

# Non-native English-speaking teachers of English in Finland

Teachers' thoughts and experiences of their profession

Bachelor's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Englanninkielen opettajia on nykyään määrällisesti paljon, niin Suomessa kuin ympäri maailmaa. Opettajat jakautuvat karkeasti kahteen ryhmään; englantia äidinkielenään puhuviin natiiviopettajiin ja ei-natiiveihin englantia puhuviin opettajiin. Jo vuosikymmen sitten on arvioitu, että ei-natiivit englanninkielen opettajat ovat muodostaneet enemmistön. Siitä huolimatta ei-natiiveja opettajia on alettu tutkia vasta viimeisten vuosikymmenten aikana, sillä natiiviopettajia on perinteisesti suosittu. Suomessa tilanne on kuitenkin toinen, sillä ei-natiivit opettajat ovat Suomessa itsestäänselvyys ja selvä enemmistö.</p> <p>Tutkielman tarkoitus on toimia keskustelunavauksena ja tuoda uusi näkökulma suomalaiseen opettajatutkimukseen. Tavoitteena on antaa ei-natiiveille englanninopettajille mahdollisuus kertoa omista ajatuksistaan ja kokemuksistaan. Muita mielenkiinnon aiheita ovat ei-natiivien opettajien vahvuudet ja heikkoudet työn kannalta sekä työn haasteet. Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu neljän kokeneen ei-natiivin englanninkielen lukio-opettajan haastatteluista. Haastattelu valittiin tutkimusmenetelmäksi, jotta tutkittavista ja kokemuksista saataisiin syvällistä tietoa. Teemoittelun kautta pyrittiin löytämään opettajien vastauksia yhdistäviä sekä erottavia piirteitä.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittivat, että opettajat kokevat ei-natiiviuden luonnollisena asiana. He pitivät englannin kielitaitoaan riittävänä opettajan työhön ja koulutustaan sopivana. Natiivi- ja ei-natiiviopettajat koettiin tasa-arvoisina, joskin molemmilla ryhmillä on omat vahvuutensa ja heikkoutensa. Omiksi vahvuuksikseen ei-natiivit opettajat totesivat sekä ymmärryksen vieraan kielen oppimisprosessista että suomen kielen taidon. Heikkouksikseen he mainitsivat puutteellisen sanaston, epätäydellisen lausumisen ja virheiden tekemisen. Tyypillisiä haasteita ovat vaikeat opetusmateriaalit sekä se, että oppilaat kyselevät opettajille vieraista asioista.</p> <p>Pienen otoksen vuoksi tulokset eivät ole yleistettävissä, joten laajempi tutkimus on välttämätön laajemmin hyödynnettäviä tuloksia varten.</p>	
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# 1 Introduction

There are a vast number of English teachers around the world as English is nowadays a widely taught and spoken global language. However, despite individual differences there is one crucial feature classifying English teachers worldwide; some of the teachers are native in the language they are teaching and some are not. In other words, some of the teachers teach their own mother tongue while others teach a second language of theirs to others studying it as a second or foreign language. According to an estimation, there are currently already more non-native teachers than native teachers of English (Crystal 2003, cited in Selvi 2011). English has also been taught in Finland for decades. During the 1960s it was legislated that Swedish as the second national language and another foreign language could be taught permanently in Finnish schools (Sajavaara 2006). English was often chosen as the second foreign language. However, English had been taught as an optional language even before the law was passed. Nowadays English language is still not a compulsory subject in Finland, but in practice most Finnish students study English. According to Leppänen et al. (2011), English is studied by more than four out of five Finns at least at some point of their studies. Hence, there are also a great number of English teachers in Finland.

The issue of non-native English teachers has been studied relatively little globally, but definitely more around the world than in Finland. Over the past decade non-native teachers have gained some interest among researchers worldwide. Still historically, native teachers have been both preferred over non-native teachers and studied more vastly. In Finland the situation differs as we have a long and resilient culture of non-native teachers. It has been and still is rather difficult for a native English speaker to gain the position of an English teacher in Finland. The Finnish law (Finlex 2013) states that a basic education teacher in Finland must have an excellent command of the school's official language. Therefore, most teachers in Finland are Finnish and thus, non-native English speakers. Research in Finland has obviously also addressed English teachers, but not from the point of view of non-nativeness. Teachers' non-nativeness seems to be self-evident in Finland, but yet the non-native teachers themselves have not been given the chance to express their thoughts and experiences on the matter.

