

HOW DO PARENTS HELP?

Parental involvement in children's learning of German as
an A2-language

Bachelor's thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli saada selville kuinka kuudesluokkalaisten saksanopiskelijoiden vanhemmat auttavat lapsiaan saksan kotitehtävien teossa ja kokeisiin lukemisessa. Tutkimuksessa pohdittiin, kenen aloitteesta lapsia autetaan, mitä mieltä lapset ovat vanhempiensa avusta ja mistä syistä vanhemmat mahdollisesti eivät auta lapsiaan. Vanhempien lastensa koulunkäyntiin osallistumisen positiiviset vaikutukset on jo todistettu monessa tieteellisessä tutkimuksessa, mutta vanhempien osallistumista A-saksan lukijoiden opiskeluun ei juuri ole tutkittu. Tutkimuksessa pyrittiin myös selvittämään voisiko vanhempien aktiivisuus/epäaktiivisuus vaikuttaa siihen, että saksaa opiskelevien koululaisten määrä vähenee Suomen kouluissa jatkuvasti, sillä aiempaa tutkimusta aiheesta ei ole tehty. Tutkimus toteutettiin kahdessa keskisuomalaisessa koulussa vuoden 2010 alussa. Aineisto kerättiin kahden suomenkielisen kyselyn avulla, joista toinen oli suunniteltu oppilaille ja toinen opettajille. Kyselyssä ei siis otettu huomioon vanhempien omaa näkemystä heidän mahdollisesti antamastaan avusta. Kyselyt olivat noin neljäsvivuisia ja koostuivat sekä avoimista että monivalintakysymyksistä.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa kävi ilmi, että vanhemmat auttoivat lapsiaan useimmiten sanojen harjoittelussa. Lukiessaan kokeita varten tai tehdessään kotitehtäviä lapset eivät pyytäneet apua aivan yhtä usein kuin vanhemmat sitä heille tarjosivat. Suurin osa vanhemmista auttoikin lapsiaan hyvin aktiivisesti, mikä on varmasti osaltaan vaikuttanut siihen, että lapset vielä opiskelevat saksaa eivätkä ole jättäneet saksanopintojaan kesken. Yleisimmät syyt sille, etteivät vanhemmat auttaneet lapsiaan olivat vanhempien huonot saksantaidot tai se, että vanhemmat olivat väsyneitä eikä heillä siksi ollut tarpeeksi energiaa lastensa auttamiseen.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tuloksista hyödytään monessakin asiassa. Vanhemmat näyttävät tukevan lastensa saksanopiskelua paljon, mutta koska A-saksan opiskelijoiden määrä laskee yhä, tulisi kyseistä ilmiötä tutkia myös muista näkökulmista. Myös sen, että vanhemmat auttavat lapsiaan lähinnä vain sanojen opettelussa tulisi herättää opettajat antamaan vanhemmille tuoreempia ja luovempia työvälineitä lasten auttamiseen. Lisäksi sen, että lapset suurimmaksi osaksi arvostavat vanhempiensa apua, vaikkeivät sitä ääneen sanoisikaan, tulisi saada vanhemmat ymmärtämään heidän antamansa avun tärkeys.</p>	
Asiasanat – parental involvement, parents and homework, second language learning	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The decline of foreign languages being studied in schools is not only a Finnish phenomenon (Jones 2009), yet in Finland the foreign language that has suffered the greatest losses regarding the numbers of pupils studying it is German (SUKOL 2008). There can be many reasons for this phenomenon but since parental involvement greatly affects a pupil's interest in school and in learning, the aim of the present study was to examine the connection between parental involvement and the learning of those pupils who have decided to study German – the underdog of the foreign languages being studied in Finnish schools.

Instead of only trying to find out whether parents help their children with their German studies, the present study also tried to find out how parents mostly help their children with the studying of German, who usually initiates the help and how the pupils feel about their parents' help. Also reasons for parents not helping was another aim of the present study in addition to finding out what attitudes the parents bore towards their child's German studies.

The present study was conducted in two middle-sized elementary schools in Central Finland at the beginning of the year 2010. Both of the groups which were to fill out the questionnaires were groups of pupils who had been studying German for about one and a half years already. Also the teachers of the groups were to fill out a questionnaire, as their views and answers could clarify some of the pupils' responses.

The structure of the present study is the following: First previous studies and some general information about the Finnish school system concerning the possibilities of learning foreign languages are presented. After that the data is presented in addition to the method that was used to gather and analyze the data. In the results and discussion section the results of the analysis of the questionnaires are presented. In the conclusion section the results of the data are discussed more profoundly.

Parental involvement in students' learning has been studied a great deal yet the influence of parental involvement in the learning of foreign languages, particularly in the learning of German, has not been studied much – especially in a Finnish context. Also, the

question about how parents actually help their children with foreign language learning remains unclear, which is why there is a need for the present study.

2 THE PARENTS' ROLE IN A PUPIL'S LEARNING OF GERMAN

In this chapter the importance and different meanings of parental involvement are discussed. Also some previous studies in the field of parental involvement are presented. In addition, the different possibilities of learning foreign languages in the Finnish school system are explained further and the current situation of pupils learning German in Finland is clarified.

2.1 Parental involvement

Newspapers seem to be full of shocking stories about troubled adolescents. These stories make one wonder what has happened to the parents and families of these adolescents who should be taking care of them. Berk (2004:246) claims that many parents would rather do something else than spend time with their children, play or converse with them or for example teach them important skills. According to recent discussions in newspapers and other forms of media (Östman 2009, Tastula 2007), it seems as though the negligence of parents towards their children has become somewhat a negative trend also in Finland. According to UNICEF (Taskinen 2007), children in Finland are forced to become independent at a rather early age and families should be spending more time together. Also the fact that the number of children in need of protection because of difficult home conditions in Finland has been growing for many years now supports this view (STAKES 2009).

