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**Title:** Staff self-assessment of ECEC practices in meeting language diversity in Finland

**Year:** 2024

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Bergroth, M., Harju-Autti, R., & Alisaari, J. (2024). Staff self-assessment of ECEC practices in meeting language diversity in Finland. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 13(1), 42-67. <https://doi.org/10.58955/jecer.130031>



# Staff self-assessment of ECEC practices in meeting language diversity in Finland

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**ABSTRACT:** The study examines language aware practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Finland. In Finland, the number of citizens with languages other than the national languages is estimated to increase, and population growth is dependent on migration. Children enrolled in ECEC have increasingly diverse language backgrounds. This calls for adjusting pedagogical practices to the needs of multilingual children only starting to familiarise themselves with the language of instruction. The data analysed were part of a national survey. A total of 882 respondents working in ECEC answered the survey. For this study, we concentrated on two open questions: “What kinds of practices do you have to support the language learning of children with an immigration background?” ( $N = 538$ ) and “What kinds of needs to develop practices have you identified regarding language learning of children with an immigrant background or organising linguistic support?” ( $N = 509$ ). Qualitative content analysis was used as an analytical approach. Our findings were condensed to a model consisting of six steps of language aware ECEC. The first three steps were well implemented according to the data. However, more attention is still needed to fully support language aware teachers, teams and systems.

**Keywords:** *language diversity, early childhood education and care, teacher competence, teaching practice*

## Introduction

Changes in linguistic demographics in the Nordic societies necessitate an ongoing self-assessment of teacher competences and skills in meeting language diversity. The number of speakers of the national languages of the Nordic countries is relatively low. It is important to actively support the use of them in societies and, to some extent, even safeguard them. This is a task that needs to be done without closing the door to diversity of languages. Nordic policy documents show a great variation in how they describe multilingual childhoods (Kulbrandstad et al., 2018). However, child language development and learning of language(s) are core elements in Nordic early childhood education and care (ECEC). Multilingualism in the Nordic educational policies is conceptualised as a resource and an enrichment for all children regardless of their language backgrounds (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Björk-Willén, 2022; Schwartz et al., 2022).

The Finnish national core curriculum for early childhood education and care 2022 (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2022) states the regulations regarding municipalities' obligation to provide ECEC in the child's mother tongue if this language is Finnish, Swedish or Sámi. The core curriculum also recognises five different groups of bi- and multilingual children. These are 1) bilingual children who speak both Finnish and Swedish, 2) Sámi children, 3) Roma children, 4) sign language speakers and 5) plurilingual children. In this article our focus is on these plurilingual children (henceforth multilingual children) who are in the curriculum described: *"Some of the children only start familiarising themselves with the Finnish culture and Finnish/Swedish as they begin ECEC. [...] Whenever possible, children are provided with opportunities for also using and learning their own mother tongue(s)."* (EDUFI, 2022, p. 50).

This group of multilingual children is growing, as the current growth in the overall population is based on immigration (MDI, 2022), and the share of children under school age with a foreign background is 12,1 % (Statistics of Finland, 2023). To date, there is only scarce research on multilingual children in mainstream ECEC in Finland, as well as on the pedagogical staff working with them, so the aim of the study is to contribute to this field of research (see Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023; Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Hansell & Bergroth, 2020; Palojarvi, 2021). The article critically examines the ECEC staff assessment of their current ECEC practices (henceforth current practices, CP) and ECEC practices still in need of improvement (henceforth developmental needs, DN) regarding supporting diversity of languages in ECEC.

## Competences within ECEC to support language diversity

According to OECD (2020), ECEC staff are generally confident about their ability to promote children's socio-emotional development but less so about working in contexts with children from diverse backgrounds (see also, Owl Group Oy, 2022). The OECD report calls for staff professional development and working conditions and leadership development, especially in ECEC centres with more diverse populations of children. A high-quality ECEC thus consists of educated staff who have pedagogical knowledge, but the teachers should be better equipped for working in linguistically and culturally diverse child groups. In Finland, new requirements to significantly raise the share of educated ECEC teachers have been addressed as a means to support high-quality ECEC.

The Finnish ECEC teacher education (180 ECTS) includes multidisciplinary studies for teacher qualifications of a minimum 60 ECTS. As language development and learning are core tasks of ECEC, it is natural that they are included as one of these obligatory multidisciplinary studies for ECEC teachers. Learning objectives for this course may vary between universities, but a typical 5 ECTS course may include a wide variation of topics such as (first) language development, linguistic vulnerabilities, language awareness, multilingual language learning or early (foreign) language learning. Even topics of literacy and multiliteracy can be included in the course. Lately, societal discourses on the need to support reading nationally (EDUFI, 2021) and introducing early language teaching as a means to battle the declining interest in foreign language learning (Skinnari & Sjöberg, 2018) have placed more pressure on this obligatory study course within ECEC teacher education. In their analysis of policy documents, Harju-Luukkainen and Kangas (2021) concluded that ECEC teachers are generally asked to be "*more of everything*," a conclusion describing even the expectations of the language awareness of the ECEC teachers.

