

Students' and teachers' opinions about English teaching in Finnish polytechnics

Candidate's thesis

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Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli selvittää ammattikorkeakouluopiskelijoiden ja -opettajien näkemyksiä ammattikorkeakoulujen englannin kielen opetuksen tasosta ja onko siinä mahdollisesti puutteita. Tutkielmassa oli myös oleellista selvittää, miten ammattikorkeakouluopiskelijat suhtautuvat englannin kielen opetukseen ja minkälaista hyötyä he kokevat saavansa opetuksesta tulevaisuutta varten. Aikaisempi tutkimus ammattikorkeakoulujen kielten opetuksesta ja oppimisesta on lähinnä keskittynyt tutkimaan tehokkuutta kielen oppimisessa ja kansainvälisyyttä oppimisen tavoitteena.

Tutkimusta varten haastattelin kahta opettajaa Jyväskylän ammattikorkeakoulusta ja kahtatoista opiskelijaa eri ammattikorkeakouluista ympäri Suomea. Suurin osa opiskelijoista oli Jyväskylän ammattikorkeakoulusta. Tuloksia arvioin vertailemalla niitä toisiinsa ja etsimällä niistä yhtäläisyyksiä ja eroavaisuuksia. Tulokset osoittivat, että ammattikorkeakoulujen englannin kielen opetuksen suunnittelu on vaikeaa, sillä oppilaat ovat eritasoisia ja tämän takia opetus ei välttämättä kykene vastaamaan kaikkien oppilaiden tarpeita.

Avainsanat: English teaching, English learning, Finnish polytechnics

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1 Introduction

While the world is becoming more and more globalized and united, the position of English as a widespread way of communication is gaining more status and its use is constantly spreading. Simultaneously the need to learn this universal language is growing. It is, therefore, crucial that various educational institutions provide their students with appropriate language skills. My interest in this field of English is focused on English teaching in Finnish polytechnics: in my study I aim to discover whether the teaching in these institutions as perceived by students and teachers is at a sufficiently high level considering the language demands of the careers and working lives students will most likely encounter in the future. Because of these likely demands, English teaching should be organized in such a way that it challenges students to learn beyond their existing language skills and improves their knowledge in areas which are significant considering their training programs.

There is some research available in the field of English teaching in Finnish polytechnics. For instance, Juurakko and Airola (2002) have carried out a study dealing with efficiency in language learning and Huovinen and Rusanen (1996) have evaluated English teaching in polytechnics based on its aim to internationality. However, none of the studies explicitly evaluate English teaching in polytechnics. Therefore, in this study I will also try to examine if there is something in English teaching that could be improved or changed. The main aim of the study is to explore how students and teachers in Finnish polytechnics perceive English teaching and the English language in general.

First of all, I will introduce some of the previous studies done in the field of English teaching and learning in Finnish polytechnics and describe the characteristics of the current way of organizing the teaching in the polytechnics. Then I will move on to present my data which was collected from teachers and students in polytechnics with the concentration being on Jyväskylä's polytechnic (Jamk University of Applied Sciences) and methods of data analysis. In the results section I will present my findings by comparing the student questionnaires with the teacher interviews.

2 English teaching in Finnish polytechnics

As mentioned above, the previous research done in the field of English teaching in Finnish polytechnics is not extensive but some interesting studies have been carried out. Penttinen (2002) for instance, has conducted a broad study regarding the needs of English teaching in polytechnics from the perspectives of students, teachers and companies. Huovinen and Rusanen (1996) also deal with rather similar issues in their study, which concentrates on describing language skills of polytechnic students based on their aim to international issues. Penttinen (2002) and Huovinen and Rusanen (1996) all investigate the issue of English teaching in polytechnics by connecting the teaching to working life, which I find very important myself, since one of the aims of English teaching in polytechnics should definitely be the preparation for students' future careers and jobs. On the other hand, Juurakko and Airola (2002) study English teaching in polytechnics from the perspective of teachers: they explore efficient ways of teaching but also efficient ways of learning. In the next section I will explore these studies in more detail.