It makes sense to think that children who succeed in school also receive support at home. A child's schooling has a major impact on his/her future and usually parents who also realize this are very much concerned with their children's success in school. Parents who care about their children, therefore, would naturally try to provide their children with the best education possible and also help them in their learning. According to Marjoribanks (1991:265) the two most important learning environments which influence a student's learning outcomes are the classroom and the family of the student. According to Berger (1981:112), acting as a teacher to one's own child is one of the most important

roles a parent has. It is, therefore, only reasonable to conclude that parents have a significant role in their children's education and learning and it is an immense sign of caring if parents decide to do their best at fulfilling this role.

The role of the parent in a child's learning is very interesting and the influence of parents on their children's education has been studied to a great extent (e.g. Marjoribanks 1991, Berger 1981). The term 'parental involvement', however, is rather vague because there are many forms of parental involvement. Parental involvement could mean, for example, parents' volunteering at school, parents being involved with the decision-making at schools or parents helping their children with their homework (Epstein 1995, cited in Barge and Loges 2003:141), the latter being the focus of parental involvement in the present study.

Parental involvement is an important aspect in a child's learning and, as Berk (2004:246) explains, for parents and children to do activities such as shopping excursions, reading bed-time stories or concentrating on homework assignments together are very important. Such activities make it possible for children to learn how to use these symbolic tools, e.g. reading bed-time stories, for thinking and communicating. When a child has good skills in thinking and communication there are few obstacles for the learning of the child. Therefore, it is no surprise that various researchers have studied parental involvement from many different points of view. Bakker et al. (2007), for example, have studied parental involvement and teacher perceptions of parental involvement in children's education and how these two are related to the level of education of the parents and to the pupils' achievement. According to Bakker et al. (2007), the teachers in their study often thought that the higher the socio-economic background a pupil and his/her parents have, the more the parents also involve themselves in their children's educational home activities, even though this was proven to be a false assumption. The results also suggest that the teachers' perceptions of parental involvement affected the academic results of a pupil, although the study could not exactly answer the question how teachers' perceptions of parental involvement can affect a pupils' daily performance and academic achievement. Another interesting study in the field of parental involvement is that of Keith (1998). It is a longitudinal study concerning the question whether parental involvement has an effect on their children's tenth grade grades and whether the effect is

the same for boys and girls and for students from different ethnic groups. The results of the study suggested that parental involvement significantly affects the grades of boys and girls from all the different ethnic groups. The question about how parents mostly help their children with their homework, however, was not answered in neither of these studies, which is why the parents' role in their children's homework will be studied further in the present study.

As one may conclude, parental involvement truly does affect the way children succeed in school and the way they learn. Parents' role in their children's learning of foreign languages in schools, however, remains rather unclear because it has not been studied much. A study by Jones (2009), however, concentrated on how parental involvement affects the attitudes of boys and girls to modern foreign languages. The study showed that pupils who come from less affluent backgrounds and therefore also go to less affluent schools do not study foreign languages as much as pupils coming from more affluent areas. Since the parents of pupils coming from less affluent backgrounds feel, for some reason or another, that languages are not useful and they cannot help their children with foreign language homework, it is not surprising that pupils from less affluent backgrounds study less languages than those who come from more affluent backgrounds. The parents of children coming from affluent backgrounds are also better equipped to help their children with foreign language homework since they probably learned foreign languages in school as well. Although Jones's study, conducted in Great Britain, gives an idea of the parents' role in choosing and learning foreign languages in schools, the findings cannot be generalized to the Finnish society due to the differences between the school systems and cultural backgrounds between Finland and Great Britain. Nevertheless, since the numbers of children learning foreign languages continues to drop not only in Finland but in other countries as well, such as in the Great Britain (Koivikko 2006, Jones 2009), the importance of parental involvement in language learning should not be forgotten but instead emphasized.

2.2 The studying of German in Finnish schools

As background information to the different possibilities of learning foreign languages in Finnish schools, a short introduction of pupils' foreign language learning possibilities is presented in this paragraph. As explained by SUKOL (2009), in Finland all pupils start to learn a foreign language in the third grade when they are either eight or nine years old, although some pupils may start learning a foreign language already either in the first or second grade. This language is called an A1-language, which is English in most cases. In the fourth or fifth grade, usually in the fifth, a pupil may voluntarily choose to start learning another foreign language, which can be for example French, German, Swedish or Russian. This language is called an A2-language. In the seventh grade, at the latest, all pupils start learning their B1-language, which is Swedish, since it is the other national language of Finland besides Finnish. As pupils start the eighth grade they can begin learning their B2-language if they wish to and in upper secondary school the students may begin studying a B3-language if they want to. As one may conclude, there are more than a few possibilities to start learning foreign languages in the Finnish school system and usually learning languages is seen as very beneficial (Pakkoruotsi.net 2010), which parents of pupils choosing foreign languages might admit to as well. Nevertheless, the number of pupils beginning to study foreign languages other than English is declining at an alarming pace. The next paragraph introduces information about the position of German in this phenomenon.

A report by the Association of Finland's Foreign Language Teachers on the statistical information about language choices in Finland (SUKOL 2008) seems to support the claim about the decreasing number of Finnish pupils learning foreign languages other than English. Koivikko (2006) has also stated that the number of Finnish pupils studying foreign languages other than English is decreasing every year based on statistical information about elementary instruction in Finland. The number of pupils learning English is rather large and English seems to be holding its position as the favourite choice of young language learners in schools. Although German used to be rather popular among pupils, the number of pupils learning it has been declining the most in comparison with other foreign languages (SUKOL 2008). The reason for such a distressing trend among

foreign language learners is rather puzzling and one cannot claim that there is only one reason behind this dilemma, although one cannot help but wonder whether parental involvement could be one of the causes for it. For example, whether the parents of children, especially elementary school children who are still rather young to make decisions independently and are still much affected by their parents and their wishes, affect the choices of young foreign language learners is also worth a look.

