# FINNISH PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF PLAY-BASED TEACHING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES IN THE 1ST AND 2ND GRADES

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Tiivistelmä

Vuodesta 2020 alkaen ensimmäisen vieraan kielen (A1-kielen) opetus kouluissa on pitänyt aloittaa jo ensimmäisellä luokalla. Tätä ennen vieraan kielen opetus alkoi viimeistään kolmannella luokalla, joskin monet koulut olivat tarjonneet mahdollisuutta aiempaan aloitukseen jo ennen vuotta 2020. Varhaisemman kielten opetuksen aloituksen pyrkimyksenä on positiivisten asenteiden luominen, sekä yksilön itsevarmuuden kasvattaminen omia kykyjä kohtaan. Koska kaikki oppilaat eivät vielä osaa lukea tai kirjoittaa ensimmäisen luokan alkaessa, opetusmetodeina hyödynnetään toiminnallisia menetelmiä, kuten leikkiä, musiikkia, pelejä ja liikettä.

Tässä tutkimuksessa perehdyttiin toiminnallisiin opetusmenetelmiin sekä niiden käyttöön ja vaikutuksiin 1. ja 2. luokan opettajien näkökulmasta. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää 1. ja 2. luokan opettajien kokemuksia toiminnallisista opetusmenetelmistä englannin kielen oppitunneilla. Tutkimus toteutettiin laadullisena tutkimuksena haastattelemalla kahta luokanopettajaa etäyhteyden välityksellä. Haastattelut olivat puolistrukturoituja ja niiden sisältöjä analysoitiin laadullisen sisällönanalyysin keinoin teemoittelemalla aineisto ja vertaamalla litteraatteja tutkimuskysymyksiin.

Tutkimuksen tulokset olivat toiminnallisten opetusmenetelmien kannalta hyvin positiivisia. Kummallakaan opettajalla ei ollut oppikirjaa käytössä englannin opetuksessa, mutta vihkoja käytettiin satunnaisesti. Molemmat opettajat käyttivät runsaasti toiminnallisia opetusmenetelmiä, kuten erilaisia lauluja ja laululeikkejä, liikettä ja liikkumista lisättynä tavallisiin tehtäviin, draamaa, sekä erilaisia pelejä. Opettajat kokivat, että toiminnalliset opetusmenetelmät lisäsivät oppilaiden motivaatiota ja keskittymistä ja lisäksi ne toivat vaihtelevaa sisältöä oppitunteihin. Opettajat mainitsivat, että vapaus käyttää erilaisia opetustapoja lisäsi myös heidän työtään kohtaan kokemaansa motivaatiota. Haasteina he mainitsivat, että toiminnalliseen opetukseen siirtyminen voi tuntua hankalalta, mikäli siihen ei ole tottunut. Myös toiminnan opettajalähtöisyyttä korostettiin, jotta oppitunnit eivät menisi yleiseksi epäjärjestykseksi tai levottomuudeksi.

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| Asiasanat: play-based teaching, early language learning, teacher interview, teachers' experiences |

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| Muita tietoja |

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# 1   INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes more global, language skills are vital. Besides the two official languages in Finland, Finnish and Swedish, other languages are needed for example in business, tourism, and international studies and research. The learning of the two national languages in Finland does not affect negatively on the learning of other languages, but instead creates prerequisites for it (Pyykkö 2017: 19).  It is hard to predict the future language needs because the world changes rapidly (Pyykkö 2017:19). According to World Economic Forum (2016), three of the world's most powerful languages in 2016 were English, Mandarin Chinese, and French, and in Finland the most popular first foreign language in schools (A1 language) between 2000-2016 has been English, which has been chosen by around 90 per cent of pupils each year (Pyykkö 2017: 25). A1 language is the first foreign or second language that pupils are obliged to study at school.

In September 2018, the Finnish Government decided to add altogether two weekly lessons per year into the 1st and 2nd grades of primary school. Those lessons were targeted to A1 language teaching which, since spring 2020, has begun in the 1st grade (Finnish National Agency for Education: Kielten kärkihanke). Before 2020, A1 language had to be taught from the 3rd grade onwards at the latest, although many schools had offered the opportunity to begin the language studies earlier than that. One of the languages that can be chosen as A1 language is English.

As Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) (2019) states in their document *Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteiden 2014 muutokset ja täydennykset koskien A1-*

*kielen opetusta vuosiluokilla 1-2 (Amendments and additions to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 regarding the instruction of the A1 language in grades 1-2)*, the aim for the earlier start in language teaching is "to create a positive attitude towards language learning, establish confidence in one's abilities, and to encourage the use of any little language skills that they have acquired" (EDUFI 2019: 25) The pupils are not expected to be literate in the beginning of the schoolyear but they are encouraged to take interest in both oral and written communication and the study methods are play-based, including for example play, music, games, and movement (EDUFI 2019: 25). As mentioned above, the majority of pupils in Finland chooses English as their first foreign language, and therefore this study with its play-based aspect of teaching is currently highly relevant.