2.1 Aims of English teaching in polytechnics

According to the Finnish law, there are certain language requirements for students in Finnish polytechnics. The statute on polytechnic studies (Asetus ammattikorkeakouluopinnoista 352/2003) states that students have to achieve such skills in Finnish and in Swedish that they are able to work in bilingual areas and possess skills that are required in certain professional positions. In addition, students have to master one or two foreign languages, both written and oral skills, in order to practise a profession and to be able to develop themselves professionally. However, as Penttinen (2002: 17) states, there are various polytechnics in Finland each providing their students with different types of training programs. Therefore, the statute may be interpreted in many ways. In addition to the loose interpretation of the statute, Juurakko and Airola (2002: 10-11) state that curricula of polytechnics in Finland provide schools with independent rights concerning language teaching: each school can therefore individually decide on the amount of time spent on language teaching, the number of courses that are provided and the resources that are used for teaching. In addition, one significant

aspect that has to be considered in language teaching in polytechnics is that students may come from vastly differing backgrounds, thus having varying skills in the English language (Juurakko and Airola 2002: 9). From my point of view, these types of aims for English teaching in polytechnics and the ways of executing them are appropriate on condition that students will receive sufficient language skills regarding their language needs, whether the needs are related to professional life or needs that students will encounter in their own time. I also intend to investigate this aspect of English teaching in polytechnics in the study.

As Juurakko (2001: 38-39) points out, language teaching in polytechnics should be organized in a way that it supports the development of different types of training programs but simultaneously encourages language learning. Contents of the language courses should be tied to professional areas students will face in the future. The aims of the courses should be to familiarize students with the special terminology and themes of their training programs and simultaneously connect the previous language knowledge with the new information. Penttinen (2002: 16) shares the same view: “The starting point of professional language teaching is the field of the profession concerned and the needs for language skills connected to it.”

Even though there may be remarkable differences in the ways language teaching is organized in polytechnics, some similarities can still be found. As Huovinen and Rusanen (1996: 12) indicate, there are some essential aims that should be achieved in language teaching: a student should be able to use language in order to cope with everyday communication situations and master the basic language skills and special terminology that comes with the training programs. In addition to these characteristics of English teaching, Penttinen (2002: 30) also introduces the issue of the importance of language as a tool for creating contacts with people from all over the world. In this view of the language teaching, aspects of culture should also be considered accurately, as Penttinen (2002: 31) points out. It seems to me that these are exactly the aspects that should be considered in English teaching, specifically in polytechnics where the purpose of language studies is mainly concerned with the ability to use language in everyday situations, related either to jobs or normal life.

2.2 Organization of language teaching

As Juurakko and Airola (2002) point out, there is a great variety of aspects that must be considered in the organization of English language teaching in polytechnics. Both oral and written skills and vocabulary each require particular attention. Fiorito (2005) also states that English teaching from the perspective of English for specific purposes should concentrate more on the context where language is used rather than on teaching structures and grammar about language. According to Juurakko and Airola (2002: 107), this is exactly what the teaching is about. In teaching oral and written skills in English, or any language, it is vital to create an authentic learning environment that encourages students to use their language skills in realistic situations. Juurakko and Airola (2002: 107) list different types of learning methods in order to achieve this type of a learning environment, such as team work, pair work, role plays and oral presentations. By using these methods exercises are related to specific training programs so that they increase students' confidence in using their language skills and prepare them for social situations they will encounter in the future. Fiorito (2005) expresses it as follows: "The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners".

Juurakko and Airola (2002: 141) state that written communication is also a significant area in mastering a language appropriately and many teachers in Finnish polytechnics criticize the amount of time spent on teaching those skills: approximately 12 per cent of English teaching is dedicated to teaching skills in writing. As well as in oral exercises, authenticity is also extremely important in written exercises so language teachers should provide students with as authentic materials as possible, such as magazines or other materials that are not directly designed for classroom use (Juurakko and Airola 2002: 24). These authentic materials can then be used, for instance, in writing reports or taking notes, as Penttinen (2002: 23) suggests.

In addition to oral and written skills, teaching vocabulary is also a crucial part of English teaching. According to Juurakko and Airola (2002: 169), development of students' skills in the area of vocabulary demands the learning to be connected with the specific training programs. If students get the impression that the vocabulary is relevant to them in the future,

they will most likely show progress in the learning process. Juurakko and Airola (2002) and Penttinen (2002) provide examples of how to arrange vocabulary teaching. While Juurakko and Airola (2002: 171) suggest authentic teaching materials, crosswords and role plays as means to teach vocabulary, Penttinen (2002: 33) gives more precise hints for teachers, such as explanation of unknown words, grouping words into categories and using new words in actual sentences.

What was distinctive in the study by Penttinen (2002) compared to the other studies was that she was the only one to mention aspects, such as teaching listening and test-taking skills as areas that should be considered in English teaching. They were given as suggestions for teachers (Penttinen 2002: 33). However, it must be stated that the teaching of oral skills received most attention in all studies. For that reason, it can be concluded that oral skills are regarded as the most important skills in mastering a language in Finnish polytechnics. Furthermore, the role of authenticity was also emphasized in all of the studies.