Although parental involvement has been a rather popular topic of many studies there is one aspect of parental involvement that has not been looked at more carefully which is *how* parents actually help their children with homework: what kind of methods do they use and with what kinds of homework tasks parents usually help their children; i.e. are written assignments or tasks concerning grammar especially favourable to parents? Whether parents help their children with homework or not may also depend on the child's own enthusiasm and readiness to ask for his/her parents' help. If parents, however, are unable to help their child with foreign language homework, this lacking help may greatly influence the child's grade and interest in the language. Therefore, the help parents give to their children who are studying German may have a significant influence on the children's enthusiasm about German and their success in the learning of the language, which is what the present study aims to examine more closely. The need for a study such as the present one is great for the number of Finnish pupils learning German seems to be dropping the most in elementary school (SUKOL 2008). That is why this negative trend needs to be examined more closely as it might illuminate the reasons behind this growing problem.

3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are the main points of interest in the present study.

1. How do parents help their children with German homework or studying for German exams?
2. Who initiates the helping? Do parents offer their help or do children have to ask for it first?
3. Do pupils feel that the help they receive from their parents is useful to them?

However, many other interesting aspects concerning the pupils' learning of German and, for example, the teachers' views about parents' help were also investigated with the help of the questionnaires and these further aspects will be dealt with in chapter 5.

4 DATA AND METHOD

This chapter begins with the description of the questionnaires used to gather the data for the present study in addition to a portrayal of the participants. Then the description of the gathering of the data is presented. Lastly the method used in data analysis is explained.

There were two questionnaires used for the gathering of the data, one for pupils and the other for the teachers of the two groups. The pupils' questionnaire (Appendix 1) was four pages long and the teachers' questionnaire (Appendix 2) consisted of three pages. The questionnaires were in Finnish because the pupils' language capacity of German would presumably not have been good enough to fill in a questionnaire such as the one used for the gathering of the data. To use Finnish was also practical because it took less time for the pupils and teachers to answer the questions in their native language.

The pupils' questionnaire consisted mostly of open-ended questions where they were asked to tell about their own experiences about the help they have received from their parents during the time they have studied German in school, which in this case was about one and a half years because the questionnaires were presented only to sixth graders learning German. Altogether there were twenty questions in the pupils' questionnaire and it took approximately fifteen minutes for the pupils to complete it. The questionnaire for the teachers consisted of questions regarding the encouragement they have given to the parents of their pupils, if they have given it, and what they personally think about the parents' role in the learning of their children. There were eight open-ended questions in the teachers' questionnaire and one of the teachers completed it in approximately twenty minutes whereas the other teacher wanted to take the questionnaire home and return it when it was properly completed.

The data was collected in two different middle-sized elementary schools in Central Finland and altogether twenty 12-year-old pupils answered the questionnaire. The first group that answered the questionnaires consisted of nine pupils and the second of eleven pupils. In total there were only five boys who participated in the present study and the rest, i.e. fifteen, of the participants were girls. The schools which took part in the present study were chosen based on their location: since they were both situated in Central Finland it was easy to gain access to them. In addition to their location, the schools

had to be big enough in order to have a group of German learners, since small schools usually do not have enough pupils who would be interested in learning German and therefore a group cannot be formed. It took approximately fifteen minutes for the pupils to answer the questionnaire, which both of the groups did at the beginning of their German class.

The first round of the data collection was actually the piloting of the questionnaire as well. It was very important to pilot the questionnaire in order to see whether it would yield analyzable results. Had this not been the case, in other words if the pupils had had difficulties with filling out the questionnaire, it would have been reformulated and the first set of completed questionnaires would not have been used as data for the present study. Since this was not the case, however, the completed questionnaires of the first group were used as data for the present study. The data was collected in February 2010 and the headmasters of both schools had given their permission for the gathering of the data for the present study.

The method used in the analyzing of the data was a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods because the questionnaire was a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions, which the pupils were to answer in their own words. The sex and the type of living arrangements of the pupil (i.e. does the pupil live, for example, with both of his/her parents or only with the other) and different questions with yes/no answers were written down into a table in order to make the comparing of the answers easier. The open-ended questions were in fact the most important as they were to give information about the pupils' personal experiences of the help they had received from their parents, its quality and frequency. The open-ended questions were, however, formulated into slightly more specific ones with the help of illustrative examples in order to make the answering a little easier for the pupils.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section the analysis of the data gathered for the present study with the help of the questionnaires is presented. The attitudes the parents have towards their children's German studies at school is dealt with first, after which the ways parents help their children while they are doing German homework or studying for German exams is discussed. After that the figures concerning the question about who initiates the help in studying for German exams and in doing German homework are compared. Then the question whether pupils feel that their parents' help is useful or not is discussed, and lastly the reasons for why the parents have not offered their help while their children have been doing German homework or studying for German exams or why they have refused to help their children are dealt with.

5.1 Parents' attitudes towards their child's German studies in school

Before analysing the ways parents help their children with the studying of German it was important to find out what the pupils' parents of the sample group think about the fact that their child is studying German in school, since it could also give answers to the question why parents help or do not help their children with German. The pupils were, therefore, asked to answer an open-ended question by describing what they think their parents might feel about their studying of German. All twenty pupils answered the question in their own words but the answers with a similar content were divided into more generalizable categories, which are presented in Table 1. While reading the table one must remember, however, that a pupil could give many reasons for what they thought their parents might feel about their German studies, which is why the total number of the answer is more than twenty.