Supporting ECEC teachers to become aware of languages surrounding the children, acknowledging the role languages play for a child's identity and learning and taking an active stance in creating (multilingual) language learning opportunities for all children are relevant for both pre-service and in-service teacher education (Bergroth, Llompart, Pepiot, Sierens, et al., 2021; Lucas & Villegas, 2013; Meier, 2018). In the Finnish core curriculum (EDUFI, 2022), this is addressed with the concept *language awareness*, which describes how the operational culture is to be organised and how the personnel as a professional learning community is expected to examine their beliefs and attitudes regarding the role of languages. Language awareness can be considered as specific attention to the co-existence of language(s) in daily activities, and it requires that ECEC personnel plan for language aware pedagogical activities that support the development of children's language skills and that are based on the needs and interests of the children. This concept, within its pedagogical framework, should not be mixed with linguistic

awareness, which is an interconnected concept within a linguistic theory framework. This concept is also used in the Finnish curriculum, in relation to language acquisition, but it is not in focus for this study. For a detailed overview on how the concept language awareness is used in the Finnish national curriculum, see Bergroth and Hansell (2020), Harju-Luukkainen et al., (2020), or Sopanen (2019). The article examines the self-assessment of language aware practices at the ECEC centres, which connects to all aspects of the ECEC operational culture.

Prior research has shown that mainstreaming multilingual pedagogies as part of a more general teacher competence on all levels is a challenging task (Bergroth, Llompart, Pepiot, van der Worp, et al., 2021; Bergroth et al., 2022) and that supporting multilingual learning has remained fragmented in initial teacher education, although it is experienced as a highly required professional need among teachers (European Commission, 2017; OECD, 2020). Prior research has also indicated that ECEC educators are underprepared to support language learners optimally (Tobin, 2020), and their pedagogical reasoning involving multilingualism often tends to stem from personal experiences or from teachers' general opinions of multilingualism rather than from research-based activities (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Hansell & Bergroth, 2020; Kultti & Pramling, 2020).

Preparing ECEC teachers to meet language diversity is a multifaceted task, and it entails all three aspects of ECEC: *education, instruction* and *care* (EDUFI, 2022). For example, children still familiarising themselves with the language of instruction may have lower language skills in the instructional language, and to diminish this initial gap requires high-quality instruction including stimulating teacher-child interactions and a safe learning environment (Bleakley & Chin, 2008; Cobb-Clark et al., 2021; Scheele, 2010; Willard et al., 2019). A systematic focus on teacher interactional strategies is needed within ECEC teacher education. For example, open questions in book reading situations are an important opportunity for child-adult interaction, and the complexity of the questions ought to be systematically followed up to secure language development (Södergård, 2007). However, as research has shown (Kalland et al., 2022; Karlsen et al., 2018), teachers easily fall back on simple questions, requiring only short verbal or non-verbal answers of the children. The focus on language-stimulating interaction is a requirement for language aware ECEC teaching.

It is also essential to make ECEC teachers aware of the opportunities for children to use their own languages since it may have a positive influence on the identity and learning of the children (Cummins, 2001, 2021; Hu, 2022; Relyea & Amendum, 2019), on long-term academic outcomes (Ganuza & Hedman, 2018; UNESCO, 2016; Yeung et al., 2000) and on children's socio-emotional well-being (Chung et al., 2019). It also supports learning the language of the surrounding society (Ramírez, 1992; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Additionally, bilingualism is positively related to various cognitive outcomes (for an

overview, see Adesope et al., 2010; Otwinowska et al., 2023). This means the ECEC teachers need to support the instructional language and provide opportunities to utilise and develop children's own languages.

Regardless of the research evidence on the positive effects of a supportive approach to mother tongues, children's languages often remain invisible in learning environments (Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023; Honko & Mustonen, 2020; Tyrer et al., 2022), or only certain languages are given attention (Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017). One of the reasons may be teachers' lack of confidence in their own multilingual language skills (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Romøren et al., 2023), a misconception that children must master one language before learning other languages (Harju & Åkerblom, 2020) or that bilingualism would require complete fluency in both languages (Cichocka, 2022). This requires ECEC teachers to be able to critically examine their beliefs on language learning, and it also requires an ability to develop learning environments that showcase diversity of languages despite their own experienced language skills.

ECEC teachers need to understand how the use of multiple languages can bridge the worlds of home and ECEC (Tkachenko et al., 2021) and promote child participation and agency (Duarte, 2018). However, parallel use of different languages requires intentional planning and implementation (Cenoz, 2018, Hansen et al., 2023). Without adequate pedagogical planning, multilingual children may avoid the use of the language of instruction and rely on other children's linguistic competences (Puskás & Björk-Willén, 2017). Thus, educators need to provide scaffolding for children during everyday activities and provide opportunities for children to participate in guided play situations (see also Arvola et al., 2020). ECEC teachers need to be able to identify and provide balanced opportunities for the use of both instructional language(s) and the mother tongues of the children.

In sum, developing multilingual pedagogies requires knowledge and planning. In addition, as suggested by Cichocka (2022), understanding the role of language in education by ECEC teachers must be reinforced in general. All the adults need to take responsibility for the children's language development in all their languages in cooperation with the guardians (see also Alisaari & Heikkola, 2020; Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023). Hansen and colleagues (2023) call for increased resources, awareness and competence dedicated to multilingual children's language development through enriched and stimulating language-learning environments in ECEC. We argue that untangling the current ECEC practices and practice-related needs involved in diversity of languages may help to systematically develop ECEC teacher education within the limited timeframe available.

## The study

The data were collected in autumn 2021 using an online survey that included both Likert scale (1–5) items and open-ended questions. The Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education sent a cover letter along with a link to the survey to all local education offices in Finland, as the survey data analysed in this study were collected as part of a national survey on the state of Finnish/Swedish as a second language teaching (Owal Group Oy, 2022). In addition, the survey was advertised through social media. Information about the study, its purpose and the protection of the data were included in the cover letter and on the first page of the online survey. Participants were informed that filling out the survey implied their consent.