2.3 Students', teachers' and companies' perceptions on English teaching in Finnish polytechnics

An interesting study conducted by Huovinen and Rusanen (1996) reveals that most students in Finnish polytechnics feel that they have benefited from their studies in English to some extent. Particularly, the areas concerning reading were mentioned as the ones that had improved the most whereas writing skills and structures in English had developed merely to a small extent. Weaknesses in writing skills could be caused by the low proportion of time dedicated to teaching those skills, as Juurakko and Airola (2002: 141) point out. However, as Huovinen and Rusanen (1996: 63) suggest, weaknesses in certain areas of language are necessarily not always caused by inappropriate teaching methods or the course contents but they may be caused by a student's own motivation and activity towards the language. Sajavaara (1999: 23) also mentions the fact that students' previous schools may have not provided them with an appropriate number of language courses. Consequently, students' backgrounds in language skills do not prepare students well enough for the language studies in polytechnics.

One aspect that Huovinen and Rusanen (1996) concentrate on in the study deals with sufficiency in English skills and whether they will be enough considering students' future professions. A large number of students stated that they will most likely need English during their professional careers, but many, on the other hand, felt that their skills in English would not be enough to cope in that field. There are numerous reasons to explain why students in polytechnics feel their language skills in English are not good enough: students may underestimate their own language skills, they may not be interested in their development in language skills or their background knowledge in English is not sufficient to allow them to progress in the learning process. Despite the various results in students' English skills, many intend to maintain their language skills after graduation. (Huovinen and Rusanen 1996: 69-71.)

In contrast to the results by Huovinen and Rusanen (1996), Penttinen (2002: 92) points out that most students in North Karelia Polytechnic considered that English teaching was tied to the demands of the working life rather well. Students who were doing their vocational training at North Karelia Polytechnic also felt that they needed practice mostly in their oral skills, in situations, such as giving short speeches (Penttinen 2002: 139). Penttinen (2002: 155) also investigates areas where teaching according to students should be increased. These areas include discussions on daily events, reading (business) texts and everyday situations.

Unlike Huovinen and Rusanen (1996), Penttinen (2002) also explores the perceptions of teachers and companies on English teaching. According to Penttinen (2002: 111), companies, both Finnish and foreign, appreciate language use situations such as everyday situations, work place situations, speeches, phone calls, translations and social conversations. Finnish companies also believe that these areas should be increased in English teaching in Finnish polytechnics. Teachers in polytechnics, on the other hand, believe that social conversation and meetings and negotiations should receive more attention in the teaching (Penttinen 2002: 158).

3 Research question

There is a large number of polytechnics in Finland and they are each educating a large number of students becoming specialists in their specific study areas. In addition to learning about their specific training programs, students should also gain a sufficient amount of language knowledge. In my opinion, it is crucial that languages are taught so that students will be able to communicate in the global world. Specifically the English language should receive enough attention since it is frequently used as a lingua franca. Consequently, my main aim in this study is to investigate through perceptions of students and teachers whether English teaching in polytechnics is at a sufficiently high level or whether there is something in the teaching that could somehow be improved.

3.1 Data collection

In order to compile my data, I had to search for suitable participants for interviews and questionnaires. Therefore, I decided to interview two English teachers from Jyväskylä Polytechnic and write questionnaires for students from various polytechnics in Finland, with the concentration being on Jyväskylä. The teachers are both women and have rather similar experiences regarding teaching in polytechnics: both of them have experiences in teaching in the business field prior to their English teacher careers in Jyväskylä polytechnic. One teacher interview was made face to face whereas the other one was conducted via e-mail. The interviews consisted of nine open questions, which dealt with the teachers' backgrounds, their opinions about English teaching in Finnish polytechnics and teaching methods (see appendix 2).

The student respondents are from the following polytechnics: Jyväskylä Polytechnic, Kymenlaakso Polytechnic and Savonia Polytechnic. Four of the respondents are females, seven are males. The selection of the students was rather random. There is a section of background information in the questionnaire following seven open questions about English studies in Finnish polytechnics (see appendix 1). The questionnaire was sent to the students via e-mail.