This study focuses on the ways primary school teachers utilise these play-based methods in their English language teaching in the 1st and 2nd grades and the experiences they have about using them. Mård-Miettinen et al. (2021: 40) found in their study of A1 English language teaching that only about a third of the teachers used a study book in their first graders language lessons. Considering this among the fact that pupils are not necessarily literate in the first grade, using play-based activities in teaching is a fitting choice. In this qualitative interview study, I will present my findings on the two interviewed teachers' experiences about the matter. I have chosen to study the subject from teachers' point of view as I am interested in the pedagogy and the teaching methods they utilise. Also, as I am going to be both a primary school class teacher and an English language teacher, I have a personal interest in the matter.

# 2 EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

In this chapter I am first going to concentrate on early language learning in general and then I will focus the attention to the Finnish context.

## 2.1 Early foreign language learning

It seems to be a general assumption that the earlier children begin their language studies the better. However, it is now understood that the young age may not be the only factor that needs to be taken into account with succesful language learning, but also factors such as opportunities to use the language in meaningful situations, the quality of formal instruction, and motivation are important (Haznedar 2014: 18; Pinter 2011: 49). In immersion in a natural context at school, however, it seems that children tend to gain a higher level of proficiency than adolescents or adults when they are exposed to similar circumstances regarding language learning (Lambelet & Berthele 2015: 19). Immersion means that either the entire curriculum or some parts of it, for example a half, is taught in the second language (Pinter 2011: 81).

As Enever (2015: 26) states, English is nowadays available to children in various ways outside of school. For example, the Internet provides a range of opportunities to access authentic materials and to be in contact with native-speaking children in virtual environments (Pinter 2011: 87). This may be the reason for children to be more at ease

with pronunciation and prosodic features of the language before they start participating English lessons at school (Enever 2015: 26).

The teachers who teach English to young learners need to possess two abilities: an advanced level of the target language and the ability to take the learners' age into consideration and use suitable methodology (Enever 2015: 22). The foreign language lessons in primary schools are often taught either by a language teacher who may also teach in a secondary school or a class teacher who also teaches other subjects to their class (Pinter 2011: 88). This is also the case in Finland.

## 2.2   Early foreign language learning in Finland

Before the A1 language studies begin in the first grade, the pupils may be introduced to the languages that are offered at their future educational instutution (EDUFI 2019: 7). This introduction can happen in the form of language showering either at their preschool education or in the autumn semester of the first grade at school, if the A1 language studies begin in the spring term (EDUFI 2019: 7). This language showering is carried out by choosing topics that interest the children and play-based methods, sucs as singing, playing games, and adding physical movement, are used (EDUFI 2019: 7).

In their study of A1 English language on grades 1-6, Mård-Miettinen et al. (2021: 30) state that the teachers who taught English to their first graders experienced many advantages about the early start. They reported the pupils to be motivated and eager to learn English as well as brave enough to participate. They felt that it was easy to implement play-based methods, such as singing and playing, into their lessons, and they believed that the pupils' oral skills developed better when they heard and used English language since a young age. The teachers also believed there was a sensitive

period for language learning, which  was believed to play an important role as well (Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021: 30).

# 3 PLAY-BASED TEACHING

In this chapter I will describe play-based teaching based on literature and introduce some central methods of play-based teaching.

## 3.1 Play-based teaching

In the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014, the term *toiminnallisuus* (functional approach) is mentioned multiple times. It is described to include methods such as play, games, physical activity, experimenting, and different ways of creating art (the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014: 21). As there are different terms used in different sources, the term *play-based teaching* is used in this study to describe all teaching methods that include various types of functionalities, such as the ones named above.

Martlew et al. (2011) describe teachers' experiences about play-based teaching mainly positive in their research article *Play in the Primary Classroom? The Experience of Teachers Supporting Children's Learning Through a New Pedagogy*. Six first grade primary school teachers from Scotland stated that play-based pedagogy (commonly described as active learning) boosted pupils' confidence and independence, as well as increased positive attitude towards learning (Martlew et al. 2011: 76). They also experienced that play-based pedagogy made learning more engaging to their pupils and they learned

at a faster pace (Martlew et al. 2011: 76). The experiences of the teachers were mainly positive, but a few minor challenges occurred: gathering evidence of pupils' learning needed to be organised differently as well as the setup of the classroom and the structure of the day (Martlew et al. 2011: 76).

## 3.2   Methods in play-based teaching

There are plenty of different play-based teaching methods teachers may utilise in their own teaching, depending on their own interests and what they feel work for their students. In this chapter I am going to present a few different methods that appeared frequently in research articles and in pedagogical literature written mostly for teachers.