A total of 882 respondents working in ECEC answered the survey. Background information about the respondents has been previously reported by Owal Group Oy (2022, p. 14). They concluded that, of the respondents, 96 % worked in Finnish-medium ECEC and 4 % in Swedish-medium ECEC. Data were obtained from 94 municipalities around Finland with 17 % of the respondents located in the capital area. The share of ECEC teachers was 53 % and child caregivers 23 %. Eight per cent of all the respondents reported that they did not work in groups with multilingual children, and 24 % of all the respondents said that they specifically worked with second language teaching. The age ratio of the respondents was relatively balanced.

In this study, we analysed two open survey questions. These were the only open questions in the survey: “What kinds of practices do you have to support the language learning of children with an immigrant background?” ( $N = 548$ ) and “What kinds of needs to develop practices have you identified regarding language learning of children with an immigrant background or organising linguistic support?” ( $N = 509$ ). The first question relates to current practices (CP) and the second to developmental needs (DN).

The qualitative content analysis was abductive (Saldaña, 2016). In the first phase, data on CP were analysed qualitatively by identifying related codes. The codes were a collection of keywords identified first through word frequencies provided by the qualitative analysis software used (atlas.ti 23) and completed through a close reading of each response. This first phase thus consisted of two rounds of coding, first based on word searches followed up by a reading of each response to see that all contents had been coded. A response was always coded in all suitable categories as a whole answer. This means that the categories are not mutually exclusive. A response typically had either only one code or up to eight codes. The individual codes were grouped into subcategories. Due to the vast number of individual codes, in the result section, we operate on the level of these subcategories. What kinds of codes are included in the subcategories are explained in Table 1 under the heading *Explanation*. The first phase was conducted by the first author.

Bergroth, Harju-Autti & Alisaari.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 42–67. <https://journal.fi/jecer>



In the second phase, all authors discussed the subcategories together before the second and third authors coded data on DN individually. Each case where the original text in the *Explanation* was not sufficient to decide upon the right subcategory was discussed jointly, and if necessary, the text in *Explanation* was altered. In most problematic cases, it was unclear how much we should interpret the motivation behind short answers. For example, we originally intended to separate codes for grouping in two subcategories depending on if grouping was mentioned as means to support social relationships and learning from peers or if grouping was mentioned as a more administrative approach, such as the question of child-adult ratio. However, as the answers typically consisted of simple *small groups*, it was not possible to identify the underlying motivation of why respondents stated this practice as a need, and they were coded to one subcategory.

In the third and final phase, the first author entered data on DN to the software programme and simultaneously checked the coding. At this stage, small discrepancies between authors were noted, such as the third coding of pictures in an educational environment in cases where pictures were used as part of the environment. This case is similar to the grouping above, and as most respondents only gave the one-word answer “*pictures*,” it was not possible to interpret when pictures were or were not part of the educational environment, so we opted to code all these cases in a separate subcategory. These discrepancies were discussed, and an agreement was reached. The discrepancies were rather minor, and they would not have altered the size of the individual subcategories. Finally, the first author checked the coding in CP according to the changes made in the original coding during phase 2.

The subcategories were further organised according to the approach that was taken regarding the practices. A *relational approach* includes subcategories that relate to building good relationships and supporting socio-emotional well-being (Aspelin, 2018), and a *structural approach* relates to administrative and economical arrangements and involves topics for professional development and shared principles for a professional community. The final category, *teaching approach*, includes subcategories related to pedagogical activities while working with the children.



TABLE 1 Categories and subcategories explained

<i>CATEGORIES</i>	<i>SUBCATEGORIES</i>	<i>EXPLANATION</i>
Relational approach	Grouping	Comments about group size, the ways to promote language socialisation through supporting friendships with peers
	Cooperation with guardians	Home-ECEC cooperation and expectations related to the roles
	Play as relations	Socialisation through play
	Relational approach to care	Comments about supporting the child's feelings of security
Structural approach	L1 teaching	Dedicated mother tongue teaching
	L2 teaching	Dedicated teaching of instructional language
	Assessment	Explicit mentions of assessment or mapping of language skills and use
	Educational environment	Physical and psychological learning environments as spaces and places (excluding pictures)
	Operational culture	Joint pedagogical practices and matters that affect possibilities to implement them
	Professional networks	Cooperation in multidisciplinary teams within the ECEC or municipality
Teaching approach	(Published) resources	Comments about materials and other resources
	Body language, signs and gestures	Use of body language as support for interaction
	Digital tools	Use of digital tools
	Pictures	Use of pictures as support for interaction
	Teacher language use	Multilingual language use by teachers, use of plain language, naming objects, emphasis, etc.
	Didactical orientations	Mentions of learning areas related to language development, e.g. maths, movement, literature, music
	Play as teaching	Comments about using play as a way of teaching languages

## Results

The majority of the CP mentioned by the respondents were coded in the category teaching approach (83 % of all 548 respondents), followed by structural approach (42 %) and relational approach (40 %). The majority of DNs were coded to the category structural approach (92 % of all 509 respondents), followed by relational approach (24 %) and teaching approach (14 %). Naturally, the categories are intertwined. To exemplify, the relational approach is connected to group sizes, as it determines how the individual child is met during the day. Group sizes are connected to available staff resources and the general operational culture at the daycare centre, which are a part of the structural approach.