Table 1. Parents' attitudes towards their child's studying of German in school

Parents' attitudes towards their child's German studies	Number of pupils
See it as a positive thing	12
The child should continue studying German	5
The child should invest more time in studying	2
Parents do not have energy to help	1
Do not know	3

Twelve of the pupil's, the clear majority, think that their parents see their child's learning of German as a positive thing. Five think that their child should continue studying German, which could indicate that even if they did not have an extremely positive view about it, at least they might see it as something important for the child's future, since they wish that their child would continue studying it. According to two pupils, their parents think that their child should invest more time in the studying of German, which could also mean that their parents feel that their child should at least try to do better in his/her German studies because it is important. One pupil simply answered that his/her parents do not have energy to help him/her with the studying of German, which does not exactly answer the questions about what his/her parents may think about German. One would think that not having enough energy to help could mean that the parents do not think very highly of German but it does not automatically mean that the pupil's parents would consider studying German as unimportant either. If parents do not have enough energy to help their child with his/her homework every time, it may be, for example, because they have had a long day at work and are tired. Three pupils answered that they did not know what their parents might think about their German studies.

5.2 How parents help their children with German homework

Homework has a big role in the learning of foreign languages, and since assignments given by the teacher are often done at home or at least in an environment where other family members are present, logically there could be some communication and interaction between pupils and their parents when homework is being done. Out of the twenty pupils who participated in the present study, fifteen reported having received help from their

parents, but only thirteen pupils were able to describe the task types and areas of language in which their parents could help them best. Table 2 shows in what kinds of tasks pupils received help from their parents. In reading the table one must remember, however, that the question that was posed regarding this subject was open-ended instead of a multiple choice question where pupils could, for example, have chosen between different task type options that were already given to them. Although the answers were written in the pupils' own words, the task types that came up in the answers could be divided into clear categories, which are presented in the following table. "No specific task type" is the category for the pupils who reported having received help from their parents but were not able to name any specific task type.

Table 2. Type of help that parents give with homework

Type of task	Number of pupils
Vocabulary tasks	4
Writing tasks	4
Deduction tasks	1
Translation tasks	1
Understanding texts	1
No specific task type	4

As seen in Table 2, vocabulary and writing tasks were the task types with which parents were most able to help. One should also note that the answers without a specific task type, which were placed under "No specific task type", could have included vocabulary and writing tasks as well, especially since those two types were the most common of all the task types. Vocabulary tasks are naturally an important part of learning a foreign language and even if the parents cannot speak German, it can be easy to help the child with vocabulary tasks. Writing tasks, however, require more grammatical knowledge of German from parents themselves, yet apparently parents were often able to help their children with these tasks as well. According to only three pupils, their parents had helped them in deduction and translation tasks or in tasks which included understanding texts. There can be many reasons for this, such as, that the pupils already can manage, for example, translation tasks independently or that the parents do not have sufficient language skills of German to help with these types of tasks.

5.3 How parents help their children in studying for German exams

Although it is hard to say whether exams are a crucially important area of language teaching, in Finland teachers traditionally rely heavily on them in their own language classes. Out of the twenty pupils who took part in the present study, eighteen reported having received help from their parents as they were studying for German exams. One pupil, however, simply answered that his/her parents do help him/her with preparing for exams but did not mention in which areas, which is why the answer was placed under “Revising the topics of the exam area”. Table 3 shows how the parents mostly helped their child as he/she was preparing for German exams. As before, when reading the table, one must remember that the question was open-ended and pupils were allowed to give more than just one description of the help they received from their parents as they were studying for exams. Similarly to Table 2, the pupils’ answers could easily be divided into clear categories, which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Type of help that parents give when pupils study for German exams

Type of help that parents give	Number of pupils
Prepping vocabulary	16
Prepping grammar	4
Prepping the topics of the exam area	3
Reading the chapters of the exam area together	1
Writing down example sentences together	1

As one can see in Table 3, parents are usually most able to give help in practising vocabulary for the upcoming exam. This might be for the same reason as in section 5.2, that is, that parents who cannot speak German can nevertheless practise vocabulary with their children. Parents probably also see vocabulary as a very important aspect of exams, since the majority of the parents were most likely to help their children in learning vocabulary for the exam. One must remember, however, that separate vocabulary tests are a very typical phenomenon in Finnish schools and they are held more often than more extensive exams, which usually include grammar as well, and this could have made the pupils name “Revising vocabulary” so often in their answers.

“Revising grammar”, although not nearly as common as “Revising vocabulary”, also seems to be an important aspect of studying for exams. This may be, because language books used in schools usually present the most important grammar points, and vocabulary as well, very clearly, which could make it easier for parents to ask questions about them.

“Revising the topics of the exam area” was not as common as “Revising vocabulary” but one must remember that a certain exam area might include both vocabulary and grammar, which means that when the pupils have answered that they learn the topics of the exam area together with their parents, they might learn both vocabulary and grammar simultaneously. “Reading chapters of the exam area together” and “Writing down example sentences together” were not common answers even though these learning methods could be very useful. Perhaps parents feel that writing example sentences together with the child is more demanding and time-consuming than simply quizzing vocabulary from a certain list of words, which is also a way of learning new words, though a rather mechanical one.

5.4 Who initiates the help when pupils do German homework?

As parents help their child with studying or preparing for exams either the parent or the child usually makes the initiative, which means that either the parents ask the children if they need help or the child asks for the parents’ help. In this paragraph the figures concerning the question who initiates the help as pupils are doing German homework tasks are presented and compared.

In the questionnaire pupils were asked, whether their parents offer them help as they are doing German homework. If they answered “yes”, they were asked how often their parents offered their help to them. The options were “often”, “sometimes” and “hardly ever” and the pupils were to circle the option that was closest to their own view. Fifteen pupils out of twenty answered that their parents do offer help as they are doing German homework, and Table 4 shows how often those fifteen pupils received help from their parents.

