

Mothers learning their children's language

Vietnamese HOA worked and raised her children in Finland for 19 years without speaking any Finnish. FAZILE, who has moved from Kosovo is worried about the language her children are speaking. Nepalese TARA is hoping for a Finnish friend. These women belong to the lucky ones: not many get to the Finnish language courses.

I am looking for work", the teacher writes on the blackboard with a blue felt-tip pen. Eighteen students copy the sentence into their notebooks. The pens are rasping against papers in the quiet room. **Hoa Tang Thu**, 50, is copying the text into her notebook as well, with small, florid letters. This Vietnamese woman is one of the students of advanced Finnish courses in adult education centre Adulta. The course is intended for immigrants whose knowledge of Finnish is so poor they cannot even cope with everyday life, much less find work. Of the eighteen students of the class, only a few are men. The windows of the classroom overlook Vainö Tanner field in Helsinki. It shows clearly that the variety of home countries in the class is vast. The Nepalese women have caste marks gracing their foreheads, a Somali woman who has wrapped herself in a colourful scarf has dyed the backs of her hands with henna, a Thai girl is wearing a pearl necklace. The northernmost home country this time is Ireland. Grey haired Hoa stands out from the group because of her age: the others are in their twenties or thirties.

All the women have the same goal, however: to learn to live in Finnish society. In theory, the course provides resources for that in 840 hours: a pinch of information about the society, pieces of advice for finding work, language studies, and finally a practical training period. Hoa, who came from Vietnam as a refugee, has been living and working in Finland for nineteen years. Even so, she did not speak Finnish at all before the language course. Today, Hoa is learning Finnish case endings under the guidance of teacher **Eevi Niemi**. Hoa sighs: -Understand a lot, speak little. It is incomprehensible, in fact: In Finland presidents have changed, we have won a World Championship in ice hockey, Turku's mustard has had a change in ownership, but Hoa has not learned Finnish. How is that possible?

Contractor without a language It was May 1987, when Hoa flew to Finland with her husband and two young children. The family lived the first year in a refugee centre. Hoa marvelled at her new home country, its dark days and strange language. After a year the family moved to a rental apartment in a suburb in north Helsinki. The third child of

the family was born in Finland. Soon Hoa found work in a factory. She assembled small metal parts of electronic devices that could not be handled automatically. In the mornings, Hoa would stand in front of her home waiting for the bus, confident of making a new life. Her husband had work as well, in another company, and the children went to the school nearby. In the eighth winter Hoa and her husband took a loan, and they bought a house. Hoa's children adopted the Finnish language and the customs of other children quickly, but at home the family spoke Chinese and Vietnamese, ate familiar foods and decorated their home with items brought from the old home country. Their friends were mostly Vietnamese as well. Hoa and her husband learned to cope without speaking any Finnish. Hoa did not have any Finnish friends. Even at work people did not talk with each other; the contracted workers concentrated on their work. – If you talked a lot, not good. The boss just show what to do, and I do, Hoa says. In early spring 2002 Hoa's factory fired 50 employees. Hoa, who had worked in the factory for over 14 years, was one of them. The energetic woman realised she was an unemployed mother – and did not speak any Finnish. Hoa registered with the employment agency feeling hopeful. She had, after all, got her previous job without speaking any Finnish. For three years Hoa waited at home for something to happen. She felt depressed. – I wait and walk outside. My husband go to work and all the children to school. The dark autumn comes and I want to find work but no one will have me, Hoa says. Finally her luck changed: a place was offered to Hoa in Adult's language course. There are as many as 300 immigrants applying for the course. The employment agency chooses about thirty of them for each course to be interviewed by the language schools. It is precisely immigrant women who are the most marginalised group among the foreigners in Finland: men often learn the language at work and children learn it at school, but the women stay at home. – The look in their eyes already shows who can learn and who cannot. Unfortunately there are not enough places for everyone, teacher Eevi Niemi says. Immigrants are often suspected to be work-shy, but how can you get a job if you don't get into a language course? To Hoa, who is in her fifties, this was a real stroke of luck: many people have to wait for their study place for the rest of their lives.

Children stayed in Nepal – I go to sauna every day, a Somali woman who has wrapped herself in an apple green scarf spells out with puckered brows. Now the students are studying verb classes. The class bursts into laughter because of the funny statement of the Somali woman. Four Somali women continue on the topic loudly in their own language. Eevi Niemi asks them to change back to Finnish. In addition to Somali, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tamil, Nepalese, Albanian and Dari are spoken in the class. For Hoa, and the others in the group, learning Finnish is difficult. Like Hoa, many