The present study is intended to initiate discussion of non-native teachers in Finland and to give a new perspective to teacher research in Finland. The study aims at examining non-native English-speaking teachers of English in Finland through their own thoughts on how they experience and see their profession. The aim is to give non-native teachers a chance to convey what it is like to teach a language one is not native in and what kind of challenges the job includes. Teachers with at least a

decade of experience of the profession were chosen for the present study because they were expected to have many practical ideas and thoughts of the job as well as even proposals for improvement.

The following chapter focuses on presenting the issue of non-native teachers through examining the challenges of defining a non-native English-speaking teacher, comparing the differences of native and non-native teachers and finally exploring previous research related to non-native teachers of English. The third chapter explains the present study more closely by presenting the aims, the participants and the methods of the study. The fourth chapter focuses on introducing the results of the present study. Finally, in the fifth chapter the results are discussed and the conclusion of the study is presented with assessment and implications.

## **2 Non-native teachers**

In this chapter the term *non-native teacher* will be explored more closely. Defining a non-native English speaker is the first challenge. It is problematic to form a solid definition, but researchers have made some suggestions. Next, comparisons between native and non-native teachers are discussed. Previous research has often addressed the differences of these teachers and compared their statuses in professional life. Lastly, previous research focusing solely on non-native teachers and their experiences is presented.

### **2.1 Defining a non-native English-speaking teacher**

Defining nativeness and non-nativeness has been seen as a challenge in teacher-related research. For example, nativeness can be defined based on one's birth country. However, defining an English-speaking country can be problematic. For example, countries such as Sri Lanka and Brunei can be seen as English-speaking countries even though English is not their official language, but commonly spoken. The terms are challenging when defining a non-native speaker as well as a non-native speaker teacher. As Medgyes (2001: 429) states, even though the terms native speaker teacher and non-native speaker teacher are considered vague, they are widely used, because teachers, as well as their students, are indeed native or non-native English speakers. In Finland the issue seems to be rather trivial, as Finnish and Swedish are the official languages and English has traditionally been seen as a foreign language. Thus, all Finns with Finnish or Swedish as their first languages studying English have been regarded as non-native English speakers.

Cook (1999: 187) argues that people can be native only in the languages they have acquired in their childhood. However, it is difficult to define childhood as it is hard to say where it begins or ends. Cook does not offer a clear definition for childhood, so the present study sees childhood as the age span from birth to early adolescence, approximately to the age of 11. Hence, this definition makes all adult learners of foreign languages automatically non-native. Furthermore, Cook does not define what is meant by acquiring a language. In the present study acquiring a language signifies learning a language to a native-like or first language-like level. Thus, even though most English teachers in Finland have started studying English in their childhood, they are not seen as native speakers of English as they have not acquired native-like skills as children. The present study thus adopts Cook's definition and views non-native teachers as being teachers who do not teach their mother tongue.

## 2.2 Research on non-native English-speaking teachers of English

As English has rapidly spread around the world, the number of non-native English-speaking teachers of English has also grown. According to an estimation, non-native English teachers outnumbered native teachers by three to one already a decade ago (Crystal 2003, cited in Selvi 2011). Bolton (2004: 388) estimates that there are 500 000 non-native English-speaking secondary school teachers of English in China alone. Non-native English-speaking teachers form an outstanding majority of English teachers worldwide, as well as in Finland. However, for a long time non-native teachers were disregarded in teacher research (Arva & Medgyes 2000: 355).

It is only over the past decade that research on non-native English-speaking teachers has started to gain ground as an accepted research area. Medgyes (1994) originally opened the discussion of non-native teachers by sharing empirical knowledge with supporting theory in his book *The Non-Native Teacher*. Some years later Braine (1999) focused on the same issue and published an edited collection of articles. After these two pioneering works, non-native teacher research has become the main interest of several other researchers (Llurda 2006: 2). For instance, Hol and Aktas (2013) have studied the non-native English-speaking teachers' perceptions of their competency. Their study examined how non-native English-speaking instructors evaluate their competency. The results were clear, as all of the teachers had a positive and strong perception of their language skills. It could be that their research happened to include only teachers with a strong belief in their language proficiency. Also, Hayes (2009) has explored how non-native English speakers experience working as non-native speaker teachers. As Hayes (2009: 7) concluded in his study, the non-native English-speaking teachers who participated in his research always aimed at doing their best and helping their students as best they could. In addition, Hayes' research described non-native teachers as committed employees.

Gurkan and Yuksel's (2012) research revealed that non-native English-speaking teachers provided more strategies for language learning and more information about the English language. The non-natives also anticipated and prevented learning difficulties better and were more sensitive towards students. The same feature was also detected by Arva and Medgyes (2000: 362), who stated that non-native teachers were more empathetic towards students. However, Llurda (2009) addressed the issue of non-native teachers feeling downgraded by not being native speaker teachers. To increase non-native English-speaking teachers' self-esteem, Llurda suggests non-native English-speaking teachers to utilize all opportunities to enhance their language skills, to contemplate on language

learning and teaching in order to avoid following outdated guidelines and to consider using English as an international language acceptable and preferred.