Table 4. How often pupils received help from parents while doing German homework

How often parents offer their help	Number of pupils
Often	4
Sometimes	8
Hardly ever	3

As one can see in Table 4, eight of the parents, who are the majority, offer their help “sometimes” while their children are doing German homework. According to Table 4 four pupils have received help “often” and only three pupils “hardly ever”. Therefore, it seems that the majority of the pupils’ parents in this sample group are actively offering their help to their children, in other words making the initiative, when they are doing German homework.

In the questionnaire the pupils were also asked whether they themselves asked for help from their parents as they were doing German homework. Again, if they answered “yes” they were also asked how often they asked for their parents’ help. The choices were “often”, “sometimes” and “hardly ever” and the pupils were again to circle the alternative that was closest to their own view. Fifteen out of twenty pupils answered that they do ask for help themselves as they are doing German homework. Table 5 shows how often those fifteen pupils asked for their parents’ help when doing German homework.

Table 5. How often pupils asked for help from parents while doing German homework

How often pupils ask for help	Number of pupils
Often	1
Sometimes	9
Hardly ever	4
No answer	1

Overall five pupils reported that they had not received help from their parents when doing German homework and similarly five pupils also reported not having asked for help when doing German homework, which is 25 per cent of the total number of the pupils who answered the questionnaire. However, the majority of the pupils, that is 75 per cent, reported that they had received help from their parents and that they had asked for it themselves when doing German homework. However, only one pupil reported

having asked help from his/her parents “often” and yet four pupils ask for help “hardly ever”. The majority of the pupils, however, ask for help “sometimes”. Therefore, as one compares Table 4 with Table 5, one can see that the parents make the initiative slightly more often when helping their children with German homework but the pupils also ask frequently for their parents’ help. Reasons for pupils not asking for their parents’ help might be, for example, that the pupils already feel confident with doing their German homework by themselves or they might not be that interested in their parents’ help. One pupil did not answer how often he/she asked for help from his/her parents and this answer has been placed in the “No answer” category. To conclude, it appears that parents offer their help more often than their children ask for it. One could think, therefore, that most of the pupils’ parents in this sample group indeed do take an interest in their children’s learning of German.

5.5 Who initiates the help when pupils study for German exams?

In this chapter, as in the previous one, the numbers concerning the question who initiates the help as pupils study for German exams are presented and then compared.

In the questionnaire the pupils were asked, whether their parents offer the pupils help as they are studying and preparing for German exams. As before, if they answered “yes”, they were asked how often their parents offered their help to them. The options were “often”, “sometimes” and “hardly ever” and the pupils were to circle the option that was closest to their own view. Eighteen out of twenty pupils reported having received help from their parents when they have studied for German exams and Table 6 shows how often the eighteen pupils stated having received help from their parents.

Table 6. How often pupils received help from parents while studying for German exams

How often parents offer their help	Number of pupils
Often	10
Sometimes	6
Hardly ever	2

The parents of ten pupils, which is the clear majority, offered their help “often” while their children were studying for German exams. Six pupils reported that their parents offer their help “sometimes” and only two answered that their parents offer their help “hardly ever”. When Table 6 is compared with Table 4, one can see that parents are even more eager to help their children when they are studying for German exams than when they are doing homework. This could be due to the fact that parents regard exams as more important than doing homework properly because they might think that exams have a more direct influence on a pupil’s grade than homework.

In the questionnaire the pupils were also asked whether they themselves asked for help from their parents as they were studying or preparing for German exams. As previously, if they answered “yes” they were also asked how often they asked for help from their parents. The choices were “often”, “sometimes” and “hardly ever” and the pupils were to circle the alternative that was closest to their own view. Eighteen out of twenty pupils answered that they do ask for their parents’ help themselves as they are doing German homework. Table 7 shows how often those eighteen pupils asked for help from their parents when studying for German exams.

Table 7. How often pupils asked for help from parents while studying for German exams

How often pupils ask for help	Number of pupils
Often	9
Sometimes	5
Hardly ever	3
No answer	1

Nine pupils reported having asked help “often” and five reported having asked for help “sometimes” as they were studying for exams. These figures are bigger when compared to the figures in Table 5, which could mean that also pupils feel that studying for German exams is more important than doing homework. They might want to make sure that they are truly learning before an exam in order to receive a good grade, which is why they ask for their parents’ help more often. Three pupils, however, answered having asked for help “hardly ever” when studying for exams, while the corresponding figure in Table 5 was

four. Thus the difference was not great. One pupil did not answer how often he/she asked for help from his/her parents, and that answer is in the category “No answer”.

When comparing Table 6 and Table 7 with each other, one may notice that once again parents seem to be very interested in helping their children as they are studying and preparing for German exams, which they show by offering help to their children. The pupils also seem to be active in asking for their parents’ help, which could mean that pupils see exams as important and are motivated in receiving a good grade. Therefore, one could think that both the parents and the pupils consider preparing for exams important.

5.6 How do pupils feel about their parents’ help?

In the questionnaire many questions were asked about the quality of parents’ help but another interesting and important aim of the present study was to find out whether pupils feel that their parents’ involvement is helpful and useful. In the questionnaire, an open-ended question was posed, which was about whether the pupils felt that their parents’ help makes their studying and learning of German easier. All twenty pupils were asked to answer the question even if they had not received help from their parents. Table 8 shows the answers of the twenty pupils, and unlike in Table 3 for example, the answers of the pupils are listed in Table 8 as they were written in the questionnaires.

Table 8. Do pupils feel that their parents’ help aids their learning of German

Does parents’ help aid learning?	Number of pupils
Yes	9
A little / Sometimes	3
Maybe	1
Not much	2
No	4
No answer	1

As one may see in Table 8, only six students out of twenty felt that their parents’ help is not helpful to them, which one can see as one adds up the answers “Not much” and “No”, but the majority of the pupils felt that their parents’ help is useful to them. One pupil also

answered that his/her parents help is “maybe” useful and one did not give an answer. Based on the figures in Table 8 one could conclude that pupils mostly appreciate their parents’ help.