TABLE 2 Overview of the current practices and developmental needs

<i>CATEGORIES</i>	<i>SUBCATEGORIES</i>	<i>PRACTICES (N = 548 / %)</i>		<i>NEEDS (N = 509 / %)</i>	
Relational approach	Grouping	139	<b>25 %</b>	77	<b>15 %</b>
	Cooperation with guardians	50	9 %	40	<b>8 %</b>
	Play as relations	31	6 %	0	0 %
	Relational approach to care	52	9 %	14	3 %
Structural approach	L1 teaching	11	2 %	26	5 %
	L2 teaching	90	20 %	82	<b>16 %</b>
	Assessment	38	7 %	24	5 %
	Educational environment	14	3 %	23	5 %
	Operational culture	54	10 %	412	<b>81 %</b>
	Professional networks	130	<b>24 %</b>	124	<b>24 %</b>
	(Published) resources	104	19 %	40	<b>8 %</b>
Teaching approach	Body language, signs and gestures	113	21 %	3	1 %
	Digital tools	35	6 %	4	1 %
	Pictures	395	<b>72 %</b>	18	4 %
	Teacher language use	121	<b>22 %</b>	9	2 %
	Didactical orientations	190	<b>35 %</b>	5	1 %
	Play as teaching	51	9 %	1	< 0 %

In general, the respondents tended to state more CPs than DNs in their replies. The biggest subcategories, as indicated by bold in Table 2, show that questions related to grouping and professional networks are frequently mentioned both as CP and DN, indicating that this practice is well-functioning at some ECEC centres but in need of development in others. The other main categories for CP are using pictures, using various didactical orientations and paying attention to teacher language use. The other main categories for

DN are questions related to the operational culture, organising dedicated teaching of the instructional language (L2), a call for materials and resources suitable to organise linguistic support and parental cooperation. In the following sections, we will discuss the practices, identified either as a CP or DN, in the categories in more detail and provide illustrative examples from the data. The examples have been translated to English from Finnish or Swedish by the authors.

## Relational approach

According to Aspelin (2018), a teacher's relational competence includes elements of communicative competence. It includes socio-emotional competence with awareness of emotional signals given by the children. Relational competence includes the teacher's ability to differentiate teaching and to find a suitable emotional closeness or distance that is best for the child (Aspelin, 2018). A relational approach can be connected to the element of *care* in ECEC. According to the core curriculum (EDUFI, 2022, p. 20), care entails taking care of the physical basic needs of the child as well as emotional caring. However, it is also stated that even care situations are always educational and instructional as the child is learning interaction skills, among other things. This places a high requirement on teacher language aware pedagogies and relational competence.

Subcategories in the category relational approach include relational aspects between the teacher and the children (relational approach to care), among the children (grouping and play as relations) and between the home and ECEC (cooperation with guardians). In their responses, the personnel often highlighted the emotional caring and the importance of promoting the feeling of security for the children. Respondents 374 and 508 gave typical responses including codes related to *warmth* and *genuine interaction*, or the opposite responses of *insecurity* and *confusion*:

*Pictures, slow and clear speech, genuine and warm interaction with the child, acceptance, involving the family in planning the ECEC activities.*

(CP, respondent 374)

*[---] Staff must be resourced, as everyday activities are already a challenge without a shared language. Children need to be able to feel safe and secure for learning to take place. In a large group without sufficient staff, children are left alone with their feelings (insecurity, fear and confusion).*

(DN, respondent 508)

Although it was not always possible to identify the motivation for working in small groups, the relational aspect was explicitly stated in some answers, as in the case for respondent 578. In this example, the codes *quiet space* and *functional* were connected to the relational approach:

*[---] Play in small groups is a great support for FSL [=Finnish as a second language] children's language learning, with adults providing a quiet space for play and a functional small group.*

(CP, respondent 578)

CP in cooperation with guardians involved the ability to use interpreters and practices related to sharing information about the day so that parents could talk about ECEC with the child in their own language (see also Solberg, 2023). Some respondents (e.g. respondent 447) described cooperation where parents join in ECEC activities, such as visits to library, so that the activity becomes multilingual (see also Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023). When discussing DN regarding parental cooperation, the codes include multilingual communication skills. Many respondents stated that they would like to help the guardians to orient to Finnish society in general. Similarly, most of the respondents mentioning this practice discussed how important it would be for the guardians to support the learning of the child's own mother tongue at home. For example, respondent 594 asks for materials for the parents on the importance of mother tongue to learn other languages:

*It would be good to direct parents to support material on why and how important learning your own language is to support learning another language. [---]*

(DN, respondent 594)

There were also some voices raised for guardians to do more for learning the instructional language, and many comments problematise the use of English, a concern also identified in earlier research (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). Respondent 714 problematises that children are learning English through devices instead of learning their mother tongue at home:

*The creeping of English into children's everyday life at the expense of the development of their own mother tongue. Children from 2–3 years of age who do not know how to speak their mother tongue, but speak English, come to the daycare centre. English is not spoken at home, but the children have learned it from a computer or mobile phone.*

(DN, respondent 714)

All in all, the relational aspect includes a variety of comments stating that warmth and safe environments are important starting points in supporting language learning. This, together with good social relationships with peers and functioning cooperation with guardians and homes, is deemed necessary for any language learning to happen.

## Structural approach

A structural approach entails codes related to the organisational arrangements for working conditions and pedagogical principles for the operational culture. It relates to pedagogical leadership within the municipality, ECEC centre and team. The category also includes specific time and personnel resource allocations in place to organise teaching and learning mother tongues (L1) or the instructional language (L2) for children familiarising themselves with the instructional language.