### **2.3 Comparing native and non-native English-speaking teachers**

Historically, native teachers have clearly been preferred as English language teachers (Todd & Pojanapunya 2009: 24), but research has also shown that nativeness does not define an efficient teacher. For example, Medgyes (1992) came to the conclusion that either nativeness or non-nativeness does not guarantee teachers' effectiveness. Todd and Pojanapunya (2009) discovered that despite students' explicit preference for native English-speaking teachers, implicitly they showed no particular preferences. Hence, when assessing for instance teacher efficiency, the assessment should be based on evaluating individuals, not representatives of language groups. In addition, the researchers determined that professional factors, such as being eager to learn and dedicated to their work, are much more important than teachers' mother tongue.

Furthermore, Gurkan and Yuksel (2012) examined how students experienced native and non-native English-speaking teachers' contributions in English teaching and neither of the groups were found superior. The research indicated that the students needed native and non-native English-speaking teachers for different purposes and thus, students preferred a combination of native and non-native teachers. For instance, non-natives could clarify and explain things in the students' mother tongue, but natives could efficiently help the students improve their pronunciation. Thus, being a native speaker of a language does not make one a superior language teacher.



### **3 The present study**

#### **3.1 Research aims and questions**

As the studies discussed above show, non-native English-speaking teachers of English have so far been studied relatively little worldwide as well as in Finland. As most English teachers in Finland are indeed non-native speakers of English, it seems relevant and worthwhile to examine the issue closer. Especially seeing the issue from the point of view of the teachers has gained very little attention in research. Hence, the present study is also intended to bring a new perspective to teacher research in Finland. The main aim of the present study is to explore the issue of non-nativeness from the point of view of experienced non-native English-speaking teachers of English in Finland.

The present study is interested in non-native English-speaking teachers' own thoughts. It is aimed at examining the teachers' views and experiences of their profession. Do non-native teachers ever actually consider the issue of non-nativeness in their daily lives? Furthermore, how do they find being non-native in the language they teach? In addition, what do the teachers see as their assets and deficiencies or what advantages and disadvantages are there in being a non-native English speaker teacher? Do they consider their non-nativeness a benefit or a hindrance? Finally, the present study aims at uncovering the challenging aspects of teaching a language in which one is non-native. For instance, do the teachers feel fluent enough or do they regard themselves as competent teachers of English culture and idioms? Which parties assist or hinder them?

Specifically, the present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do non-native English-speaking teachers of English experience being non-native in the language they teach?
2. What do non-native English teachers regard as their strengths and weaknesses as teachers?
3. What kind of language-related challenges do non-native English-speaking English teachers face in their working life?

#### **3.2 The participants**

Four experienced upper secondary school teachers of English from middle and eastern Finland participated in the present study. An experienced teacher was defined as a teacher who had been

practicing the profession for at least ten years. The participants were thus defined in order to find teachers with a longer experience of working as a non-native teacher. The level of upper secondary school was chosen because in upper secondary school the language material is more challenging than on the lower levels and thus, the teachers also have to use more demanding language. To maintain equality, both men and women were interviewed, but otherwise the interviewees were chosen at random for the present study. The teachers will be referred to as Teacher A, B, C and D. Next, they will be introduced shortly.

The first one of the participants, Teacher A had English teaching experience from over 30 years. He was also a French teacher, but he had tended to have more English courses in his schedule over the years. During his studies he had spent a summer in Michigan. He found it important that he does not teach because he gets paid for it, but because he wants students to learn and excel. Teacher B had experience of teaching English to both adults and children. She had taught five years in an adult education center and nearly 15 years in lower and upper secondary schools. Her other languages were French, Italian and German, all of which she had taught at some point of her career. To gain variation and perspective, she spent her free time waitressing. During her studies she had spent several periods in France and Germany, where English was spoken as a lingua franca. Teacher C had English teaching experience from over a decade. He had spent almost four years teaching in lower secondary school and almost ten years teaching upper secondary school English in a vocational school. His English teaching career had been suspended for four years as his family had worked as missionaries in Pakistan. In Pakistan English had been widely used as a lingua franca. His other teaching language was German, but recently he had not been teaching German actively. Finally, Teacher D had altogether 16 years of English teaching experience. She had taught the first 8 years of her career in a combined lower and upper secondary school and the past 8 years in an upper secondary school. She also taught Swedish. During her studies she had spent time abroad in Sweden and Germany where English was used as a lingua franca.

