PERCEPTIONS OF EFL LEARNING AND TEACHING BY AUTISTIC STUDENTS, THEIR TEACHERS AND THEIR SCHOOL ASSISTANTS

Master's Thesis
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Englannin kielen opetuksen toteutuksesta autistisille oppilaille Suomessa on vain niukasti tutkimustietoa, vaikka autismia ja autististen lasten opettamista on tutkittu varsin kattavasti. Autismi on yleensä ennen kolmatta ikävuotta havaittava kehityksellinen häiriö, joka vaikuttaa merkittävästi verbaaliseen ja nonverbaaliseen viestintään. Autismin peruspiirteiseen kuuluvat sosiaalisten taitojen puutteellisuus, heikentynyt viestintäkyky, kuuloherkkyys, impulsiivisuus, rajoittuneet mielenkiinnon kohteet ja toistuvat maneerit sekä puheessa että toiminnassa.

Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää, mitä käsityksiä autistisilla oppilailla, heidän opettajillaan ja koulunkäyntiavustajillaan on englannin kielen oppimisesta ja opettamisesta Suomessa. Tutkimus kartoittaa autististen oppilaiden asenteita, vahvuuksia ja heikkouksia englannin kielessä. Lisäksi selvitetään, mitkä ovat eri oppimateriaalien, läksyjen ja arvioinnin sisällöt ja roolit englannin kielen opetuksessa autisteille. Tutkielmassa pohditaan myös aikuisten roolia ja vuorovaikutusta oppimisprosesseissa sekä englannin kielen opetuksen kehittämismahdollisuuksia. Aineisto kerättiin havainnoimalla ja haastattelemalla kahdeksaa autistista oppilasta, kolmea opettajaa ja yhtä koulunkäyntiavustajaa. Kyseiset puoliavoimet teemahaastattelut ääninauhoitettiin ja analysoitiin lähdekirjallisuuteen tukeutuen.

Tulokset osoittavat, että haastatellut autistiset oppilaat suhtautuivat etupäässä myönteisesti englannin kielen opiskeluun. He pitivät erityisesti suullisesta viestinnästä sekä auditiivisista ja visuaalisista materiaaleista. Lisäksi he arvostivat opettajaa sekä tiedonantajana että kurinpitäjänä. Kokeet olivat heidän selkeä inhokkinsa. Haastatellut opettajat taas pitivät kuullunymmärtämistä ja kirjallisia töitä kompastuskivinä. Useat tutkimukseen osallistujat toivoivat jatkossa englannin kielen opetuksessa käytettävän lisää autenttista ja visuaalista materiaalia, suullisia tehtäviä sekä konkreettisuutta. Myös tarve lisäkoulutukselle nostettiin esiin.

Vaikka tulokset eivät ole yleistettävissä suppean otannan takia, antavat ne kuitenkin viitteitä autististen oppilaiden englannin kielen opetuksen toteutuksesta ja sen nykytilasta Suomessa.

Asiasanat – Keywords autism, EFL teaching, special education, integration

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Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1 INTRODUCTION

This study examines English as a foreign language (EFL) learning and teaching through the lens of special education, autism education to be more precise. Even though broad studies of autism have been carried out in several scientific fields, there seems to be a shortage of studies of autism specifically in EFL contexts. The aim of the study is to shed light on the various perceptions that autistic students, their teachers and school assistants have of distinct issues concerning EFL learning and teaching both in general and special education contexts, and clear the path for further research. Emphasis will be laid on the autistic students' views on EFL learning and teaching. Conclusions will be drawn on the basis of the three parties' perceptions with the aim of offering future educational professionals practical pieces of advice in order for them to carry out EFL instruction for autistic students in a more suitable manner.

There are a number of reasons for opting for the topic in question. First, autism has been widely studied through various scientific points of view ranging from medical to psychological and educational perspectives. However, specific research into autism and teaching a particular school subject, such as EFL, is lacking. This study therefore endeavors to find new horizons to learning and teaching English for students with autism in EFL settings in Finland. Second, earlier I had completed a Bachelor's thesis on a similar subject in which I had introduced the phenomenon of EFL teaching for students with autism spectrum disorders (abbreviated ASD) in Finland. The Bachelor's thesis (Kuparinen 2014) sought to recapitulate on the different ways EFL learning and teaching is realized for autistic students in the Finnish educational context. The research paper served as an overview of the phenomenon, and in this Master's thesis the themes will be expanded and elaborated on with a special focus on perceptions, experiences and opinions that teachers, school assistants and, particularly, autistic students have on the matters at hand. Third, I have also personal interest in autism and the diverse phenomena it entails. In addition to substituting school assistants and practical nurses for several years, I have worked with people with autism of different ages as a personal assistant for

four years and counting. Thus, previous and current work experience and studies inspired me to grasp the subject and dig deeper into its themes in order to gain a better understanding of autism and be equipped with tools to encounter autistic people more adequately in the future.

In Finland, people with autism are expected to attend school. Their schooling can be arranged in varied ways: Some of them go to a special school, others study in a special education class based in a general education school, and then there are those who either completely or partly attend general education classes. This inclusive idea of integrating children with special needs into general education classes or particular lessons whenever it is possible and plausible is a trend that is commonly encouraged by many schools and educational boards (Finlex 1998 and Finnish National Agency for Education 2014).

Autism is a very versatile phenomenon. In fact, many sources do not speak of autism but rather utilize the term ASD as an umbrella term in order to underline and capture the vast scope of autism and its related conditions. The degrees of severity of ASD and the distinct symptoms that each individual with autism has can be complex. Some individuals, such as those with Asperger's syndrome, are regarded as high-functioning autists who are able to communicate verbally and who, in some cases, may possess eccentric abilities such as extraordinary memory, but whose conduct in social situations can be somewhat strange or challenged. On the other hand, autists at the low-functioning end of the spectrum may be unable to communicate with words, have limited intellectual properties and may suffer from various other ASD-related conditions. Many autists can be located somewhere in between the two extremes of the broad spectrum. This study focuses on high-functioning students with autism who are able to speak. It needs to be mentioned that due to discrepancies with the terminology of autism, this study will use the terms "autists", "autistic students", "students with autism", and "students with ASD" synonymously, according to the examples provided by the available literature, research, practice and talk revolving around the vast phenomenon of autism.

This is a qualitative study based on audio recorded interviews and in-class observations.

