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Children’s strategic participation in a bilingual Early Childhood Education and Care Centre

This article considers children’s language learning experiences at an early childhood education and care centre (ECEC) in Central Finland. The article draws on data gathered as part of a Master’s thesis study (Holmila, 2019) which looked at the perspectives of staff, parents and children regarding the use of English as part of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology at the ECEC, with a view to future developments of CLIL provision. This article considers what can be learned from the children’s perspectives. Following a brief overview of the advantages of bilingual educational programmes and the educational context for this study, the main section of this article focuses on the strategies the children use in the day-to-day bilingual activities of the early childhood centre. The article closes with recommendations for the further development of language education in heterogeneous communities.

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The benefits of linguistically diverse early childhood education

Studies on bilingual education have shown that effective bilingual programs in early childhood can offer children cognitive advantages over monolingual programs (Bialystok, 2016). According to current scholarly consensus, flexible, dynamic language learning programmes should promote and accommodate the use of multiple languages and cultural identities (e.g. Baker, 2011). Crucially, children with specific challenges (socio-economic, linguistic, developmental, learning) experience no extra burden from bilingual education when appropriate comparisons are made with similar children in monolingual programs (Kohnert &

Danah, 2007). Early childhood education lays the foundation of future academic outcomes (Bialystok, 2016) and the early childhood environment is crucial to developing basic skills and positive attitudes to learning.

Finland has seen many changes to ECEC centres in part due to demographic changes and a new national curriculum. Increasingly, children in Finnish ECEC centres are heterogeneous, made up of a culturally and linguistically diverse intake (Schwartz & Palviainen, 2016) and the recent national core curricula for early childhood education and care (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016; 2018) elevates the role and status of languages in early childhood education.

These curricula promote a rich world of languages giving early childhood educators in close cooperation with guardians the responsibility to ensure that children develop positive linguistic identities. To do this the curricula specify six key areas of language development: interaction skills, language comprehension skills, speech production skills, language use competences, linguistic memory and vocabulary, and language awareness. The curricula explicitly note that children should be exposed to foreign languages as part of their development. The curricula also recognise that children learn at varied and individual paces and that multiple languages, cultures and worldviews enrich early childhood education communities. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016; 2018.)

Language provision in the ECEC in Finland and the present study

With the new emphasis on language in the curriculum, it becomes increasingly important to consider and develop language provision in ECEC. At the ECEC centre where the data was collected, English has been part of daily life for over 20 years and integrated into the daily lives of the children through the CLIL-based approach using songs, games, routines and activities which are led either in Finnish, English or a combination of both.

The presence of a native speaker of English as a staff member in the pre-school group increases the children's exposure to English in the year before they start school. It is hoped that this approach creates natural opportunities for children to become familiar with and learn to use the foreign language, enriching their language worlds and strengthening their linguistic abilities. In linguistically rich communities, as promoted by the national core curricula (see Finnish National Agency for Education 2014; 2016; 2018), it is necessary to consider bilingual education from multiple perspectives and to recognise the central roles of children, parents and teachers these communities (Schwartz & Palviainen, 2016).

As children are co-constructors and co-navigators of their own sociocultural worlds, it is vital that we respect and observe children as they participate in their own learning (Long, Volk & Gregory, 2007). In the Nordic social tradition, in Finnish ECEC the child is viewed as an individual and competent social actor and the ECEC community aims to acknowledge the child's perspective (Alasuutari, 2014). These concepts of children's participation and child

agency (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) are a driving force in the implementation of ECEC in Finland. It is important to value and listen to children's voices and doing so enriches qualitative research (Crump & Phipps, 2013) especially in this context where the children are at the heart of the community being studied. The community exists for the children.

As part of a wider study, 24 children from the pre-school group were interviewed. The interviews with children were designed to elicit the children's views about their experiences as members of this ECEC community. They were conducted in Finnish in informal settings such as the rooms and corridors of the ECEC centre. The ECEC's special assistant carried out the four-question interviews and wrote down what the children said as they spoke. This form of interviewing is familiar to the children because they often participate in interviews of this kind and hence it is a natural part of their daily lives. The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis.

English as a positive challenge

The children view learning English positively. The words "kiva" (nice), "hauskaa" (fun) and "hyvä" (good) were used by most of the children to describe their feelings about CLIL. One child experienced it as "vähän oudolta" a bit odd, and another described her experience as "jännittävä" meaning exciting. Many children recalled specific things that they had learned:

> Olen oppinut monta uutta sanontaa; thank you, snack time, lunch time. [I've learned a lot of new expressions; thank you, snack time, lunch time.]
>
> Olen oppinut monta sanaa ja pitkän ruokalorun. [I've learned a lot of words and a long lunchtime rhyme.]
>
> Mä en oikein muista olenko oppinut uutta, tai joo, sen Five Little Monkeys laulun. [I can't really remember if I've learned something new, or yes, the Five Little Monkeys song.]

The children are also aware that they can function practically in English:

> Englanti tuntuu ihan hyvältä täällä, koska se on mulle helppoo. Oon oppinut pyytää ruokaa. Sitten kun en ymmärräkään XXX [natiivi englanninkielinen puhuja], niin kysyn toiselta aikuiselta mitä se sanoi. [English feels quite good here because it's easy for me. I've learned to ask for food. Then when I don't understand XXX [the native English speaker], I ask another adult what she said.]