### **3.3 Data and methods**

The present study is a qualitative case study for it aimed to form a thorough understanding of the issue of non-native teachers in Finland through a small sample. In order to elicit in-depth information, interviews were chosen as the research method. The data consists of interviews with four upper secondary school English teachers. The interviews were conducted in Finnish to prevent language from obstructing self-expression. The interviewer strived for an objective and impartial

outlook on the interviews and the interviewees were aware of the purposes and the main interests of the study as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of the research. Each of the interviews lasted approximately an hour, depending on how closely each of the interviewees wanted to discuss the issue. All of the interviews were executed in February 2014. The interviewees could decide where the interviews took place.

The interviews were semi-structured and open to any relevant topic the interviewees wanted to discuss. Thus, the interviews allowed the participants to report anything they felt relevant from their own point of view. However, all of the interviews covered a list of points defined beforehand based on the research questions. The interviewees were asked about their own insights, thoughts and experiences related to their non-nativeness. Moreover, the interview questions were formed in such a way that they would provide answers to the research questions, but not prompt the interviewees.

The data analysis was conducted through a thematic analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2006: 6) state, recognizing, analyzing and reporting patterns within data is the main idea of thematic analysis. Hence, this analytic method serves the present study that aimed at finding common and differentiating features across the data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) present, the analysis was divided into five different phases: 1) familiarizing with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes and 5) defining and naming themes. In the present study, the interviews were first recorded and then transcribed where necessary. As the interviews were conducted in Finnish, some passages were translated in order to discuss them later in the study. Next the transcriptions were coded in order to find similarities and differences in the teachers' responses through a careful thematic analysis. Recurring themes were first identified, then explored more closely. All data was stored on a password-locked computer.

## 4 Results

Here, the results of the study will be presented. The teachers' responses will be discussed in detail according to the five different themes identified from the data: 1) general thoughts and experiences of being a non-native teacher, 2) comparing native and non-native teachers, 3) benefits and hindrances of being a non-native teacher, 4) language-related challenges non-native teachers face and 5) other issues hindering and helping non-native teachers.

### 4.1 General thoughts and experiences of being a non-native teacher

All of the teachers had heard of the term *non-native teacher* before, most of them already when studying English at universities. Teacher B said that she strongly identifies with the definition, but the others had not thought about it before and thus, could not determine their stand on the issue. Teacher B explained that she constantly thinks about being non-native, for example whenever she is dealing with exchange students or compiling exams. However, all of the teachers agreed that being non-native does not surface in any conversations between them and their colleagues, students or friends. Teacher D added that being non-native is so self-evident that it is rarely discussed. Teacher B implied that it might possibly be a topic of conversations in an environment where there are both native and non-native teachers present.

Teachers A, C and D agreed on not considering being a non-native a problem in their jobs. Moreover, all of the teachers regarded their language skills as sufficient for working as an English language teacher. Teacher D described teaching English as a non-native to be very natural. Teacher B found problems with being a non-native and clarified her stand by explaining that she finds upper secondary school language material challenging even for her, especially when teaching special vocabulary or jargon. She also mentioned that pedagogy was not addressed enough in her studies and hence, she had had to contemplate on how to teach and explain different aspects of language. The next passage sheds light on her experiences.

#### Example 1

“No oikeestaan alkuvuosina voi sanoa että siinä on jonkun verran semmosia, tulee tunnillakin ahaa-elämyksiä, että joutuu miettimään ja pohtimaan niinku kielen rakenteita, vertaamaan miksi sanotaan näin ja niitä kysymyksiä, koska eihän niitä missään niinku pedagogiikan, sitä pedagogiikkaa ei kuitenkaan loppuviimein opeteta niin paljon Sää joudut itse hoksamaan ne

kielen kiemurat eli kielioppihan käydään läpi, mutta se minun mielestä se pedagoginen oivaltaminen jää vähän puolitiehen, et sitä ei niinku mietitä et miten sä voit opettaa ja selittää tietyt asiat.”

“Well actually in the early years, I can say, that there are some, even in the classroom you get these Aha-moments where you have to think and ponder on the structures of language, compare why this is said in this way and those kinds of questions, because they are not really taught, the pedagogics is not after all taught so much. You have to grasp the structures of language on your own because grammar is obviously taught, but I think that the pedagogical perception is left halfway, it is not really contemplated on how you can teach and explain certain things.”