2 AUTISM, AUTISM EDUCATION AND EFL LEARNING AND TEACHING

This chapter discusses some of the key issues related to autism spectrum disorders, autism education and EFL learning. These include an overview of some of the causes, symptoms, diagnosing processes and treatment of ASD. In addition, issues concerning the brain, communication, social skills, assets and challenges, and the visual channel of an individual with autism will be presented. Emphasis will be laid on various factors related to autism education. Finally, certain aspects of EFL learning and teaching will be introduced.

2.1 Autism spectrum disorders and their diverse causes, symptoms and treatment

In spite of being researched for a number of years, autism spectrum disorders, along with their diverse causes and symptoms, continue to create debate and divergence in scientific circles with no common consensus on the exact symptoms of autism. However, despite all the variation and related conditions, it is widely agreed that there is a spectrum of disorders, and some of its typical features have been introduced. (Duran 2006:150.) The following chapters introduce and discuss some of these common traits of autism with a special focus on autism education and its characteristics. The chapter concludes with a concise outline of EFL learning and teaching in general.

Autism is a rather recent phenomenon. Brock, Jimerson and Hansen (2006:3) illustrate that the word "autism" was originally employed by a Swiss psychiatrist named Eugen Bleuler back in the year 1911. The term "autism" originates from Greek words "autos" (meaning "self") and "ismos" (condition) and it was initially utilized in relation to schizophrenic patients who seemed to be "turning inward on one's self". Moreover, Brock et al. (2006:12) depict that genetics (such as Retts syndrome and Fragile X), the environment (for example, rubella virus, valproic acid, and thalidomide) as well as neurobiological factors

and the interactions of the above mentioned aspects can ultimately lead to autism. In the following paragraphs, the underlying causes behind autism will be presented more in depth.

According to Janzen (1996:6), abnormal alterations in the development of the central nervous system can lead to the onset of autism. These alterations can occur early on during the development of the fetus, at the time of birth or sometime after birth. Hannell (2006:25) and Brock et al. (2006:3) explain that unsuccessful parenting or unfavorable socioemotional living conditions do not lead to autism but rather it "is caused by an inherent dysfunction in brain activity". Frith (2008:52) highlights that a certain gene fault is behind autism although other factors mark out its inception and symptoms. According to Ribble (2011:17) and Brock et al. (2006:10), however, there are various genes that can affect the development and onset of autism. Ribble (2011:17) indicates that a gene called Neurexin 1, for example, is thought to have a link to autism, but additionally there are altogether six primary genes and 30 other genes that may be involved. Furthermore, there has been research on chromosome 11 and its possible connection to autism. Hannell (2006:25) reveals that children who have a brother or sister with autism have an increased risk of autism, which means the condition is hereditary (cf. Brock et al. 2006:10). Canavan (2016:12) states that there is common consensus that autism starts to develop mid-way during pregnancy. Nevertheless, calamities such as traffic accidents may cause the brain damage which will eventually lead to the inception of autistic traits and behaviors. All in all, autism is a disorder of the brain system with genetic traits.

Autism is a multifaceted condition. Duran (2006:149) explains that today the umbrella term ASD is used to exemplify the scope, diversity and degree of disability that exists within autism. According to Hannell (2006:19), "autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3, that adversely affects a child's educational performance". Then again, Duran (2006:149) and Chez (2008:32) present that some of the most common symptoms related to autism are inadequacy in social interactions, impaired

communication and repetitive or stereotypic manners with great variety depending on the person. Not all people with autism share all these three-domain symptoms of autism but instead may have, for example, two of the above mentioned. Duran (2006:149) clarifies that the term Pervasive developmental disorder (abbreviated PPDs) was also introduced to include people who have certain autism-related deficits but who do not have all the three common traits of autistic behavior. Canavan (2016:6) and Hannell (2006:24) incorporate the following conditions in PPDs:

- Autism spectrum disorder
- Classic autism, also known as Kanner syndrome or Low-functioning autism
- High-functioning autism (HFA)
- Childhood autism
- Early infantile autism
- Atypical autism
- Asperger syndrome (AS)
- Semantic pragmatic disorder (SPD)
- Pathological demand avoidance syndrome (PDA)
- Retts syndrome
- Tourette syndrome
- Pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) – this often develops into autism or AS later in life, or a child with autism may improve and be re-diagnosed with PDD-NOS.

Hence, despite some common characteristics, autism spectrum disorders have significant individual variation in their symptoms.

Janzen (1996:8, 9) and Hannell (2006:24) list various symptoms and features of autism:

Language and communication
Seldom starts communication
May have little or no speech or, alternatively, may be rather verbal
Disordered and unusual language
Repeats or echoes words and phrases (echolalia)
Turn taking in conversation is very limited or nonexistent
Seems not to comprehend word meanings
Comprehends and uses words literally
Failure to develop early language skills

Relating to people and the environment
Is unresponsive
Eye contact can be very limited or fleeting
Difficulties in interacting with peers or adults
Seems satisfied when left alone
Play is repetitive
Inflexible interests and ways of doing things

Strong adherence to routines and is distressed by or resists changes
Develops stiff routines
Failure to develop normal socialization starting from preschool years

Responses to sensory stimuli
Is oversensitive to sound
Unusual physical mannerism: rocking, hand flapping and flicking of fingers or objects before eyes
General movements (walking, running, etc.) may be poorly coordinated or clumsy
Pulls away when touched
Strongly avoids certain food items, clothing, etc.
Is either very active or very inactive
May spin, whirl, bite wrist, bang head

Developmental discrepancies
Skills are either very good or very behind average
Learner's skills are out of normal sequence
Cognitive disabilities
Exceptional talents to e.g. remember dates or do complicated mental arithmetic
Is very good with puzzles, pegs, etc., but is very poor at following instructions
Echoed speech is fluent whereas self-generated speech is dysfluent
Is capable of doing things sometimes, but not at other times

Thus, there are various common symptoms and characteristics related to autism spectrum disorders.