**Online games**

In the Japanese research article *Online games for young learners' foreign language learning* the authors Butler et al. describe the use of different online games targeted mainly for language learning and the benefits of them. They found that in order for language learning online games to be interesting and motivating to pupils, they usually need to possess a few key features: challenge, mystery, control, and multiple players (Butler et al. 2014: 273). They also stated that it is not always easy to predict which games contribute towards language learning, and it is not necessarily dependent on the attractiveness of the game itself (Butler et al. 2014: 273). It is important to pay attention to pupils' age and choose age-appropriate games which challenge them cognitively and also feed their curiosity (Butler et al. 2014: 274).

In their book *Language at Play: Digital Games in Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, Julie Sykes and Jonathon Reinhardt discuss broadly the use of digital games in language teaching and learning. They present many advantages that digital games may bring into a foreign language learning. Digital gaming usually includes

interaction with other players and learning through interaction happens when players need to negotiate for meaning. Interaction can happen on three levels, and they all support foreign language learning: interaction with the game, interaction through or around the game, and interaction about the game, which includes texts and discourses (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013: 43). Digital games tend to give the player plenty of feedback along the way, both positive and negative. There are many different feedback mechanisms in digital games including for example points, levelling, and skill building. These mechanisms could also be used in foreign language for effective instruction, and not only for assessment (Sykes & Reinhardt 2013: 61-64).

**Offline games**

In Switzerland, an intervention study was conducted where different teaching methods were compared in teaching mathematics to five-to-six-year-old children, and one of the methods was a play-based approach using card and board games. The results of the study showed that teachers were generally happy with the play-based approach, they felt the material they received was exciting and varying, and they were planning on using the material also the following year (Vogt et al. 2018: 596-597). One of the teachers reported that especially the weaker pupils benefitted from the use of the approach, but the others did as well (Vogt et al. 2018: 597). The researchers performed a pre-test before the intervention, and a post-test after the intervention, and found out that the pupils who had been a part of the play-based teaching in mathematics performed significantly better after the intervention than those who had been a part of the other intervention group, as the other group had not developed their skills at all (Vogt et al. 2018: 598).

In Finland, different kinds of offline games tend to be used in language lessons, and study books often encourage it by providing ideas and materials to play, for example various board games, word explanation games, and games where pupils need to acquire specific information from other pupils.

**Physical movement**

The effects of movement in learning English vocabulary among 4-7-year-old preschool pupils were studied in Honduras. The pupils did not know any English words prior the study and they were divided into three groups of which the first group was taught English words only with the help of flashcards, the second group used flashcards and gestures (e.g., pointing to the object), and the third group used flashcards, gestures, and physical movement (Padial-Ruiz et al. 2019: 5 of 13). The results showed that pupils in all three groups learned new English words, but the biggest number of words learned was in the group which utilised both gestures and physical movement on top of the flashcards (Padial-Ruiz et al. 2019: 7 of 13).

Teachers may feel that using movement in the classroom may create problems in terms of disorder or restlessness but in fact, movement can lead to a more controlled and productive classroom (Lengel & Kuczala 2010: 30). As Lengel and Kuczala (2010: 31) state, most students would not choose to sit passively all day, but resistance may exist as well. Therefore, teachers need to create a positive environment where they act patiently and positively towards learners. Movement in the classroom can help students learn better because it involves more sensory engagement, and recall is easier when students are allowed to move, as physical exercises are often easier to remember than those including only reading or writing (Lengel & Kuczala 2010: 19-20).

**Singing, rhyming, and oral story telling**

In their research about songs in foreign language learning, the researchers Coyle and Gracia investigated the effects of a sing-along song in English language learning among preschool children in Spain. They chose a well-known children's song which had repetition in the structure and was easy to combine actions with (Coyle & Gracia 2014: 278). Three lessons were taught where the pupils were encouraged to learn the

song and participate in it by singing and using actions, and their learning outcomes were tested right after the third teaching session and again five weeks later (Coyle & Gracia 2014: 279). The results showed that the pupils' acquisition of receptive vocabulary improved significantly, whereas the acquisition of productive vocabulary did not improve much (Coyle & Gracia 2014: 280).

Elizabeth Sharp (2005: 1) states in her book *Learning through talk in the early years: practical activities for the classroom* that in her experience, children who are acquainted with lots of nursery rhymes are often the ones who have the most advanced speech and language skills. She also reports that these children tend to learn other literacy skills easily. They are not only developing language skills, but the confidence of children may grow as well (Sharp 2005: 1). Among nursery rhymes and other songs of children's choice, poems are a great way of learning and using a language. With poems, the ear for rhyme and sounds can develop, but they can also advance writing skills. As Sharp (2005: 3) states, children tend to like poems especially if they are a bit funny, and they enjoy listening to them and repeating them over and over again.

Oral storytelling is a major part in our lives, and it plays an important role for language learning, too. For young learners, the most common storytelling forms are probably picture books and oral stories, and for older learners these might also include narrative forms such as films, comics, and graphic novels (Bland 2015: 184). For young learners to be able to understand a story in a language they are just learning, teachers may use various features in their speech, for example exaggerated gestures and facial expressions, as well as repetitive speech (Bland 2015: 190). One of the ways to oral storytelling in young learners' English classes is the use of picture books. As well as containing appropriate information on social and historical aspects, they bring different cultures and different Englishes to the learners (Mourão 2015: 203).