Taking part in language courses or seminars did not seem to be popular among the teachers, partly because of their own volition and partly because such training is not offered. Teacher A, B and C had not attended any kind of in-service training of English language during their working careers. Only Teacher D had attended countless seminars and courses during her career. Most recently she had attended a course on oral skills. She was in training up to four or five times a year with her school sponsoring her. She seemed to find these courses useful and fruitful considering her job. Complete opposite to her was Teacher C who said that he does not even feel the need to attend such courses. He stated that a language course abroad could be useful, but unfortunately his school does not have enough money for such a course. Teacher B and C remarked that most course days provided by their schools mainly consider new technology, not the pedagogics of teaching or subjects being taught at schools. Neither of them found these technology trainings particularly practical. Especially Teacher B revealed her disappointment with courses on technology taking time from learning about English language. Instead of hearing about new technology, she would much rather have attended a course or a seminar on English language or English language teaching. She said that courses on different school subjects have been forgotten completely, which she regarded as a shame.

All of the participants were found to use English not only as teachers but also actively on their free time. The teachers explained that they use English outside their profession on a weekly, if not on a daily, basis. They said that they try to learn new vocabulary and keep updated in English language on their free time through using English in their own areas of interest. Only Teacher C mentioned that acquiring of English feels like work, but he, too, still tries to use as much English as possible. None of the interviewed teachers spent their free time consciously studying English, but all of them said that they acquire English unconsciously all the time. Watching TV-series or movies in English was very common among the participants. Teacher A stated that he deliberately tries to listen and acquire new words and idioms through watching TV-series and nature documents. Teacher B also

read and listened to lyrics in English songs and reads different magazines in English in order to acquire English. Teacher D found that she always learns new words and idioms when reading English books for fun.

## 4.2 Comparing native and non-native teachers

When asked to compare native and non-native teachers, all of the participants agreed that both of the groups have their advantages as well as disadvantages. However, the teachers did not seem to confront native English speaking English teachers very often. Teacher A had met a few native teachers on his free time while teachers B, C and D had met some native teachers through their jobs. The teachers agreed that pronunciation as well as oral skills are areas where a native speaker teacher could be more efficient. Teacher B added that a native might be a better teacher of vocabulary and Teacher D continued on the same matter as in the following extract:

### Example 2

”Aivan varmasti olis tälläsiä niinku, siis semmosia, miten niitä nyt sanois, siis sellasia asioita mitkä niinku pystyy vaan korva sanomaan, että tää on niinku, tää on parempi tässä, niinku joku asia et kyl näinkin voi sanoo, mut et tää ilmasu on selkeesti parempi, tää on luontevampi, idiomattisempi, tämmönen. Niin aivan varmasti, sellasia mitkä vaan korva kuulee, koska ite sitten vieraan kielen puhujana ei välttämättä kuule, niinku totta ihan sellaset perusasiat, mutta jotain hienompia vivahteita, ni ei välttämättä häirihe (minua) ollenkaan, (ajattelee vaan) et tää on hyvä juttu, tosi hyvä näin.”

”Oh definitely there would be these, I mean, how could you describe them, I mean these things that only one’s ear can tell that this is like, this is better here, like some thing that you could say another way too, but this other expression is clearly better, this is more natural, more idiomatic, you know. So definitely, things that only one’s ear can tell, because then I as a foreign language speaker will not necessarily hear these, well obviously basic things, but then some finer nuances, they don’t necessarily bother (me) at all, (I just think that) oh this is good, this is really good like this.”

Moreover, Teacher C remarked that obviously the effectiveness of a teacher is also a question of personality and pedagogical skills, not only of nativeness.

A shared opinion among the participants was that native English speakers could not substitute for non-native teachers in upper secondary schools in Finland as Finnish is much used in English

classes. It would be difficult for a teacher without Finnish skills to teach and guide weaker students. For instance, grammar was taught mainly in Finnish. Thus, native English speakers should first have to gain an excellent command of Finnish, which was not very common. Teacher A pondered that a native speaker teacher might be suitable in a situation where all students already have excellent English skills, but in an average Finnish upper secondary school that is not the case. Teacher B noted that as a native Finnish speaker, it would be more difficult for her to teach her own mother tongue as a second language than as a non-native speaker to teach English as a second language. She felt that teaching one's own native language as a second language is more challenging because as a native, one has not had the experience of learning the language as a second language. Teacher D agreed and added that being a non-native gives her perspective and helps to understand the learning process.