3.2 Methods of analysis

In my analysis I aim to make comparisons between the different types of data I have collected and draw conclusions based on these comparisons. First, I will analyse the questionnaires collected from the students and compare the answers with each other. I will concentrate more on the student questionnaires since they represent the majority of respondents in the study. Then I will analyse the teacher interviews and see if there are any similarities with the student data. In the analysis I will try to introduce both the positive and negative aspects of English teaching in Finnish polytechnics based on the interviews and questionnaires.

4 Students' and teachers' opinions about English teaching in polytechnics

First, I will examine the results from the students by dividing the answers to various sections: I will examine the students' backgrounds regarding their previous English studies, their intentions to select optional English courses in the polytechnic and their opinions on English teaching in polytechnics in general. I will also investigate whether English is seen as an important part of studies and what types of expectations the students have for English in the future. In the second part of the analysis I will investigate the teacher interviews. Through examining the teacher interviews I will try to discover the attitudes that teachers have towards English teaching and what are the positive and negative aspects of teaching in a polytechnic.

4.1 Students' backgrounds in English

As Juurakko and Airola (2002: 9) mention, students can have broad differences in their backgrounds regarding English as they come to polytechnic. Students that come from upper secondary schools may have a wider knowledge of English due to many compulsory courses they have taken while students from vocational schools may not know English as well. However, the question about the students' backgrounds (question 1, see appendix 1) indicates that there are also other differences in the students' backgrounds, as extracts 1-4 demonstrate:

(1) Olen ollut ala- ja yläasteen englantipainotteisella luokalla, joten englanti on aina ollut helppoa.

[During primary and middle school I was in a class that emphasized English so English has always been easy.]

(2) Olen käynyt suurimman osan yläasteesta englanninkielellä ulkomailla, joten lähtökohdat englannin kielen käyttöön olivat erittäin hyvät. Tämän jälkeisestä englannin opetuksesta en juurikaan hyötynyt, koska kielestä oli tullut minulle lähestulkoon toinen äidinkieli.

[I spent most of the middle school in English abroad so the basis for the use of English was very good. After being abroad I didn't really benefit of the English teaching because English had nearly become another native tongue for me.]

(3) Englannin opiskelu on aina ollut suhteellisen helppoa minulle. Lukion ja ammattikorkeakoulun välissä pidin yhden väli vuoden, jonka aikana en käyttänyt englantia juurikaan. Tämän vuoksi kielitaito oli ehkä vähän ruosteessa ammattikorkeakouluun tullessani.

[Studying English has always been relatively easy for me. I took a gap year between upper secondary school and polytechnic during which I hardly used English. Because of that my language skills were a bit rusty when I came to polytechnic.]

(4) Olin opiskellut Englantia lukiossa pitkän oppimäärän, sekä katsellut paljon leffoja ilman subbeja. Olen kokenut opiskelun aikalailla helpoksi, tosin jotkin suulliset harjoitukset ovat olleet jopa haastavia, sillä olen unohtanut paljon sanastoa.

[I had studied a great deal of English in upper secondary school and watched a lot of movies without subs. I have considered studying rather easy, although some oral exercises have been even challenging since I have forgotten a lot of vocabulary.]

Based on these examples it seems that students in the polytechnics have had rather excellent background knowledge of English prior to the studies in polytechnics. Either the students have been actively using English inside or outside school (3 and 4) or they simply consider themselves to be good at it (2 and 4). What was specifically interesting in the answers was the fact that each one of the respondents reported having good skills in English and no one reported having problems with the language. However, it is interesting to notice that even a short break from using English may result in the decline of language skills as can be seen from two examples above (3 and 4): if a student has taken a gap year, for instance, it is likely that some part of the language knowledge will decline.

4.2 Students' opinions about English teaching in the polytechnic

What becomes very evident in the study is the fact that students in Finnish polytechnics have vastly differing opinions on and ideas about English teaching – what are good teaching methods and what should be taught more, to name a few. These differences may be due to many aspects, such as what type of knowledge students have about English or what they expect from their English studies in the polytechnic. By asking the students about the teaching methods that have been used and about the shortcomings that students feel there are

in the teaching, I can investigate how students feel about their studies. First, I will give a couple of examples of what types of teaching methods have been used:

(5) Kirjallisia tehtäviä, sekä suullisia harjoituksia parin kanssa. Joskus oli jotakin pelejä isommassa ryhmässä mm. heikointa lenkkiä englanniksi.

[Written tasks and oral exercises with a partner. Sometimes there were some games in a bigger group, weakest link in English among other things.]