5.7 Reasons for parents not helping

In this paragraph the reasons for parents not helping their child when they are studying for German exams or doing German homework are presented. First the reasons for parents not initiating the help are dealt with and then the reasons for parents refusing to help their child even if he/she asks for it are discussed.

Table 9 shows the answers the pupils gave to the question why they thought that their parents had not always offered their help. The question was open-ended, which means that the pupils could give more than one answer to the question. The answers of the pupils are presented in Table 9 as they were given in the questionnaire.

Table 9. The reasons pupils gave for their parents not offering their help while pupils were doing German homework or studying for German exams

Why parents do not offer their help	Number of pupils
Parents cannot speak German	5
Parents do not have enough energy to help	5
Pupil does not know the reason	2
Parents do not know how to help	1
Parents forget to offer help	1
Parents are at work	1
Parents think that the child does not need help	1
The child has done something wrong	1
No answer	4

As seen in Table 9, the two biggest reasons for parents not offering their help to their children were “Parents cannot speak German” and “Parents do not have enough energy to help”. Naturally, if parents feel that they do not know enough German they probably will not offer their help. Also, the fact that they might be tired and may not have the energy to help could possibly affect their willingness of making the initiative to help. Two pupils could not think of a reason why their parents have not always offered them their help and four pupils gave no answer to the question. One pupil mentioned that his/her parents do

not know how to help, which does not automatically mean that the parents cannot speak German but simply cannot think of a good way to help. In this case, the parents are probably inclined to wait until the pupil makes the initiative and asks for help him/herself. One pupil also answered that sometimes the parents might forget to offer their help, and one pupil said that the parents have not offered their help because they have been at work, which does not mean that parents would not want to offer their help but instead they could not even if they wanted to, since they have not been present. One pupil also mentioned that the parents may think that the pupil does not need help and therefore they do not offer their help. One pupil answered that the reason for his/her parents not offering their help could be that he/she "has done something wrong", which implies that the pupil thinks that his/her parents might not have offered their help because they have used it as a disciplinary method.

Another point of interest of the present study was to find out if parents had ever refused to help their children with German homework or studying for German exams. Only four pupils answered that their parents had indeed refused to help them but the majority, sixteen pupils, answered that their parents had never refused to help them. The answers the four pupils gave were similar to those in Table 9, which were that the pupil did not know why his/her parents had refused to help, the parents had not had time to help, they did not have enough energy and that the parents could not speak German. Thus one may conclude that parents may not always realize to offer their help to their child but quite few actually refuse to help if their child asks them to.

5.8 Summary and discussion

In this section the results portrayed in the previous sections are summarized. The research question about parents' attitudes towards their child's German studies are discussed first while not forgetting to reflect on how the parents' attitudes may influence their eagerness to help their child with German homework or studying for German exams, that is, who usually initiates the help. Also the reasons for parents not helping are discussed, after

which the ways parents help their children with doing homework and studying for exams are dealt with. After that the pupils' feelings about their parents' help are discussed.

The majority of the parents seem to think that it is a positive thing that their child is studying German at school, and if not positive then at least they seem to think that studying German is important and that the child should continue on studying it or at least invest more time in his/her learning. None of the pupils thought that their parents would think negatively about their German studies, although three of the pupils answered that they did not know what their parents were thinking and one pupil simply answered that his/her parents do not always have enough energy to help him/her. For the most part, it seems as though the parents see their child's German studies as important, which may have a significant effect on their child's success and personal interest in the language. Also the teachers of the two groups that were asked to fill out the questionnaire both stated that they do not see the parents often or have much contact with them, but at least the parents they had met had told the teachers that they valued their child's German studies and thought that it is important. Therefore, based on this sample group, one would not think that the lack of parents' help is the cause for the declining number of pupils studying German in Finnish schools. However, the pupils who have stopped studying German were not included in the present study, and thus one cannot be sure whether the parents of those pupils affected the pupils' choice to drop out on German or not.

Since parents seem to take an interest in their child's German studies one could conclude that the parents would also be eager to help their children with their German studies, which, based on the data, indeed is true for the most part. Although the differences in the figures between the parents offering their help and the pupils asking for it while they were doing German homework or studying for German exams was not great, parents do seem to offer their help slightly more often than pupils actually ask for it. One should remember, however, that even though German is a voluntary subject in the sixth grade, the pupils are only twelve-year-olds and therefore probably not the most motivated learners when compared, for example, with the students in upper secondary school, who are older and already see the connection between good academic success and a bright future. When a pupil is as young as the pupils of this sample group and are still going to comprehensive school, it is not surprising that the parents try to make sure that their child

is learning by offering them help and thus also taking responsibility for their child's learning in school. The teachers of the classes that were asked to fill out the questionnaires, however, reported that very few parents had asked the teacher for advice concerning how to help their child with the studying of German. One of the teachers, however, said that he/she had sent a letter to all of the parents concerning the studying of German and in that letter he/she also gave some advice on how to practice the language with the child, especially vocabulary. This could have an influence on the fact that so many of the pupils' parents in this sample group were very eager to help their children especially with the learning of vocabulary.