There is also debate on whether Asperger syndrome is a condition of its own or part of ASD. Nowadays it can be seen as a synonym for high-functioning (or high-level, cf. LePage 2014:2) autism and therefore it should be introduced in this study as well. Asperger syndrome was named after an Austrian psychiatrist Hans Asperger in the year 1944, but it was not until the year 1992 when Asperger syndrome was added to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) of the World Health Organization (WHO) (Canavan 2016:11-12). Two years later it was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Nonetheless, Asperger syndrome was later, in 2013, taken out of the DSM-5 and substituted by ASD. What primarily differentiates autism from Asperger syndrome is that there is no developmental delay present in Asperger syndrome as in the case of autism. Hence, students with Asperger syndrome may even be academically ahead of their colleagues in reading and language, for example, in elementary school in particular. Moreover, Hannell (2006:25) underscores that the development of language skills differentiates autistic

students from students with Asperger syndrome: whereas the former have clear language impairments, the latter be well-developed language-wise but may exhibit insufficiencies in their nonverbal and sensory inference. There is still debate, however, on whether Asperger syndrome should nevertheless be categorized as an individual condition different from ASD.

Despite the fact that autism cannot be fully cured, many forms of treatment and intervention exist to influence the condition. Canavan (2016:12) and Lim (2011:14) point out that autism can be treated via various therapies, such as music, speech and occupational therapy, but it cannot be healed by the means of medical treatment or therapeutic intervention. However, Canavan (2016:12) accentuates that it is important to bear in mind that autism is not a mental sickness, but instead a disorder of the brain system. Autism cannot therefore be completely healed by the means of medication but instead it can be treated and alleviated through various therapies and medicines.

2.2 Diagnosing autism

Autism can be diagnosed at a relatively early age although this is not always the case. Canavan (2016:13) explains that from the age of 18 months onwards, children may be diagnosed with autism using ChAT, in other words, Checklist for Autism in Toddlers. Several individuals with Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism (or mild autism, cf. Hannell 2006:24) get an official diagnosis between the ages of five and nine but others only later depending on the onset of its symptoms. Some, however, may never be diagnosed and are merely thought to be shy, unsocial or odd. On the other hand, Hannell (2006:24) indicates that autism is generally diagnosed during the years of preschool. Canavan (2016:13) concludes that the diagnosis of autism in a child can, thus, be a long and winding process that can take a number of years due to its complexity and overlap and coexistence with other conditions such as ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), dyspraxia and Tourette syndrome. Moreover, Canavan (2016:14) suggests that teachers may have a crucial role in the process of detecting and identifying autism in a student which may lead to the diagnosis of autism. However, it is important that teachers are sensitive and

careful with their assumptions, and they should always justify their interpretations. Even though there is an increasing amount of information on autism available and more and more people have become aware of it, some parents are not familiar with the phenomenon and may have difficulties with accepting the condition in the case of their own child. In brief, although the diagnosis process of autism can be time-consuming, teachers as well as various checklists can help to detect and identify the condition at a relatively early stage.

The number of children diagnosed with ASD is continually on the rise. Walsh (2011:7) describes how the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have stated that in the United States of America in every 110 new-born babies there is one person with autism. Janzen (1996:7) is more moderate in her estimations and claims that merely 15 to 20 newborn babies in 10,000 births will become autistic. Walsh (2011:7) continues illustrating that as many students with ASD often shine in one specific area of interest, such as in mathematics or physics, teachers at different universities around the USA have noticed an increase in the number of students with ASD in their classes. For example, in 2006, out of the 282 freshmen of an American university, 12 people, that is, 4,25% were diagnosed with ASD the same fall. Moreover, Ribble (2011:16) explicates that the dramatic increase of autism is highlighted in the data published in 2003 which revealed that in the course of two years, from 2001 to 2002, the number of people diagnosed with autism had increased by 31%. Frith (2008:39) estimates that the total number of autism diagnoses has augmented by 172% since the 1990s. Brock et al. (2006:1) are even bolder by estimating a 600% rise in the number of autistic students in the USA, "from 22,664 in 1994 to 141,022 in 2003". Debbaudt (2002:16) and Brock et al. (2006:1) also confirm a radical upsurge in autism diagnoses since the 1990s. Whereas the old approximation of CDC was that four or five people in a group of 10,000 had autism, the more recent estimates show the amount to be one autistic person in every 166 people, or one in every 500 according to more moderate estimations. To illustrate the point, out of the almost 324 million Americans today (World

Factbook 2017), approximately 1,5 million have ASD. The continual increase in autism diagnoses seems to be the tendency in Europe, too.

There are various reasons behind the steep rise in autism cases. Canavan (2016:12) and Brock et al. (2006:1) reveal that the visible statistical increase in the number of people with autism today can be explained by the following factors: developments and extensions in diagnostics (to include all individuals on the autism spectrum), larger populations, decreases in child mortality rates, and the environment. Despite still being a relatively rare condition (cf. Janzen 1996:6), the studies and statistics demonstrate a general and striking increase in autism diagnoses particularly in the past three decades. Brock et al. (2006:1) conclude that today's teachers are therefore more likely to encounter learners with ASD than before.

Autism seems to be more common in males than in females. Canavan (2016:15) presents that according to statistics, merely one in four people with autism are female. However, there is debate on the issue since it is also acknowledged that girls are more capable of hiding or masking the condition. For example, they are more prone to succumb into an imaginary world with imaginary friends than boys, and this habit is seen more acceptable and common in females. Additionally, other conditions such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders may cloak an underlying condition of the autism spectrum. According to other estimates it is thought that in fact one in every two autists would be of female sex. All things considered, there are fewer girls than boys diagnosed with autism.

2.3 Autism and the brain

Autism in largely connected with brain activity. Canavan (2016:6) illuminates that the majority of ASD are hidden disabilities which are caused by the way the brain is formed and how it reacts to different stimuli. There is continuous research carried out into autism with novel findings being made often. Canavan (2016:6) and Brock et al. (2006:17) point out that it has been found that people with autism have larger-sized brains compared to the mean average, and that

their brains have higher quantities of grey and white matter. According to Canavan (2016:6), grey matter has to do with information processing and extraction from sensory organs and therefore is linked to muscle control, feelings, and memory. Then again, it is the white matter that transfers information around the brain via electric and chemical activity. Recent studies show that people with ASD have more neural pathways to transmit information around the brain but these are not coordinated or they lack a sufficient amount of white matter to connect the neural pathways of the brain. In addition, it may also be that there is simply too much information coming into the brain and that the brain is not able to process the data properly, which leads to an overload. This can explain, for example, why people with autism may get easily distracted or find it difficult to maintain focus while engaged in social interaction: there may be a flood of visual and aural information too excessive to take in. Losing focus is a defense mechanism or strategy to prevent information overload. Hence, people with autism have larger-sized brains with unequal proportions of grey and white matter which affects their information processing and overall behavior.