The participants' opinion of native speakers as an input resource were divided. Half of the teachers invited native speakers to their classrooms to discuss with students and mainly the feedback from students was positive. Teacher B and C were the ones who had tried to invite native speakers to class as often as possible, at least on oral skills courses. Teacher B had invited even exchange students from other than English-speaking countries to come visit her English classes in order to show her students that English is a global language that is spoken with a variety of accents all around the world. Both teachers remarked that obviously not everyone is brave enough to use English in front of a native speaker, but there are always students who are willing to speak English. Teacher D added that students on the upper secondary level understand the benefits of discussing with a native speaker. Students were encouraged to use English more in their daily lives when they noticed that they were able to have a conversation with a native English speaker. Teacher A said that he does not get the possibility to invite native speakers to class for there are very few native English speakers in the area where he lives. He did not find it crucial to offer such native speaker input to students. Teacher C had once had an English-speaking visitor from Sweden in class, but it was only by coincidence. Moreover, it was not important for him to have native speakers in class and thus, he did not seem very eager to invite them.

### **4.3 Benefits and hindrances of being a non-native teacher**

A shared mother tongue among teacher and students was seen as a great benefit by the participants. Teacher A stated that it helps him to understand the students as well as their problems with the language better. He remarked that without Finnish skills it would also be impossible to know where

errors come from and whether they are caused by negative transfer from the mother tongue or not. Teacher B added that Finnish is necessary for her when she is teaching grammatical structures and guiding weaker students. Teacher C and D emphasized the importance of the teacher being aware of the difficulties and troubles one faces when having to learn a foreign language. As non-native teachers have had to learn English as a second language, they can exploit their own experiences in their teaching. Teacher D also mentioned that it might be easier for a non-native speaker to form a contact with students as they share a mother tongue.

Being non-native in the language one is teaching held several disadvantages as well. Teacher A admitted that sometimes it is stressful having to think about things native speakers do not have to. He felt that there are many areas where he does not have a good command of English, but obviously it is not even possible to know everything. Teacher B agreed and added that she would like to have more time and resources to develop her own language skills. Making mistakes was a hindrance Teacher A, C and D mentioned. However, Teacher C had every now and then asked his students whether they notice him making mistakes and the students had revealed that they do not notice his errors. He also described language as something that always surprises him as there is always something new to learn. Imperfect pronunciation was also regarded as a disadvantage by Teacher C. Teacher D explained that being a non-native makes you notice your restrictions because your language skills are not native-like.

#### **4.4 Language-related challenges**

As non-native teachers, the participants faced different kind of challenges in their daily lives. Three out of the four teachers agreed that students tend to know a lot of vocabulary strange and unfamiliar to the teachers, for instance through students' own hobbies. Teacher C was the only one who did not see this as an actual challenge, but obviously he, too, came across unfamiliar vocabulary he has had to check. Teacher B said that sometimes students ask about things she could not explain even in her mother tongue. She added that from time to time she even has to read texts in textbooks again and again in order to understand them and to also be able to translate them. Teacher A admitted that he spends a remarkable amount of time preparing classes and trying to foresee students' questions. He stated that this convention is explained by his non-nativeness. Teacher B had a lot of experience of working with exchange students and thus, she was familiar with the issues related to teaching exchange students and preparing material for them. Moreover, all of the teachers agreed that because of large and heterogeneous classes nowadays, it was sometimes difficult to offer suitable



teaching materials for every student in the class. Methods suiting weaker students might be experienced as unhelpful by skilled students. Teacher D added, though, that differences in students' skill levels are indeed the norm and heterogeneity is very common within upper secondary classes.

Whenever students brought a new word or idiom to class, all of the teachers tried their best to find a sensible explanation. When the teachers needed to check something language-related, they relied on English-English dictionaries and the Internet. Only Teacher C used English-Finnish vocabulary as a primary source. Teacher B added that whenever she is using the Internet, she tries to find an official or otherwise authentic source to be sure of the reliability. Teacher C explained that he tries to encourage students to check unfamiliar words independently and only ask him if they themselves cannot find the definition. Teacher D described vocabulary learning as never-ending. She found that she has a strong command of language structures, but she still faces new unfamiliar words and idioms all the time.

When asked if non-nativeness caused the teachers stress, Teacher A stated that if the job stressed him, he would not be a language teacher anymore. He continued on the matter:

### Example 3

”Eihän se (että on ei-natiivi) ainakaan siis tietysti helpota. Tietyllä alueella se vaikeuttaa, mutta kun toisaalta just, että se myöskin helpottaa, kun ymmärtää oppilaitten ohjaamista kun tietää mistä se lähtee ja mitenkä, mikä siinä (oppimisessa) on takana ja miten voi sitten auttaa just sen takia kun tietää, mikä ne virheet tuottaa esimerkiksi”

”It (being non-native) definitely doesn't make it easier. In certain areas it hinders, but then on another hand it does help, too, as you understand how to guide students when you know where things begin and what lies behind it (learning) and how you then can help just because you, for instance, know what causes errors.”