English can be easy and difficult simultaneously. One child says:

> On ollut kiva oppia englantia ja oon oppinut sitä paljon. Englanti on helppoo ja pikkasen vaikeeta. [Learning English has been nice, and I've learned a lot. English is easy and a little bit difficult.]

The same dichotomy is present for another child who says:

> se englannin puhuminen on aika vaikeeta. Oon kuitenkin oppinut puhumaan sitä vähäsen, aika helposti opin sitä. [Speaking English is very difficult. However, I have learned to speak it a bit; quite easily I learned it.]

Another child separates this dichotomy into two concurrent concepts:

> On kiva tää englanti täällä. Välillä se on vaikeeta ja välillä ihan helppoo. [It's nice this English we have here. Sometimes it's difficult and sometimes it's easy.]

What is interesting in all these is that the challenge or difficulty of learning English does not seem to put children off; learning English is described positively by most children.

The children situate their language learning experience as part of something bigger. They recognise their own development:

> Englanti täällä on aika hauskaa, koska sitä oppii ja osaan sit koulussa. Olenkin oppinut täällä paljon kaikkea. Aluksi se oli vähän vaikeeta, mut nyt jo ihan helppoo! Jos on jotain mitä en ymmärrä, niin joskus käyn kysymässä toiselta neuvoa. Aika hyvin osaan jo sitä ja ymmärrän kans! [English here is quite fun because I can learn and then I'll know it in school. I've learned a lot about everything here. At first it was a little bit difficult but now it's easy! If I don't understand something, then I'll sometimes go to ask advice from someone else. I am quite good at it [English] now and I understand as well.]

The children are also aware of strategies they use to cope in English, for example deriving meaning from a context and thinking something might mean. This valuable skill develops of course in the child's own mother tongue, but perhaps the children are more aware of it through learning a foreign language. This strategy is mentioned by several children:

> Aika paljon käy niin, että en ymmärrä, niin sit vaan mietin mitä se vois tarkoittaa. [It often happens that I don't understand, then I just think what it could mean.]

One child says:

> jos en ymmärrä jotain, mietin mitä se voisi tarkoittaa tai kysyn apua [If I don't understand something, I think what it could mean or ask for help.]

This comment indicates that the child recognises there are limits to how much can be understood from the context alone and that it is sometimes important to ask for help from others. In effect, this child has a multi-layered strategy to cope with this aspect of her daily life. Other children also identified strategies for coping with a limited understanding of one of their learning languages. These range from 'just letting it be' to 'thinking what it could mean' to 'asking for help from someone else' or 'just saying yes or ok'.

The role of English for multilingual children

Four children with multilingual backgrounds took part in the research. Two of their responses are very similar and do not differ greatly from other classmates:

> On tuntunut kivalta, kun on ollut englantia. Olen oppinut sitä vähän. Englanti on ollut mulle helppoa. Jos en ymmärrä, kysyn mitä se tarkoittaa. [It's felt nice having English here. I've learned a bit. English has been easy for me. If I don't understand I ask what it means.]
>
> Kivaa, että täällä puhutaan englantia. Puhun kyllä suomeakin. En ole oppinut uutta, koska se on jo helppoa. Sanon aikuiselle jos en ymmärrä asiaa englanniksi. [Nice that we speak English here. I speak Finnish too. I haven't learned anything because it's already easy. I tell a grown-up if I don't understand something in English.]

However, for one multilingual child, who is supported by special needs provision due to possible learning difficulties and is more comfortable speaking English than his mother tongue (Finnish), English provides a sanctuary:

> Tuntuu hyvältä kun päiväkodissakin puhutaan englantia. Mä puhun sitä kotonakin! Mun isi on englantilainen. Olen oppinut uusia sanoja englanniksi, ehkä. Se kieli on mulle helppoa XXX [natiivi englanninkielinen puhuja], auttaa mua aina englanniksi, kun en ymmärä. [It feels good that we speak English at daycare. I speak it at home too! My dad is English. I've learned new words in English, maybe. The language is easy for me. XXX [the native English speaker] always helps me in English when I don't understand.]"

His last comment reveals that he feels supported by the presence of English, as he is helped to understand daily situations (the "always" in his sentence is potent) because of the presence of English.

Finally, one boy enthusiastically explains:

> Kuka ei tiedä mitä English se sanoo, kun se XXX [natiivi englanninkielinen puhuja], sanoo. Kuka ei tiedä sitä. Minä tietää kun mitä se sanoo! Se English mulle helppo. Olen oppinut 'cartoon' se uusi sana. En tiedä mitä suomeksi sanoo, englanti vaan. [Nobody knows what English she's saying, when XXX [the native English speaker] is saying it. Nobody knows it. I know what she says! English is easy for me. I've learned 'cartoon' that's a new word. I don't know how to say it in Finnish, only in English.]

For this child, his knowledge of English positively contributes to his self-image. He is obviously proud. The presence of one his "other tongues" at the ECEC strengthens his linguistic identity.

Creating rich language worlds

This study shows that children actively construct their own linguistic identities and language development using the resources and relationships that are available in their environment. It is important to support children by helping them to recognise strategies for language learning and by drawing connections between the languages they know to create the kind of rich language worlds mentioned in the national core curricula. Additionally, the research illustrates that emergent multilingual children are able to draw meaning from contextual experiences. It would be interesting to make comparisons with children in monolingual early childhood education programs.

Finally, there is need for careful and considered implementation of responsible language teaching as the community becomes increasingly heterogeneous. Incorporating a wider selection of languages than Finnish and English would help raise children's awareness of a language-rich world and nurture positive attitudes to language learning.

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