Frith (2008:52) and Janzen (1996:5) classify autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder that influences the brain's information processes. Due to the differences in their brain, people with autism have a special kind of information processing that has an effect on the following areas listed by Canavan (2016:7):

Social interaction
Emotional recognition and regulation
Impulse suppression
Language and processing – input and output
Fine and gross motor skills
Planning and organization
Attention, short-term memory
The ability to be flexible
Sensory regulation

Moreover, Canavan (2016:7) describes that the brain of an autistic person works in a distinct manner compared to an average person. Metaphorically speaking, it may take several detours, which undoubtedly can prolong the journey, for the brain to arrive at point B (solution) from point A (question or problem) in the

pathway of information processing. However, as grey and white matter are unequally distributed in the brain of an autistic person, this can also lead to shortcuts from starting point A to conclusion B, which can be manifested, for example, in extraordinary skills in mathematics, photographic memory and languages. Hence, the brain's information processing system is affected by autism with milder or more severe manifestations in various skills.

Brain abnormalities can be detected in different conducts. For example, Canavan (2016:8) clarifies that lack of inhibition and impulse control are characteristic to many people with autism and this is due to the underconnectivity between the different parts of the brain. Canavan (2016:8, 9) explicates that this deficiency may manifest in inappropriate behavior, narrow spheres of interest, urge for a firm daily routine, language processing issues (including literal, word-for-word interpretations), challenges in various skills of organization, and absence of Theory of Mind (cf. Mann 2011:50), the ability to predict what the other person thinks and or what are his/her intentions. Additionally, Canavan (2016:9) explains that due to the dysfunction in the brain's frontal lobes, an autistic person's ability to organize him/herself and manage difficult cognitive tasks becomes restricted. This dysfunction leads to issues such as poor working memory, inability to stay attentive, and problems in starting, maintaining and impeding actions. Furthermore, Canavan (2016:10) mentions that because of these deficiencies a student with autism may view other people as alien to him/herself or (s)he may feel like being in constant danger and fright as (s)he is unable to make predictions on the course of future events – particularly those ones which somehow deviate from the daily routine. In brief, an autistic individual's brain dysfunctions may play a major role on his/her daily operations.

2.4 Autism, communication and social skills

Communication is a multifaceted phenomenon. Dyrbjerg, Vedel and Pedersen (2007:81) explain that in communication two or more people exchange signs. It is said that most of human communication is nonverbal, that is, that we communicate primarily through different signs such as hand gestures, voice

expressions, body language, eye contact and tone of voice. People with autism, particularly those who are not able to express themselves verbally, tend to have difficulties in putting across their message and stating their needs and desires. For example, an autistic child may not be able to express thirst, hunger or need to use the bathroom, which means that the child is totally dependent upon the adult's interpretations of the child's state. Even high-functioning autists who can speak may still find it challenging to convey their needs to another person. Hence, when aural and verbal channels of communication may pose significant issues for some people with autism, the use of the visual channel is highlighted and becomes of great use. The use of pictures is a beneficial and helpful way for many people with autism to express their needs and communicating them to another person. However, for some autists and particularly those learning the initial steps of visual communication, the use of two very distinct images can be a useful tool in order to teach the person to distinguish and choose between two options. All in all, communication is much more than an exchange of verbally uttered words and this is highlighted in autism education in which various signs are taken advantage of in order to communicate reciprocally with different autistic individuals.

There are various ways for autistic people to communicate even if they lack the ability to produce verbal output. Duran (2016:151) stresses that functionality plays an important role when helping students with autism to communicate. It is advisable that these students learn functional information when learning to communicate. In functional communication the student should be able to use the vocabulary, grammar and other language material already found in the different environments the student interacts in. Further, functional refers to the fact that the student is instructed in the specific context of the environment in question. To illustrate the point, a young student with autism could point at the picture of food to indicate that (s)he is hungry. Which vocabulary should be focused on depends on the environment and the students' needs in that particular environment. For instance, if learning to do a job, the student will be provided with vocabulary and inventory to support him/her in that particular task. If the student is unable to get his/her message across verbally, (s)he can be

provided with pictures or icons to help him/her deliver the message. Duran (2016:157) exemplifies that it is highly advisable to include as much meaningful and functional communication and tasks for the autistic students as possible in order to prevent inappropriate comportment since inactivity is one of the primary reasons leading to inapt behavior. Thus, the functional use of language in meaningful communication is an important part of the communication strategies employed with and used by autistic students.

As visually inclined people, many people with autism operate via various images. Some people with autism carry a picture booklet through which and its various icons they can communicate. Many of these booklets utilize the so-called PECS or Picture Exchange Communication System (Duran 2016:151). PECS is also in use in various special education classes although not necessarily in booklet form but as individual adhesive pieces which then are used to build and show the daily schedule of the course of events, for example (Picture Exchange Communication System 2017). Duran (2016:152) underlines that the use of PECS with people with autism has been deemed successful. PECS were originally created to meet the functional communication needs of people with autism. Through the use of these images provided by PECS, people with autism are encouraged to seize meaningful communication by prompting them to start a request for a desired outcome. A student could form a sentence by selecting or pointing out at different words or images: "I", "want", "to draw", for example. The student can also be asked to answer various genuine or fact-based questions via PECS and his/her replies can be corrected if necessary. Each PECS image usually contains both text and picture of the particular word in question. Duran (2016:152) concludes that PECS employs behavior analysis strategies and a functional communication approach through which it endeavors to instruct meaningful communication. In brief, PECS is one essential visual channel of communication through which students with autism can understand and create messages of their own.

Other forms of nonverbal communication for autistic people are available too. LePage (2014:169) observes that students with autism perform better in

assignments involving nonverbal language than verbal language and communication. Language intense exercises might pose a problem, particularly if they include heavy use of synonymous words or pronouns, for example, which are generally more challenging for students with autism to grasp. Duran (2016:152) adds that in addition to PECS symbols, nonverbal people with autism may communicate via signs including hand gestures, pictures and so-called baby sign language or supportive sign language. This form of nonverbal communication is referred to as total or simultaneous communication. Duran (2016:153) points out that teachers of students with autism advise that autistic students are taught more than just one form of communication since there might, and probably will, be situations in which the other person is not familiar with a particular form of communication. For instance, using supportive sign language and thus the employment of PECS symbols or equivalent can be of significant use for communication to take place. Furthermore, it is vital that parents or guardians are introduced, taught, trained and encouraged to use different forms of communication in order to communicate with their child in distinct contexts with a communicational strategy already familiar with that particular child. Walsh (2011:7) also argues that learning adequate communication skills is of utmost importance particularly for students with autism. There are, thus, different ways for autistic students to communicate nonverbally, and all people involved in autism education are advised to learn to cope with various forms of communication instead of resorting to merely one alternative.