For parents to offer their help while their child was studying for German exams seemed to be slightly more common than parents offering their help when their child was doing German homework. However, helping with homework concerning vocabulary and helping with the learning of vocabulary before an exam were the two most popular ways the parents used when helping their children. Even though some pupils of the sample group reported that their parents could not speak German, these pupils' parents however were able to help with the practicing of vocabulary although not much with other areas of the language. Since many foreign language text books usually contain a list of the most important words presented, for example in a chapter, it is not difficult for parents to simply quiz these words from their children – especially when these lists of words for the most part have the Finnish translation of the word as well. When the parents were helping their child with German homework, writing tasks also seemed to be an area of homework where the pupils often received help from their parents. The help that parents can give their child with forming sentences and texts in a foreign language is priceless because usually writing sentences or pieces of texts while learning a new language can be very hard. Therefore, those pupils whose parents can speak German have an advantage in comparison to those pupils whose parents cannot speak German nor help them with writing or grammar. Whether the parents of the child can speak German or not, it seems as though parents and pupils feel that preparing for German exams is more important than doing German homework: the overall number of parents and pupils participating in preparing for German exams (18/20) was bigger than the number of pupils and parents doing German homework (15/20). This could be due to the fact that parents and pupils

regard exams as more important than making an effort for completing homework properly because they might think that exams have a more direct influence on a pupil's grade than homework. Helping with homework is also an abiding daily chore unlike helping with studying for exams, which is probably why parents more often choose to help with the latter.

Although many parents do offer their help to their child, the pupils were nevertheless asked to tell why they thought that their parents might not always offer their help. They were also asked to tell had their parents actually refused to help them in some occasion, and to explain the reasons for their parents' refusals. The two major reasons for parents not offering their help were that the parents could not speak German themselves and that the parents had not had energy to help, and therefore had not offered their help. Not to offer one's help when one does not have sufficient skills in a subject is a very logical reason for not initiating the help. When one is not confident with one's skills it could be said that it is pointless for one to offer one's help and that is probably what most parents were thinking when they did not offer their help. Furthermore, since many parents seem to be busy nowadays and their life is hectic, it is no wonder that some parents do not offer their help because they are simply tired. This does not mean, however, that they would refuse their help if their child came to them and asked for it.

The parents did not always offer their help for many various reasons but only four parents actually have refused to help their children when they asked for help. This is a very positive finding, since the clear majority, that is sixteen pupils out of twenty, reported that their parents had never refused to help them if they had asked for help. One could claim, therefore, that the majority of parents, or at least the parents of the pupils in this sample group, do have time to help their children and even offer to help voluntarily. Thus the parents today actually seem to take their children's education and learning rather seriously, even though for example Berk (2004:246) has claimed that parents would rather do something else than for example teach important skills to their children.

The majority of the pupils received help not only when they were doing German homework but also as they were studying for German exams, and also the majority of the pupils felt that their parents' help was useful to them. Therefore, it makes sense to think that parents would also keep on helping their children in the future, since at

least the pupils feel that they are benefitting from it. One should not take for granted, however, that the pupils actually would tell their parents that their help is useful, which means that the parents might not know how their child feels about their help. However, if the positive results of the parents' help shows in the grades their child receives, one would think that the parents continue on helping them prepare for exams and tests, especially if the child is otherwise struggling with the German language.

6 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine pupils who are studying German, the language which Finnish pupils choose to study less and less in elementary school compared to other foreign languages (SUKOL 2008), and also how these pupils' parents are involved in their children's studying of German: how they actually help their children with their German homework and studying for German exams, and who initiates the help - the pupils or the parents.

According to the results of the present study, parents do not seem to think negatively about their child's German studies but instead see it as a positive and important thing, which therefore, according to a study by Keith (1998), should have a positive effect on the pupils' learning as well. The pupils' were not, however, asked about their grades and therefore the connection between parents' help and their child's academic success could not be examined in more detail. The majority of the parents also tried to help their child with their German studies as much as they could, even though they could not speak German. In comparison with the pupils, the parents made the initiative regarding helping with German homework and studying for German exams slightly more often. This can be seen as a very positive thing not only because previous studies prove that parents' involvement does affect the ways children succeed in school and the way they learn (Keith 1998), but also because elementary school pupils may not always understand the importance of school and learning, which is why parents have to be involved with their child's learning and even control it to some degree.

The majority of the pupils in the sample group stated that their parents not only helped them with the learning of vocabulary but also with writing tasks and with the learning of grammar. Since German is usually seen as a rather difficult language, parents' help truly is valuable for the children and most of them also appreciate it and think that their parents' help indeed is useful. Although the majority of the parents help their children both with doing homework and studying for exams, the parents seemed to be even more active in offering their help when their child was studying for German exams, which is not surprising since exams are such an important part of the Finnish school system.

The numbers of pupils studying German in Finland is still declining, for which there probably are many reasons. According to the results of the present study, the lacking of parents' help or enthusiasm towards the German language however is not one of the reasons influencing the decline of pupils studying German at school. Of course, the sample group of the present study only covered twenty pupils and one cannot make generalized conclusions based on such a small sample group. Also, the present study did not include those pupils who actually had dropped out on German, which is why the present study cannot say how active the parents of those pupils were in their helping or what their attitudes towards their child's German studies were. Furthermore, the data was collected in Central Finland, which means that even though the results suggested that the pupils' parents were very helpful it does not mean that the situation is the same in all parts of Finland.

The questionnaires used in the present study seemed to be constructed well since nearly all of the pupils knew how to fill them out properly. Suggestions for further study would be to include more pupils in a study such as the present one so that the results could be more convincing and could be generalized more. The reasons for pupils dropping out on German should be studied as well. Also, it would be interesting to see how the activeness of the parents varies in different parts of Finland, especially between big Finnish cities and smaller cities. The number of children taken into custody is constantly growing in big Finnish cities (Räihälä 2009), which could mean that the parents living in bigger cities do not care much about their children's schooling and wellbeing. Also, since the aim of the present study was to examine the pupils who are studying German, although the fact is that many pupils today are not, it would be interesting to find out reasons for why pupils decide to begin study foreign languages other than German.

The results of the present study have illuminated the ways in which parents help their children in their learning of German. However, parents could still be better informed of new language learning methods, which they could activate together with their children when learning for an exam or doing homework. Language teachers are experts on language learning methods and they could easily inform parents about them since parents are, at least according to the results of the present study, actively helping their children

with their language learning. Even a simple note sent from the teacher to the parents concerning language learning methods could be helpful and also increase the positive results in the pupils' learning of languages. In conclusion, there is still much to be done in order to make parents aware of new language learning techniques. However, if this was done and parents and language teachers could work together towards making foreign language learning more fun and motivating for pupils, the number of pupils learning foreign languages in Finnish schools could rise to its former level or even surpass it.