of them have never learned to read and write even in their own language. The atmosphere in the class is warm; one's citizenship does not matter here. The students shout out right answers to each other while doing a verb exercise. – In which countries have they found bird flu? the teacher asks. The women shout out the names of their home countries. Despite the unpleasant context they are proud of the chance to say the name of their own home country out loud. What also makes them proud is understanding the content of the news they see in papers or television. It is nearly noon. The teacher shuts off the whirring overhead projector: lunch break. The students spend every day from nine to two at the course. At the moment, the half-year course is their only work, and everybody is taking studying seriously. The women do their homework carefully, and let the teacher know if they are not attending. Hoa takes her lunch - rye bread - out of her bag and starts to chat in Finnish with the small Nepalese woman **Tara Bhandar**, 36, sitting next to her. A tiny nose ring sparkles in Tara's nose. Tara and Hoa have become friends at the course. – How is your family? Hoa inquires. – A few weeks ago, when Tara was feeling unwell, Hoa walked her home, teacher Eevi Niemi says. Tara moved to Finland last summer and was accepted to the language course right away. It is difficult for her to concentrate on her future in Finland, however. Two of her four children, a 13-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl, are still in Nepal. Her husband, who works as a chef, has already lived in Finland for seven years, and Tara did not have the strength to live as a lone parent in her home country. – It is very difficult to live with children without a man in Nepal, Tara says. Now Tara's children are living with their grandparents in Nepal. She does not know when they can move to Finland. Luckily she can talk to them on the phone every couple of weeks. – It is so expensive to call to Nepal, she sighs. Tara is one of the most educated women in the course. In her former home country she taught Nepalese to illiterate women for seven years. Tara does not know yet what she would like or what she could do for a living in Finland. She has, however, discussed a practical training in a Finnish school with the teacher. For all the students, the course will last a practical training period. The very thought of a proper job in Finland brings a wide smile to the women's faces. It is increasing their motivation that part of the students of the previous course could stay as paid workers after the training. So what would these women like to do for a living? Waitressing, cleaning or caring for children? When one listens to their answers, the question seems almost naive: anything will do for all of them. They can't afford to ask for much. – I don't know if I can get work. I am fifty and have diabetes, Hoa says laconically.

Language barrier between mothers and children The teacher walks around the classroom, giving out hand-outs. There is no study book. The students are supposed to write down sentences starting with the word 'family'. Tara takes up the tasks with enthusiasm, but Hoa looks pensive. Her family means everything to her, but sometimes she feels that her not speaking Finnish has almost formed a barrier between her and the children. The children who are 21, 20 and 15, speak Finnish with each other at home, or otherwise, according to Hoa, they are mostly silent. Hoa does not take offence at the silence: she knows that in the Finnish culture people do not prattle all the time. But sometimes it is difficult for her to keep up with her children's train of thought. She and her husband are also dependent on their children's language skills. The children have acted as interpreters in almost all situations that require Finnish. Hoa also regrets that her children have had to cope at school without their parents' help. – They had to ask the teacher for help with a lot of things. Mother and father can't help, Hoa says quietly.

Fazile Metolle, 37, who came to Finland from Kosovo eight years ago, is in a similar situation. The three children of the brown-eyed, sympathetic woman have done the talking in shops and the health centre alike. Fazile understands Finnish fairly well, now she just needs to learn to speak it. But even though Fazile dreams of a perfect knowledge of Finnish, she is worried about her children growing up in a Finnish-speaking environment. – The children have only one Albanian lesson a week at school. They probably forget their mother tongue as soon as I learn Finnish, Fazile says. Teacher Eevi Niemi emphasises that the women should still speak their own languages, and teach their own culture to their children. – When the child grows up, the mother cannot communicate with him or her anymore with her poor Finnish, she says. Still it is one of the purposes of the course to bring the mothers and children of immigrant families closer to each other by means of the Finnish language. That is why full-time mothers are often given priority among the applicants. – Even if you could tell that a woman would never get work, we might take her to the course just for the sake of her children, Niemi says.

Many of them do not know a single Finn A couple of weeks later the students wander around at the children's section of Kallio library. Eevi Niemi has brought her students to get acquainted with Finnish literature and the library. For many of the students, this is their first visit to the library. Some of them have borrowed videos for their children. – What if you don't pay, when books late? a Chinese woman asks the librarian. The librarian recommends that the women start learning the language with children's book. A serious Albanian woman says she will only borrow children's book for

her children. She wants to know where she can find *The Kalevala* (the national epic of Finland – editor’s note). A pregnant woman from Sri Lanka wants to get a library card. When the librarian asks for her address, she gets embarrassed. She gets a crumpled envelope out of her backpack and shows the address there. Teacher Eevi Niemi is standing by the door, looking at her group proudly, like a mother to her children. Teachers of immigrant groups know nearly everything about their students, since the students come to them with their problems. After school day, confidential matters from the upbringing of the children to embarrassing incidents can be discussed. Difficult matters are discussed as well. A 21-year-old Thai woman **Naomi** has a black eye, covered with heavy make-up. Naomi has just divorced her Finnish husband and lives in a shelter. They celebrated their wedding a year ago under lucky stars, or so she thought. Soon the man started to drink heavily, and when he was drunk he became aggressive with his wife. Luckily there are also happy matters to discuss: everyone would like to be Eevi’s friend. For many students, the teacher is the first and only Finnish acquaintance. – Sometimes the students invite me to their homes, the teacher says. Tara thinks that the most important thing about the practical training in the spring would be getting to know people. – I want a Finnish friend, she says.

So what became of them? A month later the women in Eevi Niemi’s language course are happy: nearly everyone has got a place for their practical training. – During the past years, employers have had a positive attitude towards Adulta’s students, Eevi Niemi says. So where did they end up? Hoa has already started assembling dentistry equipment in the same factory where her husband works. Fazile got a job in a grocery store, and Naomi got the cleaning job she had hoped for. In the following weeks, Tara will start working in a nearby grocery store as well. But something even more important has happened to her: Tara has made friends with a woman living in her neighbourhood.