Mother tongue instruction was mentioned by only 2 % of respondents as a CP, and similarly, only 5 % express it as a DN. This may be because the survey was not filled in by mother tongue teachers, rendering their work, both CP and DN, invisible (see also Rosén & Straszer, 2020). In any case, this topic requires a closer look in the future. There is naturally a close connection to available resources that are coded to the category *operational culture*. In most cases, the CP implies that there is a teacher or assistant knowledgeable in a child's own mother tongue, and the DN, in most cases, is a request for multilingual personnel or additional staffing resources for the support of mother tongues. There are also calls for better integration of mother tongue teaching in the joint practices of the ECEC centre:

*Clarifying the job description of language assistants. [Are we] aiming for individual tuition in mother tongue or accompanying the rest of the group, integration? It is of course a matter for each individual case, but language assistants themselves may have a certain perception of their role, which does not correspond to the objectives set by the rest of the staff.*

(DN, respondent 492)

The view of teaching L2 (Finnish or Swedish) connects to additional professional networks rather than to the ordinary staff at the ECEC centre. Respondent 626 describes CPs and how their ECEC makes use of external language teachers:

*We have L2 mentors working on project funding, who come to help in groups and introduce L2 teaching. The child is given a small language assessment, and then the child's language learning goals for speaking and understanding the language are written into the child's plan. We also have rotating teachers for preparatory and L2 education who work regularly with L2 children. The fruits of this work can be seen in the regularity and increasing teaching time with L2 children. The aim is also to work together with the group staff and have common goals in language learning [---]*

(CP, respondent 626)

In general, it can be concluded that additional L2 teachers are welcome, and they can have various educational backgrounds. Special education teachers and project workers were often mentioned. However, none of the respondents stated that they were satisfied with the current amount of support L2 teachers can provide. A more frequent, longer, and more

systematic programme for the L2 teacher visits was requested. There are also requests for additional staff trained in L2 teaching, more time to plan the teaching, more resources to enable individual teaching or teaching in smaller groups and more training for the ordinary staff members regarding L2 teaching. In some responses, as stated by respondent 441, teaching different languages is connected not only to the child but also to the whole family:

*More individual language teaching already in ECEC together with the family.*

(DN, respondent 441)

The category of educational environment takes up visits to surrounding milieus including both nature and buildings, such as libraries. Although the core curriculum (EDUFI, 2022, p. 31) states that “*the learning environments promote children's linguistic development and language awareness and make cultural diversity visible*,” these topics were not highlighted in CP (3 %) or in DN (5 %) in our data. This aligns with earlier research findings in Finland (Honko & Mustonen, 2020; Tyrer et al., 2022) and is thus a relevant topic of future studies.

The current core curriculum (EDUFI, 2022) has placed a significant focus on the topic of professional learning communities as a part of a high-quality operational culture (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; see also, Sharmahd et al., 2017). Despite this policy focus, CP coded to operational culture are mentioned only by 10 % of the respondents. On the contrary, a vast majority of respondents (81 %) mention it as DN. Due to this discrepancy and the number of respondents stating this need, we analysed this DN subcategory in more detail.

Many responses (60 %) in this category require *more time* and *staff* to make it possible to better support language. This reflects the persistent lack of qualified personnel in Finnish ECEC. (*Mandatory*) *teacher training* is mentioned in 40 % of the responses. The respondents pointed out the need to further educate the whole staff – not only the ECEC teachers (e.g. respondent 406). What the professional training should entail was not detailed, but the training should start from the very basics (respondent 385) and include both discussion of shared beliefs and attitudes and point out old-fashioned thinking that is not based on modern research (559). Professional training should be provided at the latest when there is a child who is starting to familiarise with the language of instruction in the group (635), but optimally it should be offered right away, as concluded by respondent 418:

*[---] it is a part of contemporary society that there are L2 children in the groups, and one would do well to be prepared rather than be clueless when a child arrives to our group.*

(DN, respondent 418)

In 16 % of the DN regarding operational culture, the whole ECEC team as a professional learning community or the idea of a competent system for ECEC, such as collaboration between individuals, teams and institutions and having language aware governance at the policy level, were mentioned (Sharmahd et al., 2017, see also Milotay, 2016). Respondents 501 and 538 point out the importance of examining current practices and attitudes, as well as discussing and deciding on language aware and language responsive practices among the whole team – not only among the teachers.

*Personnel should receive more information and training on the subject. In addition, as pedagogical leaders, ECEC leaders should consider the need for support for children with an immigrant background by providing training and support to the staff, especially in those centres where there are many children with an immigrant background. [---]*

(DN, respondent 501)

*We need more information, know-how and understanding of the construction of the identity of multilingual children. How can I strengthen and support their identity? How to make different languages visible in groups as part of "normal" early childhood education? Sufficient time and resources should be provided to organise linguistic support for children with an immigrant background. There should be more understanding in order to understand the importance of the matter for the staff. It would be good if the entire staff knew how to use and committed to using different methods with multilingual children in early childhood education.*

(DN, respondent 538)

Furthermore, some of the responses coded to needs regarding the operational culture refer to other administrative decisions. Respondents suggest how the distribution of multilingual children should be organised between the daycare centres in the municipality. For example, respondent 404 states that if the enrolment of multilingual children were better distributed to all ECEC centres in the city, then all staff in various centres would have the right to participate in the in-service training. Respondent 629, working as an ECEC special education teacher, points out that ECEC centres within the city could do well in sharing experiences even internally. The respondent further comments that special education teachers do not have possibilities to work for L2 teaching in any great lengths.