Shortly put, being non-native as a teacher did not always help, but it was useful too. Teacher C and D agreed by stating that being a non-native does not cause them any stress. However, Teacher B admitted that she always worries about being updated in the language. It stressed her not being able to attend English language courses through her employer. She genuinely would like to learn more English and attend courses, but she did not have the money or the time to do so.

The participants did not find that students question or challenge them because of their non-nativeness. Only Teacher D could remember a case where her language skills had been questioned.

A lower secondary school boy had asked her for a definition for a word and as Teacher D had responded with a natural "let's check it in the dictionary", the student had been astonished by how she could be a teacher if she does not know all the answers. Obviously, she had explained to the student that not even native speakers know all the words in the English language. Teacher C admitted that he tends to humorously say to his students that when someone reaches his language skill level or even outdoes him, they can switch places.

#### **4.5 Other issues hindering and helping non-native teachers**

Among the participants, lack of time was considered the main feature hindering them in their profession. Teacher A explained that considering the time frame, there is too much material to teach. Teachers had to keep up with the nationwide guidelines and decide what were the most important issues to teach. Sometimes it was difficult to define what was significant and what was not. Teacher B agreed and stated that the amount of material is completely out of proportion compared to the actual schedule. Also, the national examination at the end of upper secondary school forced her to include some issues leaving some equally important issues unheeded. Teacher D also found that the national examination skews English teaching. There was rarely time for projects or applied language use because of preparing for the examination took so much time. Language assessment was seen as a challenge by teacher B. She thought that it is sometimes difficult for there are no national guidelines on how to assess or how much evidence one needs to back up the assessment. Teacher C had another perspective, too, as he explained that sometimes teaching is hindered by students acting childishly or being irresponsible and even lazy.

The participants could name several features helping them overcome the challenges. Teacher A said that having good relationships with his students, English being a well-liked subject and having a good atmosphere within the school staff assists him in doing his job. Teacher C agreed and added that he enjoys the strong team spirit at his school. He also remarked that he finds it useful to be able to decide when and where he does the background and follow-up work for his classes. Teacher B explained that her colleagues support her as well as the comforting thought that being perfect is not the most important thing in language teaching. If anything, language teaching was about helping students to communicate in a foreign language. Teacher D seemed to be the most happy and satisfied with her job as it was very difficult for her to name anything either hindering or helping her. She said that her colleagues are the most important help whenever she happens to need support.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

In this section, the results of the present study will be discussed in relation to the research questions. They will also be compared to previous research. Lastly, some implications are offered with an assessment of the present study.

The first research question *How do non-native English-speaking teachers of English experience being non-native in the language they teach?* elicited the teachers own general thoughts and experiences on the matter. The issue of non-nativeness with its advantages and disadvantages seems to be very familiar to the participants of the study, even though the issue is not featured in everyday discussions. The level of familiarity with the term was surprising as non-nativeness seems to be such an obvious and unnoticeable part of their profession. However, as expected, the issue is still not a discussion topic. Being a non-native teacher is also mainly not seen as a problem, maybe because it is so common in Finland. In other words, it is the norm in Finland. This point of view is supported by the participants describing being a non-native teacher as very natural.

The non-native teachers of the study considered their English language skills to be completely adequate for teaching the language, which implies that their education has answered the needs of their profession. Hol and Aktas (2013) discovered similarly that non-native teachers have a positive and strong perception of their language competency. Hence, non-native teachers feel that their language skills are sufficient for the profession. However, the participants felt that pedagogy could be addressed more closely. A larger study might elicit whether there is a need to develop the way pedagogy is taught to future teachers. In-service training was mostly seen positively, even though only one out of four had received training during her teaching career.

The participants showed interest in in-service trainings especially in the target language, which seemed to be caused by their non-nativeness. The participants' interest serves as an indication of the teachers' willingness to learn new things even after their graduation. However, English language training was not offered to a majority of the participants even though the teachers would have liked to update their knowledge. Hence, this seems like a major deficiency in the teachers' careers, which definitely should be taken into consideration in schools and education boards. Half of the teachers complained about their employers offering training only on new technology, even though they would benefit more of training concerning the English language. Thus, the themes of in-service training should be reconsidered.