(6) Kaikkia (opetusmenetelmiä) paitsi varsinaista luennointia. Enimmäkseen teemme kirjallisia ja suullisia tehtäviä. Mutta kumpaankin kurssiin on kuulunut jokin suullinen esitys.

[All (types of teaching methods) except for actual lecturing. Mostly we do written and oral tasks. But both courses have included an oral presentation.]

(7) Suulliset pari- ja ryhmätehtävät tunnilla, kirjalliset tehtävät läksyinä (lähinnä sanastoa, englanninkielisten tekstien lukemista ja hieman kirjoitustehtäviä).

[Oral pair and group tasks during class, written tasks as homework (mostly vocabulary, reading English texts and a little bit of writing tasks)]

(8) Paritöitä/pienryhmätöitä ja –keskusteluja, kirjalliset/suulliset tehtävät, sanakokeet

[Pair work/small group work and discussions, written/oral tasks, vocabulary exams]

As we can see from these extracts, versatile teaching methods have been used in English teaching in polytechnics. Similar aspects of teaching methods include both written and oral exercises, vocabulary tasks, pair and group work and some amount of presentations (5, 6, 7, 8). Based on these examples it seems that English teachers in polytechnics try to avoid actual lecturing (since it was not frequently mentioned in the answers) but concentrate more on using more practical ways of teaching such as versatile tasks and exercises.

Even though the teaching methods seem to be rather versatile, students still feel there are some aspects that should be emphasized more in the teaching. The following extracts reveal how students feel about certain teaching methods:

(9) Taso voisi olla korkeampi, sekä enemmän esimerkiksi suullisia esitelmiä. Niiden avulla ainakin puhumista oppii parhaiten.

[The level could be higher and more oral presentations for example. At least one can learn speaking with them.]

(10) Koko ensimmäinen kurssi oli puutteellinen. Opiskelimme muun muassa viikonpäiviä ja kuukausien nimiä, mikä on mielestäni melko turhaa, kun kaikilla on takana lähes 10 vuotta englannin kielen opiskelua. Toinen kurssi on sujunut paremmin ja ollut huomattavasti monipuolisempi. Siinä otetaan myös huomion ala, johon olemme opiskelemassa.

[Whole of the first course was insufficient. We studied among other things week days and the names of months, which I consider rather unnecessary because everybody has studied English for almost 10 years. The other course has been much better and considerably more versatile. It takes into consideration the branch that we're studying for.]

(11) Oman alan sanastoa voisi käydä enemmän.

[There could be more vocabulary related to own branch.]

(12) Sanakokeita en ole nähnyt, vaikka ne olisi hyödyllisiä!!

[I haven't seen vocabulary exams even though they would be useful!!]

(13) Mielestäni kursseilla jätetään kielioppi aivan liian vähälle huomiolle. Mikäli kaikki eivät ymmärrä jotakin kieleen liittyvää kielioppiasiaa, pitää se mielestäni käydä läpi eikä sivuuttaa.

[In my opinion, grammar receives too little attention in courses. If everybody doesn't understand some grammar aspect related to a language it should be examined and not bypass.]

These extracts reveal some interesting opinions students have towards English teaching. Even though the students mentioned multiple teaching methods that are used in the teaching, many of these methods are still brought up as areas that should be emphasized more. What is specifically interesting is that students mention rather different types of methods they would like to see more in the teaching, such as vocabulary exams, grammar teaching, oral presentations and vocabulary teaching (12, 13, 11). It is obvious that each student has individual needs regarding English teaching and these needs are very well shown in the answers. This is also one of the aspects that complicates the organization of English teaching in polytechnics. There are various expectations that students have towards the teaching and it may be very demanding to meet all the expectations.

4.3 Students' intentions on selecting optional English courses in the polytechnic

As Huovinen and Rusanen (1996: 60-61) indicate, there are several reasons behind the selection of optional English courses in the polytechnic. First of all, students in the study by Huovinen and Rusanen (1996) feel that the optional courses will be of use for them in the future, they are interested in international aspects of studying languages, they want to maintain their language skills or they merely need practice in the language. Those, on the other hand, who did not intend to select optional courses in the polytechnic mentioned reasons, such as not having enough time or interest or they simply considered their language skills to be good enough. According to Huovinen and Rusanen (1996: 59), 58 per cent of

students agreed that the number of compulsory English courses was too small and 88 per cent considered that the participation in the optional courses would be useful.

In the following section I will investigate the students' intentions to select optional English courses and the reasons behind those choices. The question about the students' intentions to select optional courses reveals rather versatile opinions, as extracts 14- 17 indicate:

(14) En [aio valita valinnaisia kursseja], koska näen ammattiaineet hyödyllisempänä tulevaisuuteni kannalta.