In sum, codes related to (a lack of) resources are visible in the data, which is natural due to the current challenges of lack of ECEC staff in Finnish society. It is also striking that some of the subcategories related to such CP that are a requirement in the core curriculum, such as the learning environment, using multilingual pedagogies and professional learning communities, are relatively small in the data. Combined with frequent requests for teacher training, these obligatory practices related to the core curriculum could be relevant topics for future in-service training of ECEC staff.



## Teaching approach

The frequent mention of pictures as non-verbal aids (72 % of all CP respondents) made the category teaching approach by far the largest category in CP although these responses were often one-word mentions of the practice. The DN related to pictures were often connected to the shared pedagogical principles of the team, as stated by respondent 682:

*[---] the values of the work community to support the use of pictures, that everyone uses... acceptance of language awareness in the work community.*

(DN, respondent 682)

While most respondents relied on using pictures, only one-fifth (22 %) reported paying attention to the teacher's verbal language use as a CP. The codes included *using plain language*, *clear speech* and *systematic naming of objects*. Interestingly, only in a few practices, the holistic development of the child's language was placed in the centrum of attention. Language comprehension skills with linguistic modelling and verbalising activities were mentioned in accordance with the core curriculum (EDUFI, 2022, p. 41), but the child's speech production skills in various situations, also required by the curriculum, were not as easily recognisable in our data. Respondent 812's answer is an exception describing language learning objectives and promoting child language use in concrete learning situations within and outside the ECEC centre.

*Using the local environment in education. For example, a walk in the woods with a small group and, based on the children's observations, naming things and phenomena and talking freely, but with the language learning objectives in mind (e.g., place names, colours, emotions). Use of photographs. Looking at pictures of preschool activities and talking about what happened, naming things, practising phrases, etc. Photo support for field trips, with pictures of key things from the trips and excursions. [---]*

(CP, respondent 812)

Respondents' own language skills in the instructional language were not reflected upon in the responses, but DNs regarding one's own multilingual skills were reflected on by some respondents:

*[---] In this survey, I noticed that we haven't used the children's mother tongue concretely to support learning, e.g. with the help of keywords. We take an interest in the children's mother tongue and ask about words, learn expressions, but this could certainly be increased.*

(DN, respondent 721)

There were, in general, only a few responses stating concrete DNs for the teaching approach, but 8 % of the respondents requested new materials or making the existing materials available at their own ECEC centre. For example, respondent 420 concludes that, while there is a multitude of available digital materials, to put them to use would

require support from a more specialised language and culture teacher. Respondents commented that there is not enough time to create their own materials, and thus, the need for ready-made materials remains persistent.

The CPs include mentions of many different types of materials. Quite often, the name of the resource was stated as a CP, and the usage was not explained. Various published resources aligned with CP coding in different didactical orientations. Didactical orientations were mentioned by 35 % of the respondents. Of these respondents, 67 % mentioned literature (or a popular book application) and 64 % mentioned music and songs. Regarding songs, for example, materials created in the project *Kielinuppu* (Kunnas & Goncalves, 2022) to support Finnish language learning are popular among the respondents.

In sum, the teaching-related practices focused quite heavily on providing non-linguistic support to aid the understanding of the instructional language. Pictures, music and listening to (multilingual) stories were often mentioned. However, expectations and pedagogical practices to support active language production by the children was less visible in the data, pinpointing an important area to be included both in initial and in-service teacher training.

### **Critically examining language aware ECEC by merging CPs and DNs**

In this section, we merge the three categories of practices, both the current and those assessed as still in need of development, to a model that encompasses the full scale of practices related to a language aware ECEC operational culture. This merging of current practices and those in need of development are now treated as two sides of a coin, and thus, they both inform us how the language aware ECEC practices are created. By turning our attention to the practices from a performance viewpoint – that is, from practices requiring the smallest effort to practices requiring the largest or most holistic effort – we were able to identify seven steps on the road to language aware ECEC. We conceptualise the steps as complementary to each other, not mutually exclusive, and in optimal cases, all the steps are present to support the language learning of all children.

The practices analysed indicate that the respondents have at least an elementary understanding of the need to support the language development of all children (step 1 *insight*). For providing optimal premises for language learning, respondents focus their attention on a positive approach to children's general well-being (step 2 *security*) and describe being mentally present, having time, noticing even the small language use attempts of the child and giving plenty of positive feedback, such as non-verbally with smiles. These supportive practices to make children feel secure are closely connected to

the following step (step 3 *non-verbal aid*). Some elements of these first three steps are mentioned by most respondents.

In step 4 *external support*, a slight polarisation in responses can be identified, and we view this as an important topic for future studies. Our data responses coded to professional networks often mentioned availability of ECEC special education teachers either as a CP or as a DN. A call for language and culture experts, mentors and teachers are also frequent in the data, both as a CP and as a DN. Even in these responses, a certain polarisation can be seen. In some answers, language teaching is seen as a task for external specialists, while others ask for external support to make sense of existing materials and to support the professional learning community at their own ECEC centre. Our findings resonate with earlier research (Gitschthaler et al., 2021) where additional support staff has been found to be perceived as among the most important resources (see also Siarova, 2022).