In addition to language skills training, another vital area for people with autism is the sphere of social skills. Duran (2006:154) describes that it is because of the lack, deficit, oddity or inappropriateness in social skills that in many cases causes people with autism not to gain permanent job vacancies or long-lasting friendships. The knowledge and training received in the area of social skills will be of great use in the days to come of the autistic individual and may even have a positive effect on his/her job prospects. However, the social skills acquisition dilemma becomes even more substantial and critical in adolescence with all the physical changes taking place in the body at the same time. Duran

(2006:154) and Farrell (2006:33) suggest that role play can be utilized to demonstrate, for example, proper grammar for practice or to teach an individual with autism social interaction skills and how to apply them in an appropriate and socially acceptable manner in distinct contexts. Duran (2006:154) continues that yet another important social skill for an autistic person in particular to learn is not to follow strangers no matter how eagerly and how kindly they would be inviting the disabled individual to come with him/her. Parents or guardians are a very helpful source for teachers to learn about their students' social skills and behavior and how to influence them. The importance of parent-teacher communication is also highlighted by Hannell (2006:27). Canavan (2016:16) also puts emphasis on the importance of parents who are specialists in their knowledge of their child with autism. They are a valuable resource and support group whose knowledge, skills and thoughts should be taken into account. All in all, it is crucially important to incorporate the practice and development of various social skills into the curriculum of students with autism.

Autistic people experience issues related to their language use, cognition, behavior, and social conduct. Ribble (2011:24) illustrates that language-wise people with autism may excel in grammar and vocabulary but their utterances may be repetitive. Moreover, cognitive-wise many people with autism may be obsessed in one specific topic and thus might show problems with following the teaching or partaking in activities other than their fixation. In these cases a teacher and/or school assistant can help the student to gain and maintain focus in the actual content of the lesson by assuring that the student will not get a chance to fall into his/her own reality by, for example, neglecting the students' inquiries on the topic of his/her interest. Furthermore, autistic students have a tendency of being capable of working with concrete concepts, but issues like analysis or abstract thinking which deviates from the concrete world can be too challenging a task. Then again behavior-wise students with autism may have social awareness, but may not be able to act accordingly if, for instance, they misbehave and, after the teacher's intervention, are asked to change their conduct. Further, in social interaction, an autistic person is usually unable to

recognize the signs around him if, for example, people think that they are dull or talk too much about themselves or a topic far from the sphere of interest and connectivity of the other members engaged in the social interaction in question. Their understanding of what is socially acceptable is therefore limited. All in all, people with autism have many capabilities but they do not always possess sensitivity in social interactions which may lead to various mishaps and confusion.

According to Dyrbjerg et al. (2007:91), people with autism generally may find the following aspects of communication and social interaction challenging:

> Sharing attention
> Imitating
> Sustaining a dialogue
> Following a story or an idea and building on it
> Taking turns and being able to wait for your next turn
> Adapting to others
> Giving and receiving something from others

However, Dyrbjerg et al. (2007:91) stress that regardless of the fact that people with autism may not have all of these social abilities, it does not mean necessarily that they could not have a good time being with other people around them.

2.5 Autism and education

Educating an autistic child begins at early childhood. Duran (2016:155) highlights that it is extremely important to start influencing an autistic person's social and behavioral skills at as early a stage as possible since, as time goes by, the work becomes more challenging, particularly when reaching puberty during which it might already be too late to affect the individual and his/her behavior and code of conduct. Appropriate patterns of behavior are learnt before the teenage years. Aggression is one common way for an autistic adolescent to deal with issues and challenges, particularly if (s)he cannot express him/herself verbally (cf. LePage 2014:156). Thus, Duran (2016:155) advises that when facing an adolescent with autism it is helpful to bear in mind that it is vital to employ positive reinforcement whenever possible. This is also

encouraged by Farrell (2006:34). Duran (2006:155) explains that in order to use the strategy of positive reinforcement, the instructor must first find out what the autistic student likes whether it is a food item, an object, or an activity such as drawing or listening to music. Then, if the student will follow the rules and complete the task as planned, the instructor can reward the student with one of the things or doings (s)he likes and, thus, positively support and give instant feedback on the successful completion of a given task. Duran (2016:158) summarizes that all forms of positive behavior interventions and communication are welcome and should primarily be borne in mind when encountering a student with autism. It is therefore crucial to support an autistic child's behavioral and social skills starting from an early age and particularly by the means of positive reinforcement.

The years of compulsory education pose a challenge to individuals with autism. According to LePage (2014:155), elementary school and junior high school are the most problematic years of schooling. In junior high school, due to the various changes that are taking place in a growing individual, there may be sudden and unexpected manifestations of the disorder in the behavior of the youngster. This is also the case for students with autism who, amidst the teenage years in particular, may find it difficult to cope with all the occurring physiological changes and may therefore react in abrupt ways in new social situations or challenges. Some autistic children lack self-control, cannot contain impulses and become verbally or physically aggressive while others become very anxious and fearful (LePage 2014:156). One of the reasons behind the emergence of such behavior is the inability to express one's feelings. Each of these behavior traits is merely one way of trying to handle the world and the changes taking places in one's body or, simply, sudden changes and surprises in the daily routine that may startle the fixed mind of an individual with autism. Hannell (2006:27) urges that the whole learning environment should be organized "so that there is as much security, predictability, and consistency as possible" and that changes are made known in little steps. Janzen (1996:8) emphasizes familiarity, too. LePage (2014:156) concludes that all kinds of predicaments in school work may also lead to unpredictable anxiety in students

with ASD. The various physiological and socioemotional changes that take place during the years of comprehensive schooling are particularly challenging for students with ASD.