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APPENDIX 1: The questionnaire for the pupils

Ole hyvä ja kirjoita vastauksesi tuleviin kysymyksiin selkeällä käsialalla. Vastaa avoimiin kysymyksiin, eli niihin kysymyksiin joissa sinun ei tarvitse vastata ympyröimällä, mahdollisimman laajasti omin sanoin. Mieti jokaista kysymystä ja vastaustasi huolellisesti. Jos tila ei riitä vastauksellesi, merkitse kysymyksen numero sivun toiselle puolelle ja jatka vastaustasi sivun toiselle puolelle.

1. Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi:

Olen... tyttö / poika

2. Kenen kanssa pääsääntöisesti asut? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

2.1. Äidin ja isän

2.2. Äidin

2.3. Isän

2.4. Muun huoltajan (esim. isoäidin, sijaisvanhempien). Kenen?

3. Miksi päätit aloittaa saksan opiskelun?

4. Kannustivatko vanhempasi/huoltajasi sinua saksanopiskelun aloittamiseen? Jos kyllä, miten he kannustivat sinua?

5. Mitä vanhempasi/huoltajasi omasta mielestäsi nyt ajattelevat saksan opiskelustasi?

6. Tarjoavatko vanhempasi/huoltajasi sinulle apua, kun teet saksan läksyjä? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

Kyllä / Ei

7. Jos kyllä, kuinka usein he tarjoavat sinulle apuaan? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

Usein / Joskus / Erittäin harvoin

8. Jos vanhempasi/huoltajasi auttavat sinua saksan kotitehtävien teossa, millaisten tehtävien kanssa he osaavat mielestäsi parhaiten auttaa (esim. sanastotehtävien, kirjoittamistehtävien kanssa)?

9. Tarjoavatko vanhempasi/huoltajasi sinulle apua, kun valmistaudut saksan kokeisiin? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

Kyllä / Ei

10. Jos kyllä, kuinka usein he tarjoavat sinulle apuaan? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

Usein / Joskus / Erittäin harvoin

11. Jos vanhempasi/hooltajasi auttavat sinua saksan kokeisiin lukemisessa, miten he yleensä auttavat sinua (esim. kyselevät sanoja, lukevat kirjan kappaleita kanssasi)?

12. Tuntuuko sinusta, että vanhempiesi/hooltajiesi apu helpottaa saksan opiskeluasi ja oppimistasi?

13. Jos vanhempasi/hooltajasi eivät tarjoa sinulle apuaan, kun teet läksyjä tai luet kokeisiin, mistä luulet sen johtuvan?

14. Pyydätkö sinä koskaan vanhemmiltasi/hooltajaltasi apua, kun teet saksan kotiläksyjä? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

Kyllä / Ei

15. Jos kyllä, kuinka usein pyydät apua? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

Usein / Joskus / Erittäin harvoin

16. Millaisten tehtävien teossa yleensä pyydät apua vanhemmiltasi/hooltajaltasi (esim. tekstien kirjoittamisessa, kielioppitehtävissä, sanastotehtävissä, ääntämisen harjoittelemisessa, kappaleiden kääntämisessä jne.)?

17. Pyydätkö sinä koskaan vanhemmiltasi/huoltajiltasi apua, kun valmistaudut saksan kokeisiin? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

Kyllä / En

18. Jos kyllä, kuinka usein pyydät apua? Ole hyvä ja ympyröi vastauksesi.

Usein / Joskus / Erittäin harvoin

19. Ovatko vanhempasi koskaan kieltäytyneet auttamasta sinua saksan läksyjen teossa tai kokeisiin lukemisessa?

Kyllä / Eivät

20. Jos ovat, miksi he ovat kieltäytyneet auttamasta?

KIITOS VASTAAMISESTA!

APPENDIX 2: The questionnaire for the teachers

Ole hyvä ja avoimiin kysymyksiin mahdollisimman laajasti omin sanoin. Jos tila ei riitä vastauksellesi, merkitse kysymyksen numero sivun toiselle puolelle ja jatka vastaustasi sivun toiselle puolelle.

1. Oletko pitänyt yhteyttä oppilaidesi vanhempiin koskien sitä, miten vanhemmat voisivat auttaa lastaan saksan kotiläksyjen tai kokeisiin lukemisen suhteen? Jos olet, millaisia neuvoja/vinkkejä olet antanut?

2. Ovatko oppilaidesi vanhemmat koskaan kysyneet sinulta, kuinka he voisivat auttaa lastaan saksan opiskelussa?

3. Ovatko oppilaidesi vanhemmat kertoneet sinulle, miksi heidän lapsensa aloittivat saksan opiskelun? Jos ovat, mitä syitä he ovat sinulle kertoneet?

4. Ovatko oppilaasi kertoneet sinulle, miksi he aloittivat saksan opiskelun? Jos ovat, mitä syitä he ovat sinulle kertoneet?

5. Ovatko oppilaidesi vanhemmat kertoneet, kuinka he suhtautuvat lapsensa saksan opiskeluun? Jos ovat, millaisia asioita he ovat kertoneet?

6. Miten sinun mielestäsi oppilaidesi vanhemmat suhtautuvat lastensa saksan opiskeluun?

7. Oletko havainnut yhteyttä vanhempien asenteen ja lapsen koulumenestyksen välillä koskien saksan opiskelua? Jos olet, millaisia yhteyksiä olet huomannut?

8. Auttaako sinun mielestäsi oppilaidesi vanhempien apu oppilaitasi saksan kielen oppimisessa?

KIITOS VASTAAMISESTA!