**Drama**

Drama in the language classroom can be utilised in many ways, for example as a warming-up activity or as a project that takes a longer period of time. An example of a warming-up activity includes finger puppets, which the learners pick out of a box and go round the class playing the role of the puppet and introducing themselves to their classmates (Bland 2015: 219-220). Drama has different aspects of children's play activity that support language learning in an active way, such as playing roles, listening, imitating, and trying out (Bland 2015: 223). Drama can either be scripted or unscripted, and both of them work well in language learning. Scripted drama may encourage learners to motivated reading, whereas unscripted drama may encourage them to motivated creative writing (Bland 2015: 220-221).

# 4 THE PRESENT STUDY

This chapter will introduce the research questions and explain why these questions were chosen. Also, the data and data collection methods, and methods of analysis will be explained.

## 4.1 Research Questions

The aim of this study is to examine the experiences of the 1st and 2nd grade primary school teachers about play-based teaching in English language classes. The research aims to answer to the following questions:

1. What kind of play-based methods do the teachers use?
2. What kind of experiences do the teachers have about using play-based teaching methods?
3. What are the experiences of play-based teaching from the perspective of the teachers' work?

## 4.2 Data and Data Collection

In this study, semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method. This was chosen as the method because the study focused on the teachers' own

experiences and therefore, I wanted to leave room for free discussion around the subject.

A research interview has a specific purpose and specific participants: the interviewer is the uninformed party who needs to gather the information from the participant. The interviewer is also the executor of the interview who usually guides the direction of the interview with explicit topics (Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2009: 19). An interview may resemble a spontaneous conversation, but it always has a goal. The interview is guided by the purpose of the study and some significant markers of a research interview are for example the recording of the interview and the interviewer taking notes (Ruusuvuori & Tiittula 2009: 19).

Semi-structured interviews are usually planned interviews that are on a set date and time outside of ordinary business (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006: 315). They typically contain a set of open-ended questions, which give room to other questions and discussion around the subject (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006: 315). The interviews can be either individual or group interviews that are customarily conducted only once and last from 30 minutes onwards (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006: 315).

After deciding on the topic of the thesis, I searched for interviewees through acquaintances and my social circles, thus using convenience sampling. The aim was to find two or three classroom teachers, who were teaching either first or second graders in a primary school and who also taught English to their class among other subjects. I wanted to interview classroom teachers instead of language teachers for two reasons: in many cases, classroom teachers in Finland teach their class most of the subjects in first and second grade, including English language. Secondly, I assumed that classroom teachers were accustomed to utilising functional, play-based methods in other school subjects, and I was interested in hearing their thoughts about these methods in foreign language teaching. I found two volunteers who matched the criteria and who were willing to participate in my research.

The data was collected in February and March 2022. Two first- or second-year primary school classroom teachers were interviewed via Zoom and the interviews were recorded. The interviewees were from western Finland and they both taught English to their class among other subjects. They had around 20 years of teaching experience both but had only started teaching English a few years ago. Neither of them had studied English language at the university apart from the compulsory language course. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to make the content easier to access to the researcher and to allow direct quotes to be included in the Findings and Discussion section. Both interviews were conducted in Finnish, and I have translated all the excerpts into English. The original Finnish quotes are listed in Appendix 3.

## 4.3  Method of Analysis

The method of analysis used was qualitative content analysis. In qualitative content analysis, the aim is to systematically describe the certain content of the research material which has been selected based on the angle of the research itself (Schreier 2012: 3-4). Qualitative content analysis consists of three characteristics: it is systematic, flexible, and it reduces data (Schreier 2012: 5).

As mentioned earlier, the interviews were held over Zoom, and they were recorded. The recorded data was transcribed verbatim to make it easier to handle and it was read through multiple times to find answers to the research questions.

Although the theory I read in the beginning of the study guided my research, the actual theory part of the thesis was written after the collection of the data. As there are many close terms, such as action-based teaching, action-oriented teaching, and play-based teaching, the main term of my study (play-based teaching) was established after collecting the data and after I had read more previous pieces of research. As my research was very practically oriented, it employs some characteristics of Grounded

Theory. In grounded theory research, the collection of data happens simultaneously with the analysis and leads to the theory development (Oktay 2012: 15). However, in grounded theory, the researcher usually returns to the field after collecting the data and analysing it to test the theories built (Oktay 2012: 17), but this was not possible with my very limited research.

While reading the transcribed data through a number of times, I started to divide the contents into different categories guided by my research questions and the themes that arose repeatedly from the collected data. The themes were examined thoroughly and then classified into bigger arrays which in the end formed the subchapters of the analysis section.