Step 5 *language aware teacher* refers to individual teachers already working with a pedagogical approach to language learning in all situations, including even the most basic care situations of ECEC everyday practices. However, if the staff member experiences working alone with language aware teaching practices, the full potential of language awareness is not likely to be reached. Our findings indicate that language aware staff members function best in *language aware teams* (step 6). The intersection of steps 5 and 6 was clearly visible in our data. Many respondents felt that a general language awareness and the related pedagogical practices needed to be improved and thus called for in-service training. The requests for in-service training did not usually include any specific topic, but the training should start from the very basics so that all staff members would become more language aware (step 5). For this purpose, any training on the topic was found fruitful. The requests included both concrete models and materials but an equally more abstract discussion on beliefs, attitudes and joint pedagogical principles in the team, which indicates that the ideas of a professional learning community presented in the core curriculum are strongly present in the data and would support step 6 in our model. Even previous research has highlighted the importance of joint reflection of in-service training (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020, Buschmann & Sachse, 2018; Kirsch & Aleksić, 2018).

The final step, step 7 *language aware system*, refers to the implementation of a so-called competent system (Sharmahd et al., 2017). In our data, joint principles were called for, not only in their own ECEC centre but also more broadly in the city or municipality. This included, for example, providing in-service training to all daycare centres whether or not they currently had multilingual children enrolled; having clear language learning plans, strategies and support measures; and providing materials and necessary human resources. This also included sharing experiences and good practices among the different ECEC centres in the city.

In our visualisation of the model, we narrow it down to *six steps* (Figure 1). Based on our findings, there was an understanding among respondents about how to help children to feel emotionally safe and how to lower the pressure on understanding verbal communication (steps 1–3). However, our findings also implied that actively supporting learning to use verbal language(s) was not yet a self-evident skill in all ECEC centres. This was seen as a rather strong reliance on external professional support (presented previously as a separate step 4). Although we agree that multidisciplinary professional networks are invaluable, we argue that they may be too prominent in the current data, at the expense of language aware teachers, which we in Figure 1 place as step 4.

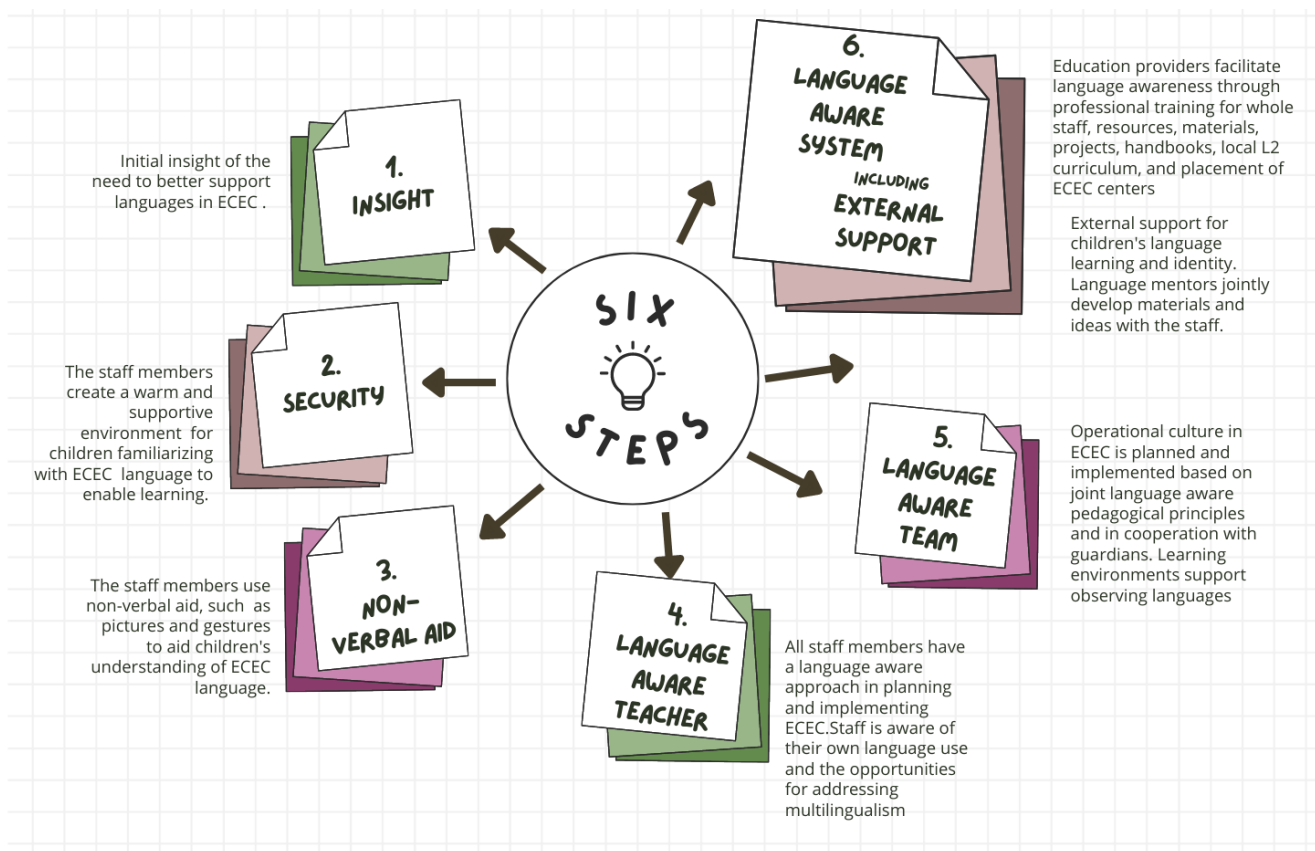


FIGURE 1 Findings visualised as six steps of language aware ECEC

To achieve this model, we argue that more research on cooperation with multidisciplinary professional networks is needed, regarding both practices and expectations on the roles in supporting languages in ECEC. A natural step after the more relational and non-verbal support approach should be a language aware teacher, who actively plans the activities with language learning in mind. Each staff member needs to have at least basic understanding and competence to support this professional role, and the task should not be outsourced to other professional experts. The readjustment of the fourth step is in line

with the updated version of the core curriculum, stating that “*The familiarisation with and learning of Finnish/Swedish related to the child’s linguistic development should not be compared to support provided in ECEC*” (EDUFI, 2022, p. 50), which means that language teaching of the instructional language is not primarily a task of ECEC special education teachers but that of all staff.

