies between the set objectives and the reality of the classroom.

History teaching in Finland would need to focus more on how historical knowledge is being produced. As students focus on finding the difference between truth and propaganda, teaching should aim at giving tools for analyzing different texts in order to distinguish information from opinions and evaluate authors' motivations. This would answer to requirements of critical reading and thinking skills included in the Finnish national core curriculum. Students need to learn to understand that historical knowledge is always in relation to the sources used and to the historical context in which the sources are produced. Realizing this was most hard for the students. They tried to form a single narrative, making truth and propaganda the opposite ends and, in the final analysis, lost sight of the original documents.

In retrospect, we can see some limitations in how we gathered the data. Although the teacher was present throughout the course, we did not examine how students gathered information. Thus, we cannot say how and where students gathered information when they contextualized the topic. Therefore, it is not possible to say how critical students were in regards to information they found from the internet and what sources they used. This would be an interesting subject of further research. Another point of criticism is that we could have put more emphasis on working together. Instead of writing everything down, some parts could have consisted of group work and discussions that could have been recorded. However, as it is, students at Finnish high schools are used to working alone and writing long answers.

Even if this was not our intention, we made one important related discovery. After the course, students described feelings of empowerment as a result of outside attention paid to them. Even if the questions they put to the scholar were somewhat unimportant and irrelevant, the questions were authentic, and they increased students' feeling of agency. Students lauded the arrangement in which they were not just passive recipients of information. The value of breaking the confines of the classroom was apparent. This would suggest that it might be worthwhile to pay more attention to how students process information, what makes them interested in the subject and makes them not only objects, but active subjects.

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<sup>1</sup> We use *high school* instead of *Finnish general upper secondary school* (*lukio* in Finnish) for the sake of clarity. In Finland, the post-compulsory upper secondary level comprises general and vocational education. After comprehensive school education, 95.5% of school-leavers pursue further voluntary basic education (2.5%) or continue their studies in upper secondary schools (54.5%) or in initial vocational education and training (38.5%). Upper secondary education offers general education for students of approx. 16–19 years of age. Subjects are taught in courses that are not bound to a particular year of study. It usually lasts three years.

<sup>2</sup> The University of Jyväskylä is a nationally and internationally prestigious research university that focuses on the human and natural sciences. The QS World University Rankings by Subject has ranked the University of Jyväskylä among the world's top 200 universities in education, psychology, and history. For education, it is ranked among the 51–100 top universities and for history among the top 151–200. (<http://www.topuniversities.com/subject-rankings>)

<sup>3</sup> Students' answers have been numbered and indicate whether a student is male or female, although there were no visible gender differences.