[I don't (intend to select optional courses) because I consider the occupational subjects more useful regarding my future.]

(15) Olen valinnut valinnaisia Englannin kursseja, sillä haluan oppia omaan alaani liittyvää sanastoa, sekä puhumaan englantia sujuvasti ilman takerteluja...

[I have selected optional English courses since I want to learn more vocabulary related to my own field and speak English fluently without stammering...]

(16) Hmm... En ole varma onko meillä sellaisia [valinnaisia englannin kursseja]. Kaikki kielet kuitenkin opetetaan eri toimipisteessä (n. 2-3km meidän koulusta), joka hankaloittaa paljon niiden valitsemista. Joten voi olla, että en valitse valinnaista enkkua.

[Hmm.. I'm not sure if we have those [optional English courses]. All languages are taught in different places (circa 2-3km away from our school), which complicates a lot the selection of them. Therefore, it might be that I don't select optional English.]

(17) En ole valinnut vielä [valinnaisia englannin kursseja] mutta luultavasti tulen valitsemaan koska englanti on helppoa ja hauskaa.

[I haven't yet [selected optional English courses] but I probably will select because English is easy and fun.]

The extracts above indicate that each student has different types of reasons behind their choices when selecting optional English courses. Some of these reasons also differ to some extent from those that Huovinen and Rusanen (1996) state. For instance, one factor when choosing optional English courses is that studying it is fun and easy (17). On the other hand, English courses are not selected because of issues related to a distant location of the school where English courses are taught (16) or the fact that other subjects are considered more important (14). The present study reveals that over half of the students (7 out of 12 students) are currently taking optional English courses or intend to take them later on during their polytechnic studies. Those who are not intending to continue their English studies after the compulsory courses do not either feel that they would benefit from the optional English studies or they do not have time to study it. One student also considered English studies to be her own responsibility and not that of the polytechnic.

4.4 English studies and their relevance in the future

One of the main aims in English teaching in polytechnics should be to prepare students for their futures, mainly for the jobs students will most likely encounter. For that reason, the teaching should be arranged in a way that it provides students, for instance, with appropriate vocabulary and conversational skills that are required in completing certain work related tasks. According to Huovinen and Rusanen (1996: 69) only 28 per cent of the students considered their English skills to be sufficient enough to cope in the working life after their studies. In the present study I aim to reveal some of the opinions of the students on the relevance of their English studies in the future. All of the students in the study believe that the studies in English will be of benefit, at least to some extent, as extracts 18-20 show:

(18) Uskon, että (englannin) opinnoista on hyötyä. Globaalissa maailmassa joutuu varmasti käyttämään vieraita kieliä.

[I believe that [English] studies will be of benefit. One will certainly have to use foreign languages in the global world.]

(19) Uskon olevan jonkinlaista hyötyä, esimerkiksi jos tulevaisuudessa on jossain yrityksessä töissä ja jokin ulkomaalainen luennoitsija tulee puhumaan englanniksi yrityksen taloustilanteesta. Tällöin englannin opinnoissa opituista sanoista voi olla hyötyä...

[I believe that they will be of some benefit, for example if in the future one works in a company and some foreign lecturer comes and talks in English about the economic situation of the company. Then the words that have been learnt during the studies might be of benefit...]

(20) Hyötyä on varmasti. Ulkomaalaisten tuttujen kanssa jutteleminen on helpompaa ja töitäkin voi ulkomailta löytyä.

[There will certainly be benefit. Conversation with foreigner friends is easier and one can also find jobs abroad.]

There was also one student who felt that his basic language skills would be of more benefit for him in the future:

(21) Uskon, että siitä [englannin opiskelusta] tulee olemaan jonkin verran hyötyä työelämässä juuri ammattisanaston takia. Muuten luulen kyllä että tulen enemmänkin käyttämään perus puhekieltä mikä on kerääntynyt vuosien varrella musiikista, netistä ja telkkarista matkustelusta yms.

[I believe that it [English studies] will be of some benefit in the working life because of the occupational vocabulary. Otherwise I think that I will use more basic spoken language which has been gathered with years from music, net and television travel etc.]