We suggest that external support should be conceptualised as a part of the language aware system, presented as step 6 in Figure 1. This means that the basic ECEC practices need to be language aware and support the language learning of all children. This requires working in teams jointly with language aware systems, which includes not only their own ECEC group but also wider systematic support, inclusive of external support.

## Discussion

In this study, we examined current practices (CP) and developmental needs (DN) identified by 882 ECEC personnel to support the language learning of multilingual children with the aim to better understand practices related to language aware ECEC. These practices and needs are highly existent in both contemporary Finnish and Nordic society due to the demographic changes that have already happened and those predicted to happen in the future (MDI, 2022). Changes in the legislation governing ECEC, with stronger requirements on the share of qualified ECEC teachers, consistent lack of available qualified ECEC personnel and heightened focus on quality ECEC through improvements in professional learning communities and leadership, have created tensions that need to be scrutinised through the lens of teacher practices and needs. We analysed practices and needs with qualitative content analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Three categories were created: *relational approach*, *structural approach* and *teaching approach*.

Although the need to better support (critical multilingual) language awareness as a general teacher competence has been acknowledged before (Alisaari et al., 2019, 2021; Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, 2023; Harju-Autti & Mäkinen, 2022; Heikkola et al., 2022; Pyykkö, 2017), it has remained an unsolved issue on how to best achieve this, especially within initial teacher education. The conception of learning and teaching in Finnish ECEC is based on a broad general pedagogical competence similar to other Nordic countries (see Einarsdottir, 2013). The importance of gaining access to knowledge, growth, well-being and identity through the language dimension in ECEC is essential for all children as individuals and as members of the language diverse society. However, at this moment, there is no teacher education specifically oriented towards languages in ECEC, which may explain the discrepancies between educational discourses on teacher competences and experience of language aware practices, as reported in this study.

The need to concretise the steps required to provide language aware ECEC is visible in the data studied, as the respondents called for mandatory professional training but could not detail what the training should entail. The findings in our study imply that ECEC staff is well-equipped to help children to feel emotionally safe and to aid children to understand verbal communication with non-linguistic support (Aspelin, 2018; OECD, 2020). Although feeling secure and being able to feel included in communication are highly important first steps for language learning for any child, it alone is not enough. Children need meaningful opportunities to use languages. Supporting ECEC personnel to systematically notice opportunities for language use and to plan, document and evaluate practices related to those opportunities, specifically regarding multilingual children with migrant backgrounds, is a topic that needs to be systematically included in all teacher training (Bergroth & Alisaari, 2023; Bleakley & Chin, 2008; Cobb-Clark et al., 2021; Hansen et al., 2023; Scheele, 2010; Willard et al., 2019).

Support from external experts regarding goal-oriented teaching of L2 (instructional language) was mentioned both as a CP and DN (for similar findings, see Gitschthaler et al., 2021; Siarova, 2022), and similarly, mother tongue teachers were needed to support mother tongue (L1) (Rosén & Straszer, 2020). However, the ECEC core curriculum was updated in 2022 after our data collection. The updated version states explicitly that familiarisation with language of instruction is not an intensified or special support measure in ECEC (EDUFI, 2022), making it clear that every member in the pedagogical staff need the competence to support L2 (see also, Pyykkö, 2017, Vaarala et al., 2021). This calls for both more research and ECEC personnel reflections on the operational culture regarding the connection between special education teaching and support for language learning in ECEC (see also Helakorpi et al., 2023). This is also a topic to be discussed within initial teacher education.

A language aware operational culture needs to be based on the educated professional personnel working in the child groups (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020). Our findings indicate that language aware leadership needs to be given more attention as it is still, to our knowledge, a topic largely uncharted by research. Regarding teacher education, steps 5 and 6 in the *six steps model* (Figure 1) could be where the in-service training efforts are placed. Rather than training individual language aware teachers (step 4), as is to be done within initial teacher education, these steps would focus on creating a step towards language awareness on team and system levels. The importance and need for joint pedagogical reflections within the ECEC (Bergroth & Hansell, 2020; Buschmann & Sachse, 2018; Kirsch & Aleksić, 2018) were visible in the responses.

To conclude, the road towards language aware ECEC consists of multiple steps. Although our study is limited by the fact that no actual practices were analysed, the results of this study indicate that the first important steps are already taken in the Finnish ECEC.



However, more attention and systematic development of language aware ECEC teachers regarding practices related to L2 language use and providing the children with opportunities to use and learn L1 are needed in teacher education. Furthermore, developing high-quality ECEC requires a holistic language aware approach throughout the system, from the municipality-level decision making to pedagogical leadership, as well as the teams and individuals working within ECEC. Future comparative studies on various steps in the suggested language aware ECEC model in the wider Nordic context would be beneficial as a means to support the shared Nordic ideology on an informal, play-based and child-centred approach to teaching and learning.

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Bergroth, Harju-Autti & Alisaari.

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Bergroth, Harju-Autti & Alisaari.

*Journal of Early Childhood Education Research* 13(1) 2024, 42–67. <https://journal.fi/jecer>