The early years of schooling in particular have different emphases in autism education. LePage (2014:157) underlines that in elementary school, the focus in autism education is not primarily on academic issues, but more on practical everyday life issues and skills that are being learnt and that will affect the autistic students' happiness and independence in their future. Such skills are, for example, that of getting dressed, eating with a knife and a fork, using the bathroom, tying shoelaces and other practicalities which many times involve motor hand-eye coordination in which some children with autism have difficulties. Moreover, Hannell (2006:27) urges:

> Ensure that the student's program includes as much life skills experience as possible. Becoming familiar with the outside environment, using public transportation, visiting public places, accessing community facilities, and being able to participate in normal community activities will be an important part of the student's overall personal development.

Then again, according to LePage (2014: 173), "in elementary school, the goal is to help a child learn about how to make friends, to play and to socialize". This should also be taken into account in the case of students with autism. Autism education therefore accentuates the learning of various practical and social skills required in everyday life.

Academic studies become more prominent the older the autistic student gets. LePage (2014:179) illustrates that academic skills begin to become more and more pronounced in the middle and junior high school years which may pose problems to an autistic student already struggling with organizational skills such as doing homework. Homework, in fact, is an area which may cause serious headaches for students with autism, their parents and their teachers alike. Some people with autism can be very stubborn and might have an idea that school should not be part of their leisure time spent at home in any way and therefore homework can cause them anxiety, sadness and frustration. LePage (2014:180) notes that many children with autism have already

undergone their most serious behavioral issues before entering middle school which makes it easier for them to concentrate on academic subjects and socializing with other students. Thus, older autistic students are generally more capable of concentrating on their academic studies.

Building a personal learning plan is of utmost importance in autism education. Ribble (2011:27) indicates that creating a learning plan for each and every student with autism is a very useful tool to monitor and evaluate the student's learning progress and gain insights into his/her strengths and weaknesses as well as the learning and skill areas which necessitate more attention. An Individual Plan Relative to Arrangement of Instruction (Henkilökohtainen opetuksen järjestämistä koskeva suunnitelma, HOJKS, in Finnish) is widely exploited in numerous Finnish schools to cater for students with various special needs. The plan is constructed cooperatively with the teacher(s) and the care-givers. Moreover, the plan is devised for every single school subject in which some form of special support is required. However, in the case of seriously disabled students, the plan is created for the particular student's sphere of operations. The student's class teacher or special education teacher therefore is chiefly responsible for devising the plan and monitoring its outcomes. In addition to the syllabi, pedagogical assessment is employed when designing the plan, and the plan itself is subject to change according to the alterations in the particular student's studies, needs, and educational prospects. (HOJKS 2016.) Hence, education is personalized according to students' academic and educational skills and necessities. For example, in the schools where the study was carried out, the effects of a HOJKS could be seen in the fact that some junior high school autistic students were still using elementary school EFL material in accordance with their proficiency and needs at the time. In brief, mapping an individual learning plan such as that of a HOJKS in Finland is highly advisable for all students with ASD to efficiently and productively support their learning.

Autism education largely focuses on moving from dependency to independency. Duran (2016:158) lays emphasis on the sphere of independent

skill training as one of the most important areas in the education process of students with autism. It is vital to encourage and teach students to be as active and work as independently as possible since these skills are of great use in adulthood. What is crucial here is to be committed, consistent and relentless in positive reinforcement which each time guides and directs the student towards a desired way of doing things. Parents can offer great help in order to outline the needs of the autistic individual and to rank them in the order of their importance. For example, learning how to wash hands every time after using the bathroom, could form part of the highly-ranked essential skills that the parents and the teacher find useful for the student to learn for his/her independence and self-help. LePage (2014:166) points out the role of images, and notes that while younger high-functioning students with autism necessitate more the use of pictures, signs and symbols, older students often can process and cope with written information, too. In addition, since many students with autism have the habit of asking several questions, presenting information in a visual form, such as through the use of calendars or schedules of activities, will probably diminish the number of questions that need to be asked and therefore help students with autism become more independent, look for answers in the visual environment by themselves and then act independently upon those visual messages. Hence, all the influential people in an autistic individual's life should follow the principle of independency and support the individual to acquire such mindset.

Each autistic student should be dealt with individually. Ribble (2011:25, 26) points out that due to the diverse and multifaceted nature of autism there is no one golden way or perfect method that could work as a magical key for all students with autism and all encounters with them. Thus, help must be targeted and tailored for each individual separately. Ribble (2011:19) sums up that it is vital to treat every single student with autism as an individual with his/her own unique needs, necessities and patterns of saying and doing things. As autism is such a versatile phenomenon, a teacher cannot possibly instruct a class of students with ASD as one homogenic group but rather as individuals. This is reflected, for example, in the making of the daily and weekly schedules

and timetables for each and every student with ASD separately to suit his/her schooling and development the best way possible. Canavan (2016:10) concludes that being aware of the various deficiencies will help teachers, school assistants and other educational professionals encounter and manage students with ASD and therefore support their learning in a more effective, precise and student-friendly manner. In spite of the challenges that the diversity of autism entails, educational professionals should endeavor to encounter each autistic student individually in a quest to support his/her development in the most adequate fashion.

It is essential to understand why an autistic student behaves the way (s)he behaves. LePage (2014:161) notifies that even gifted students with autism may have major behavioral problems although this is not always the case. Duran (2016:156) illustrates that a student's disobedience towards classroom rules, teachers' or school assistants' orders, or towards the completion of a given task can be tackled with carrying out a behavioral contract with the student in question. In the process, the teacher pursues finding the student's reasons and logic behind his/her misconduct or lack of interest in the completion of an activity. The employment of pictures as visual aids is relevant to help the student recognize and begin to understand his/her behavior in addition to realizing also the benefits of complying with the rules and regulations of the classroom. Duran (2016:157) expounds that it is also important to ask students with autism about their conduct, particularly about such comportment that can be deemed uncommon, strange, or questionable. Repetition of certain picked up words or phrases over again or what the other person has uttered (echolalia) that some people with autism may exhibit could serve as an example (cf. Hannell 2006:24). Through positive communication, teachers, other professionals and other students can become aware of the reasons behind various strange behavioral manifestations and therefore begin to understand autistic students and their behavior better.