As can be seen from these extracts, students feel positively about the effect that English studies will have on their futures. Most students mentioned vocabulary related to their own training programs as the most important feature of their studies that will most likely be of benefit in the future (21). Other things that were mentioned were aspects such as listening and speaking skills (19, 20). All in all, it seems that students consider their English studies in the polytechnic to be rather useful in the future. As Huovinen and Rusanen (1996: 69) suggest, these positive attitudes may be due to healthy language identities or these students may just feel positively about their English studies in general. From my point of view, it is also important to take into consideration the students' previous experiences in English: if the experiences have been bad the overall motivation towards English studies may be low. Therefore, it may be difficult for the students to see the benefits they would receive while studying the language.

4.5 Teachers' opinions about English teaching in the Finnish polytechnics

Along with the students, the teachers also have certain opinions on English teaching in polytechnics. With the teachers, the planning and organization of English teaching starts from the syllabus, as extract 22 indicates:

(22) Ops [opetussuunnitelma] antaa raamit, joiden puitteissa me alakohtaisesti toimimme eli sisältöjä hiukan muokaten erityisesti ammatillisessa, englannin yleisessä kurssissa myös hieman koetamme motivoida ottamalla alakohtaisia sisältöjäkin mukaan esim. lukutekniikassa.

[Syllabus gives frames in which we work according to the field, in other words we edit the contents a little bit specifically in the occupational, in English course we also try to motivate by bringing field specific contents along e.g. in reading technique.]

Consequently, contents of the syllabus can be altered and varied according to the field that is taught. It was also mentioned that teachers in polytechnics can rather individually decide on the contents of English teaching but once the decisions about teaching have been made, teachers should also achieve those goals. In my opinion this type of organization in English teaching is rather good. English teaching can be planned according to the needs of students. As a result, they are likely to receive the best results from teaching with this type of language organization.

As with the students, I was also interested in investigating whether the teachers felt that there are some shortages in English teaching. The answers (extracts 22-23) indicate that the wide differences that students have in their English knowledge have an enormous effect on the teaching:

(23) Mielestäni emme tarjoa todella hyvälle kielen taitajille tarpeeksi haasteellisia ryhmiä; he pääsevät yleensä vapauttavista kokeistakin suoraan läpi, joten heillä ei ole kieltä kuin yksi ammatillinen kurssi; esim. keskustelukurssi voisi olla hyvä.

[In my opinion we don't provide really good students with groups challenging enough; they usually pass straight the exams that free them from other courses so they only have one occupational course; i.e. a conversation course could be good.]

(24) Joudumme aika paljon miettimään, miten saada heikoin aineskin läpi kurssista, jolla ei opeteta enää kielioppia. Hyvät kärsivät tässä keskikastin kustannuksella, mutta olen koettanut heille tehdä lisämateriaalia ja haastavampia tekstejä. Jokainen tehtävä voidaan yleensä tehdä todella hyvin ja haastavasti tai heikoimmille sitten riittää, kun tekevät; tehtävänantoja mietin usein.

[We have to think a lot how to get even the weakest element to pass the course that doesn't teach grammar anymore. The good ones suffer here at the expense of the middle cast but I have tried to make the extra material and more challenging texts. Each exercise can usually be made really well and in a challenging way or it is enough for the weaker ones that they just do the exercises; I often think about the tasks.]

These extracts well show the complicated nature of English teaching in the polytechnics. As some students need more practise in the language, the planning and organizing the courses becomes extremely complicated. Teachers need to know how to balance between the good language learners and those who have more problems with their learning. The extracts also indicate the low number of courses students have to participate in their polytechnic studies. Specifically those who have good skills in English only have to select one English course. On the other hand, those so called good students may actually have sufficient language skills to cope with prospective language situations, for instance situations at a workplace.

Both teachers in the study agreed that the main goal of English teaching in Finnish polytechnics is to prepare students for the language situations that students will face in the future. It was also stated that it is usually students' responsibility whether they want to learn or not. Those who feel that English will be important for them in the future will most likely select optional courses more frequently than those who do not see the importance. However, the reality is that there are usually only two or three compulsory English courses, after which students are responsible for their own language studies.

5 Discussion and conclusion

My aim in the present study was to explore to some extent the current state of English teaching in Finnish polytechnics and also find out if the teaching could somehow be improved or changed to better fit students' language needs. What I discovered somewhat agreed with my hypothesis: student questionnaires and teacher interviews both revealed some shortages in the teaching. Most students pointed out, for instance, that grammar teaching was not given enough attention to or that the courses provided were not challenging enough. Some students also felt that there could be more oral presentations, vocabulary exams and other tasks related to oral communication and vocabulary related to specific training programs. On the other hand, the teachers considered the wide range of students with various language skills to be problematic regarding the organization of teaching. What personally disturbed me the most while collecting the data and information for the study was the fact that students in Finnish polytechnics have to participate only in two English courses during their studies. Even if there are possibilities to choose optional English courses, they may be neglected due to other more important courses or due to lack of time.