## 4.4   Ethical issues

According to the ethical research principles of JYU, the participants were ensured from the very beginning of the study that taking part in this study was completely voluntarily and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Before the interviews, the participants received an informed consent which informed them about the study, its purposes, and the research methods. They also signed a consent form in which they agreed to take part in this study. The participants were told that the study would not include any personal details of them and therefore, every measurement possible was made to protect the anonymity of the participants. The audio files of the interviews were stored in a secure cloud service and the transcripts did not contain any personal information of the interviewees. This data was deleted after gathering the required material. Also, the quotes were chosen in a way that the participants would maintain their privacy. To ensure the anonymity of the participants in this thesis, they are referred to as T1 (Teacher 1) and T2 (Teacher 2) in the text. As the gender of the participants was not significant for the research, they are both referred to as 'they' instead of 'he' or 'she'.

# 5   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter I will introduce the findings of my research through three themes that emerged from the analysis of the data and the data analysis of my interviews. These themes are *the methods and materials of play-based teaching that the teachers reported using, the teachers' experiences of the usefulness of the methods and materials in play-based teaching,* and *the teachers' views on the effects of the play-based teaching from the perspective of their work.*

## 5.1   The methods and materials of play-based teaching

Both participants were experienced teachers who stated that all of their teaching is mainly play-based, not only the English lessons. They mentioned many different methods that they use regularly. As seen in examples 1 and 2, both of them mentioned singing games and sing-alongs to be one of their most used methods of play-based teaching.

> (1) T1: When you asked what kinds of play-based methods, well quite much nonsense poems and songs, and those we repeat many times so that they stick to the pupils' minds. Then they remember those 'I can swim' and then we add movement to it.

> (2) T2: For example, 'London Bridge is Falling Down' and we go round and round, and all kinds of songs with movements. And nonsense poems, and music because with music it is easier to learn many things.

Both teachers mentioned singing and song plays a few times, which emphasises the importance of them. They both experienced that pupils learn better when they use more than one sense at a time, for example voice and movement combined. Also, they reported that pupils enjoy these activities very much. Another play-based method that both teachers reported using constantly was adding movement into an ordinary task, for example:

> (3) T1: For example, we have studied different colours with colouring and adding the name of the colour on it. Then I have hid the coloured papers with the colour names and once the pupils have coloured their own papers, they need to go check if they have chosen the correct colour. So that they need to move a bit in the class.

> (4) T1: We have a basketball rack, so the pupils get to throw the ball to the basket, and at the same time, they need to count 'one, two, three' in English. After that they get to do something. So that we add movement to other tasks.

Teacher 1 was not very keen on adding drama play into the lessons because of personal preferences although they acknowledged it to be a useful method among others. However, Teacher 2 had an engaging way of utilising drama in their English lessons, as seen in example 5.

> (5) T2: Yes, so I have this hand puppet called Mr Fox and I start my lessons with him knocking on the door with me. I use this regularly and we practise greeting each other in English. Then I have Mr Fox at other times too and he teaches something to the students, for example, 'What's your name?', 'My name is Matti.'.

Other play-based teaching methods that emerged from the interviews were different types of games, which were used for example to learn and revise colours and numbers. Teachers reported that these games were often quickly created during lessons and the most important goal was to study in a motivating way. They both experienced that movement and play-based teaching added pupils' motivation in English language classes and Teacher 2 mentioned that these classes are often one of the most play-based lessons during their day. Teacher 1 reported that they sometimes go out and play different games there to motivate pupils with different surroundings. Example 6 illustrates one of the games they might play:

(6) T1: So, we've had English there [outside] as well. For example, this… a washbasin. What is it? When you try and find matching pairs, what is it? A memory game, yes.

In example 7 Teacher 2 mentions that sometimes the pupils are allowed to play online games if they have little extra time, and the teacher makes sure every pupil has a chance to play from time to time.

(7) T2: So, then they have the opportunity to use Chrome. To play an English language game [online]. […] So, if they have extra time and I make sure that everyone gets that extra time.

Teacher 2 emphasised that online games were used only occasionally in the lessons, but they felt that in the terms of equality, it was important to give every pupil the opportunity to play every once in a while.

Both teachers reported that they were teaching English without designated textbooks or workbooks. They mainly used oral teaching methods, but they did have notebooks for pupils, which they used occasionally. In examples 8 and 9 they explain this:

(8) T2: Now [in the spring term] I have notebooks where we practice for example numbers. And colour different colours and write the names of the colours to practice writing as well.

(9) T1: Sometimes we do something on the notebooks. For example, we have studied family members by drawing them and adding the English words describing them.

Both teachers mentioned many simple materials which they used in their English language classes. These included pockets and boxes containing different tasks, colour cards and flash cards, games, and little stuffed animals and other figures.

## 5.2 The benefits of play-based teaching

This chapter aims to demonstrate why the two interviewed teachers consider play-based teaching beneficial simultaneously for their teaching and their pupils. It also presents their thoughts about their means of finding new and varying ways to teach.

As mentioned in the beginning of the previous chapter, both teachers reported to utilise a vast variety of play-based teaching methods in their English lessons, which indicates that they find them highly useful. In example 10, Teacher 2 explains their thoughts behind the play-based methods.