Many autistic students tend to view their teachers as sources and examples of perfect knowledge and know-how. Canavan (2016:9) explains that students

with ASD do not possess a regular respect for authority. They assume that a teacher, for example, knows his/her subject excellently and does not err. Hence, students with ASD are very alert in spotting and pointing out mistakes. Moreover, a teacher must be careful with his/her choice of words to ask a question or to address a student with autism. For instance, abstract questions or using words with idiomatic or double meaning may cause confusion as students with autism tend to view the world and language concretely and thus will answer honestly and literally, even if it were funny or socially inappropriate. Then again, LePage (2014:157) points out that even though students with autism may find it challenging to connect with their peers (or in some cases they become obsessed and fixated in certain individuals who they consider being the "right" persons), on the other hand, they may have no difficulties in approaching adults and coming along with them. This should be seen as more of an asset than a weakness. Moreover, LePage (2014:178) and Hannell (2006:19, 24, 27) indicate that since autists tend to be challenged by changes, unexpected ones above all, the less changes there are to the members of the staff involved in autism education, particularly the homeroom teacher, the better. However, some autists are more adaptable to changes than others. In brief, teachers and other adults alike have a very influential role in the life of an autistic individual and therefore they should be responsible and sensitive when dealing with students with autism.

Nevertheless, the teachers are not the only influential people involved in the education process of an autistic child. Duran (2016:156) exhorts that it is vital to organize meetings with the student's parents or care-givers since they are the most vital support network for the child and they can share useful information concerning their son/daughter. Maintaining frequent and positive communication between the teacher and the parents is more than important for better and more congruent schooling and instruction to take place. In this arena, various strategies can be discussed, ideas and views shared, and mutual decisions about the plan of actions agreed upon. Duran (2016:157) mentions that parents should also be fully aware of the various intervention strategies at play in the classroom with their son/daughter. Furthermore, it is

recommendable not only to have a clear strategy for the realization of the teaching for the class with students with autism but also to have literature on it available for the school assistants, other teachers and other members of the staff. Thus, both the teacher and his/her colleagues will be more mindful of the theory and practice carried out with students with ASD. Brock et al. (2006:2, 3) urge that all school professionals ought to be aware of the phenomenon and have the latest information concerning autism in order to speed up and particularize its early identification process in a school setting. Additionally, it is a convenient idea to spread the news to the general public and rouse their awareness of the codes of conduct that help to encounter a person with autism in a supportive manner.

All people in relation to an autistic child's life should be aware of his/her condition, at least to some extent. Duran (2016:157) explicates that along with parents, it is essential to create and maintain positive relationships and communication between the teacher, assistants and other professionals who are in the autistic student's sphere of influence. Meeting up on a regular basis to discuss the student's progress is significant in order to gain insights on or discoveries of the strategies that have been deemed successful and which ones less successful. In addition to members of the staff, all the other students should be aware of students with autism. If, for example, there exists a general education school with special education classes designated for students with autism, it is important that the general education students will become acquainted with their colleagues in special education classes and vice versa. Raising awareness not solely by pouring out information but also through genuine encounters and interaction is a way to shatter down prejudices, false assumptions and judgments. This can occur by the means of inclusion, which pursues creating a school open to anyone and everyone, partial or full class integration or simply via social interaction which already takes place if students with autism have lunch in the same space with students of general education classes or if they attend a mutual morning opening held at the school gym, for example. LePage (2014:177) underlines that schools should welcome students with autism and that all their staff ought to have an inclusive mindset. Brock et

al. (2006:3) point out the contemporary tendency of moving into more and more inclusive settings with the integration of general and special education. It is therefore advisable to rouse autism awareness in all of the contexts in which an autistic child operates with the goal of creating a setting which would be as inclusive as possible for all its different members.

Integration forms a part of the studies of some autistic students. LePage (2014:170) reports that students with high-functioning autism tend to be wholly or partially integrated into general education classes throughout their years of schooling. Thus, they have special needs but socially and intellectually they belong to the sphere of general education. For example, if a student with autism has his/her strengths in mathematics or is particularly gifted in a foreign language, this student can be encouraged to attend the lessons of that particular school subject with the students of general education. On the other hand, LePage (2014:178) underscores also that for a student with autism, it is important that there is a homeroom or home class in which (s)he can be and connect with other autistic students.

Group and pair work is an essential ingredient of contemporary education, particularly in language learning and teaching. LePage (2014:163) points out that while group and cooperative work is largely seen as a beneficial and positive alternative to teacher-lead instruction, it is important to bear certain things in mind when using group work with students with ASD. First of all, LePage (2014:164) underlines that the autistic student should not always be the one on the receiving end of help but (s)he should be given opportunities to show and excel in his/her strengths. Second, the teacher should ensure that the autistic student will not get stuck in a certain procedure, such as cutting a picture for a group project, but will be actively involved in various other areas of group work. Third, in an integrated class comprising students of general education and special education, there lingers a threat that the student with special needs will be an outcast in activities consisting of cooperative work. Hence, the teacher should make sure that every single one can join a group and be an active member of it. Fourth, LePage (2014:166) insists that the teacher and

other group members ought to give the student with autism more time to think him/herself. Further, a high-functioning student with autism will not be satisfied with the easy chores, such as merely cutting out pictures, while the other group members do the fun part of devising a story, for instance. Finally, LePage (2014:165) concludes that all kinds of positive reinforcement is welcomed particularly in situations in which a student exhibits performance beyond his/her skill levels. Group and pair work should therefore also be encouraged in autism education and particularly in an integration setting, but bearing in mind certain guiding principles.

Computers, mobile phones, tablets, and other electronic gadgets along with the Internet can be successfully exploited in autism education. LePage (2014:163, 169) describes that students with autism can spend hours searching for information on a topic of their interest. It is therefore crucially important to instruct them in the use of the computer, the Internet, and the keyboard right from the beginning. Being able to use a computer and do valid searches on the Internet are assets in the overall education process of an individual with autism. Learning to use the mouse and the keyboard can also be of excellent help in middle and high school studies where taking notes becomes more relevant. LePage (2014:170) also points out that some children with autism may demonstrate great skills in drawing and doing art using a computer, which is why such skills should be reinforced, too.