As the participants were non-natives, it was expected that they have an opinion on the issue of comparing native and non-native teachers. When asked to compare the two groups, the participants saw natives and non-natives as equals with both having benefits and hindrances. Even though the participants had only little experience of native teachers as colleagues, they had a very realistic and sensible view on the issue. The teachers experienced that the effectiveness of a teacher is not defined only by one's mother tongue as being an effective teacher is also dependent on, for example, one's personality and pedagogical skills. Hence, they thought that non-nativeness is normal. This was an interesting remark as Medgyes (1992), too, has discussed how an effective teacher is not only defined by nativeness or non-nativeness. With their experience of the profession, the non-native teachers were certain that a native speaker could not replace them, at least not without an excellent command of Finnish. Thus, they rightly seemed to be very sure of their current and future employment. However, the non-native teachers saw that in some language areas a native could be a more efficient teacher. These areas were such as pronunciation, oral skills and vocabulary. Admitting the native teachers superiority in these language teaching areas did not seem to cause the participants much stress as they appeared to trust their own professionalism strongly. A study by Llurda (2009) expressed a concern over non-native teachers feeling underrated in comparison with native teachers, but the present study did not elicit similar results. It would seem that such a situation is more likely in an environment in which there are both natives and non-natives working as language teachers.

The second research question *What do non-native English teachers regard as their strengths and weaknesses as teachers?* aimed at examining what aspects the non-native teachers consider to be their advantages and disadvantages. It seemed to be very easy for the participants to name benefits and hindrances non-nativeness caused them, probably because they have had to deal with these aspects of the profession on a daily basis. As expected, the main benefits of non-nativeness were helping to understand the process of learning a foreign language and being able to use the mother tongue in class. The teachers remarked that having a shared language is especially useful when assisting weaker students. Gurkan and Yuksel (2012) stated in their study that non-native teachers anticipate and prevent learning difficulties better than native teachers and this seemed to be the case with the participants of the present study. Most of the hindrances the teachers could name were very much the same issues they mentioned as the areas a native teacher would be a better teacher in. Lacking vocabulary, imperfect pronunciation and making mistakes were listed as the main deficiencies of a non-native teacher. Having to contemplate on things native speakers do not have to was also mentioned as a weakness. However, all of these features seem to be only normal for any non-native speaker as non-native speakers have not acquired these skills in their childhood and

naturally have to do more conscious work on their language skills in comparison with native speakers. Imperfect pronunciation as well as making mistakes could also be thought of as natural parts of global English and not only as errors. Nevertheless, the weaknesses of non-native teachers mentioned by the participants could be taken into consideration in teacher training in order to give future language teachers a strong expertise in teaching English.

The third question *What kind of language-related challenges do non-native English-speaking English teachers face in their working life?* explored different challenges the teachers confront in their daily lives. Even though the participants were ready to mention several challenges of being a non-native teacher, three out of four non-native teachers reported that non-nativeness and its challenges do not cause them any stress whatsoever. Thus, it would seem that the teachers are well-equipped to perform their job and to overcome these difficulties. Students asking about things the teachers do not know and having such demanding materials were the main things the teachers named as challenging. These challenges of the profession could guide the development of teacher training so that future teachers, too, have enough strategies and resources to outcome these challenging situations.

According to the participants, despite the challenges of the profession, students do not tend to question the teachers professionally, which indicates that teachers are considered as experts and authorities. Thus, language-related challenges do not seem to hinder the non-native teachers. Whenever the participants face a language-related challenge, the participants often retrieve answers and information together with their students. Thus, language-related challenges are transformed into learning possibilities for both the teachers as well as the students. However, the profession of a language teacher is not only about the language for there are other issues both helping and hindering the non-native teachers. Lack of time as well as having too much material to teach was mentioned by most of the teachers as a terrible annoyance. However, the main difficulty appeared to be in deciding what in the offered materials is worth teaching and of use to the students. Also the difficulties of assessment as well as students' behavior were sometimes experienced as challenging.

In conclusion, although non-native teachers in Finland do not seem to regard non-nativeness as a problem, it affects their daily lives as teachers. Non-native teachers appear to have their own distinctive strengths and weaknesses assisting as well as hindering them. The divergent language skills of native and non-native teachers separate the two groups, but the teacher's mother tongue was not thought to define an effective teacher. However, even though non-native teachers face challenges different from those of native teachers, they are well-equipped to overcome any

difficulties. The small sample of the present study naturally decreases the generalization possibilities. The present study is only tentative and a larger sample is necessary in order to elicit results suitable for generalization. More useful data could be produced by using both qualitative and quantitative methods, perhaps by joining interviews and questionnaires. Moreover, a comparison between the teachers' statements and observed, actual behavior could bring an interesting point of view to non-native teacher research. In addition to the practical implications, the present study had a general aim of bringing a new perspective to teacher research in Finland. Finnish non-native English-speaking teachers had not previously been given the opportunity to share their thoughts about non-nativeness from their own point of view. A vast majority of English teachers in Finland are non-native and thus, it seemed only natural to explore this side of their profession. As Hayes (2009:1) stated, the actual voices of working teachers offer researchers bright insights and important ideas on English language teachers. After all, as Medgyes (1992: 340) puts it: "the road to the learner leads through the teacher".

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