There were also many positive aspects to English teaching in polytechnics. For instance, most of the students in the present study considered English studies to be very useful and they felt generally good about the studies. They also considered English to be relatively easy and stated their background knowledge in English to be good. Not one of the students admitted to having any major problems with the language. Students also felt that they had learned important aspects of English related to their training programs.

Both the students and the teachers felt that preparation of students for the future – specifically for the future careers and jobs - is an important part of English teaching in polytechnics. Students found the teaching of occupational vocabulary particularly useful, but there were also students who felt that English teaching in polytechnics did not offer them much regarding their futures since their knowledge of English had been rather extensive prior to their studies in the polytechnic. The teachers stated that English teaching in polytechnics should be able to provide students with sufficient English skills regarding their futures if they choose useful courses. Thus, students themselves are to some extent responsible for their success in the English language.

The present study has been made with certain restrictions. Therefore, there are still many aspects that could be studied in more depth. For instance, the number of respondents could be higher. With a wider range of respondents, the results could be more varied and the discussion could be more intensive. The fact that all the students in the study had gone to upper secondary school prior to their studies in the polytechnic was a shortage in a way that it gave rather limited information about students' backgrounds in English.

As the present study shows, teaching English in polytechnics is not a straightforward task to plan and execute. Students may have enormous differences in their backgrounds regarding their English skills and these variations should somehow be considered in the syllabus. Consequently, this also complicates the evaluation of English teaching in polytechnics. However, there are many positive aspects to English teaching in these institutions as the present study indicates.

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Appendix 1

Proseminaari, syksy 2008/Kyselylomake

Opiskelijoiden käsityksiä englannin opetuksesta ammattikorkeakoulussa

Taustakysymykset:

Ikä:

sukupuoli:

amk:

opiskeluala:

opintojen vaihe:

väylä, mitä tulit ammattikorkeakouluun (lukio, ammattikoulu)?

käytyjen englannin kurssien määrä?

Kyselyosio:

1. Minkälainen tausta sinulla oli englannin kielessä ennen kuin tulit ammattikorkeakouluun? (oletko kokenut englannin opiskelun helpoksi vai onko kielen oppimisessa ollut joitain vaikeuksia jne.)
2. Aiotko valita valinnaisia englannin kursseja/oletko valinnut valinnaisia englannin kursseja? Miksi? Miksi ei?
3. Mitkä englannin kielen osa-alueet (suullinen/kirjallinen osaaminen, kielioppi, rakenteet jne.) ovat omalla kohdallasi kehittyneet eniten ammattikorkeakoulussa? Mistä luulet tämän johtuvan? Entä mitkä alueet ovat kehittyneet vähiten? Mistä luulet sen johtuvan?
4. Koetko, että englannin kielen taitosi ovat parantuneet amk:ssa? Miksi? Miksi ei?
- 5.. Minkälaisia opetusmenetelmiä (ryhmätyöt/parityöt, esitelmät, luennointi, kirjalliset/suulliset tehtävät) opettajat ovat englannin kursseilla käyttäneet?
- 6.. Onko englannin opinnoissa/opetusmenetelmissä jotain, mikä on mielestäsi puutteellista?

7. Uskotko, että englannin opinnoista amk:ssa tulee olemaan hyötyä tulevaisuudessa? Missä ja millaista hyötyä?

Appendix 2

Proseminaari, syksy 2008/opettajahaastattelu

Onko englannin opetus ammattikorkeakouluissa tarpeeksi vaativaa vai voisiko opetusta jotenkin kehittää?

1. Kuinka kauan olet opettanut amk:ssa?
2. Minkälaisia kursseja olet opettanut/opetat?
3. Minkälaiset tavoitteet englannin opetuksella mielestäsi on?
4. Miten paljon opetussuunnitelma määrää mitä opetetaan?
5. Minkälaisia opetusmenetelmiä olet opetuksessasi käyttänyt?
6. Koetko, että englannin opetuksessa olisi mitään puutteita?
7. Minkälaisia arviointimenetelmiä käytät opiskelijoiden arvioinnissa?
8. Miten opiskelijoiden erilaiset taustat vaikuttavat opetuksen suunnitteluun?
9. Antaako englannin opetus opiskelijoille tarvittavat taidot työelämää varten?