> (10) T2: So, it [play-based teaching] is… Can I say the requirement for them to learn. And also, to have joy for learning so that it does not get dull.

Teacher 2 considered play-based teaching vital for their pupils' learning as it adds versatility to the content of the lessons. They also felt that it has a strong connection with joy, which they saw as an important factor in learning a foreign language.

Teacher 1 has experienced the action and movement to be helpful in learning for different types of pupils, as shown in example 11.

> (11) T1: The pupils have become more restless during the past 10 years, and they can't concentrate for long. […] So to be able to learn and be active at the same time helps children to stay concentrated and even those who have difficulties to stay still are able to move but also do something useful.

Teacher 1 also explains that being able to move during lessons helps pupils to calm down at other times, and learning persistence is a key skill at school as well. They have a quiet period of 15 minutes every day, during which the pupils are allowed to work quietly with reading or drawing.

The effects of play-based teaching that emerged from the interviews were only positive. Teachers reported to be happy when they can teach using varying methods

that suit themselves and they reported that to be one of the factors they enjoy their work.

## 5.3   Play-based teaching in terms of teachers' work

Play-based teaching is more than just the methods used. Other factors that emerged from the interviews were the importance of colleagues and possible challenges that may occur with play-based teaching.

Colleagues were seen as an important source of ideas. Both teachers shared their ideas with their colleagues and also received new ideas from them both face-to-face and online. Different education days outside of school were seen as a fruitful opportunity to gain new ideas and thoughts, but the corona pandemic had prevented participating such events during the time of the interviews and even some time before that. Teacher 1 explains their thoughts in examples 12 and 13:

> (12)T1: We had this seminar about early language teaching from which we received some tips. It was during time when we were allowed to attend seminars and see people [before the corona pandemic].

> (13)T1: But really, those kinds of play-based workshops are very good. Sharing ideas with other teachers is very useful.

Both teachers considered play-based teaching as little or as much demanding as teaching without a play-based emphasis. In examples 14 and 15 they explain this:

> (14)T1: You would need to plan as much if you were just going to open a book and have a look what you find in there.

> (15)T2: At first, it can feel like it [more demanding], but it is not as you don't need many of those [play-based attributes] for one lesson.

They stated that play-based teaching can be very simple and same ideas and methods may be utilised in other school subjects as well. Teaching English without study books was seen to encourage the use of play-based teaching methods. Teacher 2 mentioned

that there were more ideas in their mind than can be carried out in terms of time, which was considered a positive problem. However, there are some factors that need to be taken into consideration:

> (16) T1: The one who leads the activity needs to have it clear on their mind. Otherwise, it's going to be a disaster, and no one gains anything from it.

> (17) T2: When you asked if it [play-based teaching] is more demanding, maybe some people feel that way in the beginning. […] beginning with the play-based teaching can seem like a big obstacle, but once you get the hang of it, it's very enjoyable as the lessons are very nice, and they seem to go by fast.

> (18) T1: And you just need to be brave enough to try. If you get an idea, you should just test it and you will notice if it wasn't such a good idea.

These examples show that play-based teaching may feel challenging in the beginning, but once it becomes a routine, it adds pleasure for both pupils and the teacher. However, an important matter is that the teacher needs to be in charge of the action for it to succeed.

# 6   CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine the experiences of the 1st and 2nd grade primary school teachers about play-based teaching in English language classes. As pupils are not expected to be literate in the beginning of their first year at school, using play-based methods, such as music, games, and physical movement, is an appropriate choice (EDUFI 2019: 25). The study was conducted by interviewing two teachers and the research questions were: (1) what kind of play-based methods the teachers use, (2) what kind of experiences the teachers have about using play-based teaching methods, and (3) what the experiences of play-based teaching from the perspective of the teachers' work are.

The teachers utilised many different play-based teaching methods in their English language lessons, including singing games and sing-alongs, physical movement, drama, and different online and offline games. Mård-Miettinen et al. (2020: 40) found in their study of A1 English language teaching that only a minority of the teachers used a study book in their first grade. This was also the case with the teachers interviewed for this study. Both teachers considered different singing and song-related methods to be very enjoyable both for them and their pupils, so they used them often. They also regarded those methods to be very effective in terms of learning English. They had chosen methods that they considered suitable both for them and their pupils, and they had chosen not to use some methods due to personal

preferences, for example Teacher 1 did not enjoy drama as a teaching method and therefore did not use it.

Martlew et al. (2011: 76) stated in their research article that the teachers' experiences about play-based teaching were mainly positive, and they experienced this method to be useful in increasing positive attitude towards learning. This was also the case with the teachers interviewed for this study. As both teachers reported utilising many play-based teaching methods in their teaching, they seemed to find them highly useful and play-based teaching added versatility and joy to the lessons. Lengel & Kuczala (2010: 19-20) argued in their article that movement in the classroom can help students learn better because of more sensory engagement. In the present study as well, action and movement were seen suitable for different types of pupils, especially the ones who had difficulties of staying still. Teacher 1 also experienced that being able to move during lessons helped the pupils calm down at other times. Both of them mentioned a number of times that play-based teaching methods clearly added pupils' motivation towards studying. In the study by Vogt et al. (2018: 596-597), the teachers who participated in the play-based teaching intervention, reported that the experience was positive, and they were happy with the materials received. The teachers in this study did not report any negative effects about play-based teaching either.

Play-based teaching was seen as little or much demanding as teaching without a play-based emphasis. The teachers stressed that lessons need to be planned beforehand no matter the teaching method, and during one lesson only a couple of play-based methods are needed. Also, Teacher 2 mentioned that play-based methods need not be very complex for them to work well, and the same methods can be utilised in other subjects too. Play-based teaching may feel difficult and demanding if the teacher has never tried to teach that way before, but it may become easy and interesting if the teacher is open to new experiences. What needs to be taken into account, however, is that for the play-based methods to be successful in the classroom, the teacher needs to be in charge of the action. This means that in order to maintain a safe and comfortable

atmosphere for all the pupils, the teacher needs to make sure that everyone acts by the same rules.

This study clearly shows that play-based teaching methods can be useful and motivating for both pupils and their teachers. However, as there were only two classroom teachers interviewed and they had quite similar backgrounds and teaching experiences, these findings cannot be generalised. In the future, the effects of the use of play-based teaching methods could be studied more widely with different age groups, and with different methods, for example observing and interviewing pupils. Also, the views of the pupils' guardians about the matter could be examined. To broaden the perspective, both classroom teachers and language teachers could be interviewed, and their views could then be compared. Other interesting points that arose during the study and could be examined in the future were the effects of play-based teaching on motivation and different learners.

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# APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (FINNISH)

Taustakysymykset:

1. Kuinka pitkään olet toiminut opettajana?
2. Millainen koulutustausta sinulla on?
3. Millainen suhde sinulla on englannin kieleen?
4. Millaisia ajatuksia sinussa heräsi, kun kielten varhennus astui voimaan ja selvisi, että alat opettamaan englantia jo alkuopetuksessa? Kuka päätti siitä, että alat opettamaan myös englantia luokallesi?

Toiminnalliseen opetukseen liittyvät kokemukset:

5. Käytätkö toiminnallisen oppimisen menetelmiä englannin opetuksessasi? Millaisia?
6. Koetko toiminnallisen opetuksen hyvänä tai hyödyllisenä tapana opettaa? Jos kyllä, niin miksi?
7. Miten toiminnallisuus vaikuttaa oppilaisiin? Onko vaikutukset myönteisiä vai kielteisiä?
8. Millaiset toiminnalliset menetelmät ovat mielestäsi toimivimpia ja mistä oppilaat innostuvat eniten?
9. Käytätkö jotain toiminnallista opetusta tukevaa materiaalia? Millaista? Mistä saat ideoita?
10. Onko toiminnallisen opetuksen suunnittelu ja toteutus mielestäsi kuormittavaa jollain tavoin? Miten?
11. Oletko saanut koulutusta tai tukea esimerkiksi työyhteisöltäsi? Millaista?
12. Oletko lisännyt / vähentänyt toiminnallista opetusta viime vuosina? Miksi?
13. Muita ajatuksia toiminnalliseen opetukseen liittyen?

# APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (ENGLISH)

The background questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What is your educational background like?
3. What is your relationship with English language like?
4. What kind of thoughts did you have when you found out that you would start teaching English in the first two grades of the primary school among other subjects? Who made the decision that you would be teaching English to your class?

The experiences related to play-based teaching:

5. Do you utilise play-based teaching methods in your teaching? What kind?
6. Have you experienced the play-based teaching to be a good or useful method of teaching? If yes, why?
7. How does the play-based teaching affect pupils? Are the effects positive or negative?
8. What kind of play-based teaching methods are the most useful in your opinion? Which ones make the pupils the most excited?
9. Do you use some material that supports play-based teaching? What kind? Where do you get your ideas from?
10. Do you find the planning and implementation of play-based teaching too demanding in any way? If yes, how?
11. Have you received training or support from your work community? What kind?
12. Have you increased or decreased the amount of play-based teaching in recent years? If yes, why?
13. Any other thoughts related to play-based teaching?

# APPENDIX 3: THE FINNISH EXCERPTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

1. T1: Ku sä kysyit minkä tyyppist toiminnallista, nii aika paljon on loruja ja lauluja ja niitähä toistetaan tosi monta kertaa ni lapsillehan jää ne kivasti mieleen ja sit ne muistaa niistä ne et I can swim ja ja sit niihi liitetää viä liike.

2. T2: Leikkinä vaikka nyt, vaikka London Bridge is Falling Down ja pyöritään ympäri ja ja siis mitä kaikkia lauluja on semmosii et tulee se koko keho mukaan ja tehdään ja leikitään. Ja loruttelut, musiikki ihan sen takia koska niistähän oppii sen tai siis on helpompi oppii sit monia asioita.

3. T1: Esimerkiks värejä on opeteltu nii, et ko on väritetty jotakin juttuu ni, ni on laitettu sitte noi englanninkieliset värisanat ni mä oon käyny piilottamas semmoset pienet laput, on vaik keltainen lappu. Siin lukee sit se yellow. Mut se on ollu vähän niinku siel sivummalla, et sit ko on saanu värittää ni on pitänyt käyd tarkistamas se, et mikä se onkaan se yellow. Et pitäny tehd pieni semmone reippailu etsimää se oikee vaihtoehto.

4. T1: Meil o koripalloteline, ni voi ol niinku et pitää laskee esmes heittää se one, two, three ja sit saa tehr jonku jutun, elikkä voi yhdistää siihe niinku liikunnallisia juttuja.

5. T2: Joo elikkä Mister Fox on mulla käsinukkena niin että mä alotan oppitunnin niin että, jos mä konkreettisesti näin kerron sulle, et oppitunti alkaa siittä et sinne oveen Mister Fox koputtaa minun kanssani ja Mister Foxia käytän ihan siihen et toistuvasti alotetaan tunti sillä et tervehditään. […] Ja Mister Fox on jatkossakin aina mukana eri tuokiossa niin et hän opettaa jonkun asian, vaikkapa että mikä sinun nimesi what's your name ja my name is Matti tai mikä kuka kukin on ja siis tälläsis mitä erilaisia aihealueita tulee, ni se Mister Fox on niinku mukana.

6. T1: Ni meil o myöski siel ollu englantii, elikkä esimerkiks tämmöst niinku tota… pesuvati. Tota mikä se o? Ku etsitään parit, mikä se peli on? Muistipeli, jes.

7. T2: Ni sitten on vielä mahdollisuus mennä Chromeen. Pelaa jotain enkun, enkkupeliä. […] Että kun jos jää aikaa ja tietty mä huolehdin siitä, että joskus jää jokaiselle aikaa.

8. T2: Nyt mul on sit [kevätlukukaudella] vihko mihinkä tehdään sitten just niinku vaikka ny ne numerot ollaan kirjotettu ja ja tota. Ja sitten väritellään noi värit ja kirjoitetaan viereen eli tulis sitä kirjoittamista sit pikkuhiljaa.

9. T1: Sin vihkoon, vihkoon sit tehdään aina joskus jotakin. Esimerkiks on perheenjäsenii opiskeltu nii et on saanu piirtää se oma perhees ja sit siihe on lisätty englanninkielisii sanoja.

10. T2: Joo siis tota… sehän on, uskallanko mä sanoa ihan et pienten lasten oppimisen edellytys. Ja se, että on se oppimisen ilo myös sitä vierasta kieltä kohtaan, et se ei olis tylsää.

11. T1: Siis oppilasaines o viimese 10 vuode aikan tullu paljon levottomammaksi yleisestiki ja, ja tota lapset ei jaksa siis keskittyy niin pitkää aikaa. […] ni se että kun ne voi oppii ja olla kuitenkin niinku aktiivisia, ni se pitää jollakin tavalla niinku niitten lastenkin vireystilaa siihe asiaan niinko hyvänä ja ne joil on vaikeuksii niinku olla paikallaan, ni he kuitenki sit tekee jotaki hyödyllist mut voi liikkuu.

12. T1: Semmone koulutus oli varhennetu kiele opetus, ni sielt tuli jotaki vinkkejä sillo kun viel sai käyd koulutuksis ja nähd, näki ihmisii.

13. T1: Mut et oikeesti niinku tommoset toiminnalliset koulutuspajat, niin ne on tosi hyviä, siis semmosia… Toisten opettajien kans vinkkien jakaminen ni se on ihan tosi hyödyllist.

14. T1: Et iha yhtlail sitä joutus suunnittelemaan sitä, et avaa jonku kirjan sivun, et mitä täs nyt onkaan.

15. T2: Äkkiseltään se voi alkuun vois kuulostaa siltä, mut ei oo [kuormittavampaa] koska sä et kovin monta [toiminnallista asiaa], sä et tarvi, siis yhden oppitunnin ajaksi.

16. T1: Et ko siin täytyy nimenomaan ol sil joka sitä toimintaa johtaa, ni täytyy ol homma selvä. Muuteha se menee kaahimiseks eikä kukaa hyödy.

17. T2: Kun kysyit onkse [toiminnallisuus] työlästä, ni voihan se alkuun tuntua jostaki. […] et se toiminnallisuuden alotushan voi olla semmonen iso muuri, mut kun siihen pääsin sisään itte, ni se on niin miellyttävää ku ne tunnit on mukavia ja, ja ne menee oikeestaan itteltäkin valtavan nopeesti.

18. T1: Ja sit semmosel rohkeel kokeilumielel myöski kannattaa tehdä, että. Jos saa jonku ajatuksen ni testaa. Kyl sen sit huomaa jos se olikin vähä huono idea.