In addition to all the learning and teaching that occurs in the classroom, recess times must be borne in mind, too. LePage (2014:173) highlights that recesses are an important part of autistic students' daily schedule and they help them to escape the possible frustration involved in school work. However, parents are very keen on knowing what their son or daughter with autism does during recess times. Parents are, in general, very displeased if they find out that their child is not engaged in any kind of social interaction with other students but are solely indulged in their own world and thoughts (cf. LePage 2014:162, 163, Ribble 2011:18 and Dyrbjerg et al. 2007:15), perhaps even talking to themselves in an isolated spot making them alien to the rest of the students of

the school. Hannell (2006:27) underscores that it is important to encourage students with autism into social situations involving play and communication with their peers, whether they are students of special or general education, but under adult supervision. Recesses are a communal activity and an open arena for social integration and interaction between general education students, students with special needs, and adults. In addition, it is also relevant to provide autistic students with enough social support during their recesses and integration lessons classes alike. Hence, in spite of being times of freedom from academic duties, recesses can also be taken advantage of in autism education to support the social integration of autistic students into the overall school context.

In higher education the challenges of students with ASD can become pronounced. Walsh (2011:8) indicates that the rapid and sudden increase in the number of students with ASD has also meant that in many cases there is not enough literature, research, resources or informative and/or practical courses available for the public and educational professionals to help them encounter and deal with students with ASD. This dilemma becomes even more apparent in the sphere of third-degree studies where there are no classes designated specifically for students with ASD unlike in various elementary and high schools, at least in Finland.

Still a lot of research, study and interpretation is needed in order to support autistic students the best ways possible. Ribble (2011:25, 26) mentions that naturally there are some strategies that generally work better for students with autism than others. In the pursuit of finding the most suitable methods, the knowledge and first-hand experiences of an autistic child's multidisciplinary team (cf. Hannell 2006:26 and Lim 2011:14) including parents, guardians, teachers, pediatricians, behavior management specialists (such as psychiatrists and psychologists), social workers as well as speech, occupational and music therapists and other specialists come in very helpful. It is vital to share the information and experience available and be in regular contact with the ones affecting the life and studies of the autistic student. Moreover, having the chance of working one-on-one with a student with autism is preferable. In brief,

teachers must work actively and cooperatively with other specialists, such as parents, school assistants and therapists, involved in the autistic student's life in order to achieve the best results.

2.6 Assets of an individual with autism in an educational context

Before addressing the issues that many students with high-functioning autism have, it is useful to introduce the various assets and strengths they commonly share as depicted by Canavan (2016:5):

- They are loyal and socially optimistic: they will persevere with a friendship, even if let down.
- They are free from prejudice and accept people at face value.
- Contrary to popular belief, they are very emphatic and may surprise you with their insight. (They just don't know what to do with another person's feelings.)
- They will tell you what they really feel and think about something rather than what they think you want to hear.
- When they ask a question – they want an honest answer to it. There is no hidden motive behind it.
- They will tell the truth even if it means getting themselves in trouble.
- They rarely do something they know to be wrong, even when pressured.
- They have a strong sense of justice and neither fear nor favor.
- Their humor can be unique and unconventional.
- They love words, especially puns, and will make up their own jokes with them.
- They want to co-operate but often don't know how.
- If they enjoy a sport, they will train hard to be the best and are particularly good at individual sports.
- They have the ability to learn quickly and want to progress, especially if interested in the topic.
- When they start a task they want to do it perfectly.
- They have a good eye for detail and pick up mistakes.
- If it interests them, they can concentrate on a single task for a very long period of time.
- When they are interested or motivated in a task they will persevere with an extraordinary determination to finish.
- Their long-term memory is good, especially for childhood experiences, facts, figures, dates and film dialogue or audio recordings.
- They are creative, often insightful, and provide an original solution to a problem.
- Their spatial awareness can be quite remarkable – they are visual thinkers.
- They often have encyclopaedic knowledge of their special interest.
- Of average or above average intelligence, they have the potential to go on to university.

- They often have an interest or a talent for something: design, Japanese, quantum physics, art, music or computing – find out and nurture it.

Hence, in addition to all their other assets, autistic students may be particularly talented in some skills and subjects. Ribble (2011:23) observes that some students with ASD may excel in some academic subjects whereas they may have severe issues at accomplishing others. An autistic student may, for example, succeed in mathematics, foreign languages, or history, or in more practical subjects such as woodwork, visual arts, or handicrafts and, thus, (s)he may be integrated into the equivalent lessons in general education. Additionally, students with autism, high-functioning autists above all, can be particularly gifted in some areas, such as music or spatial perception, and therefore those gifts should be taken into account and reinforced (LePage 2014:161). However, despite their talents in certain skills, such as having an incredible photographic memory, such students tend not to operate up to their full potential. Nevertheless, students with autism possess many positive traits, skills and abilities that should be supported and reinforced in an educational context.

2.7 Issues of an individual with autism in an educational context

In spite of all the many strengths of an individual with autism, there are also various challenges that they face throughout their schooling. Many students with autism have a variety of learning difficulties many of which also reflect on their writing (Ribble 2011:16). Fixation in one area of interest or one specific topic is something that will significantly affect the autistic student's focus, and can be a particularly problematic feature in group work situations or written compositions if the student always resorts to writing merely about his/her fixation. It is therefore important to direct the student's focus and interest into other domains as well. Yet another issue for many people with autism is that it is difficult for them to concentrate in a task even in the level of a single sentence. The student may, for example, start with one topic, but abruptly be shifted into a totally new topic even before the end of the sentence, making the

whole message appear random and scattered. Fixation, limited interests and inability to maintain focus are some of the issues autistic students face at school and these challenges are highlighted in the case of writing. These issues will be discussed in more depth in the following paragraphs.

The educational professionals and other specialists involved in the life and studies of an autistic individual also face various challenges. Ribble (2011:18) indicates that a great challenge with students with autism is that they may have a wide array of different autism-related disorders and other learning difficulties. Some people with autism are also diagnosed with, for example, depression, dyslexia, epilepsy, hypermobility, ADHD, Obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD) and Tourette syndrome, which may disturb the educational context and its members, hence making it even more difficult for the student with autism to cope in the environment (see e.g. Canavan 2016:12, Walsh 2011:8 and Brock et al. 2006:3). Therefore there might not be enough qualified teachers and school assistants to meet the academic, social, emotional and other needs of autistic students, and to tackle their issues effectively in their daily life. Autism and all its related conditions can therefore pose serious issues for those working in autists' educational contexts.

Autistic students may face various hardships in their social interactions during their schooling even in daily encounters with different people. Ribble (2011:18) explains that a person with autism can be intellectually gifted, but may have certain non-academic behavior traits and psychosocial challenges which may have strong and atypical effects on the classroom environment and dynamics. For example, a student with autism might talk nonstop about him/herself and his/her interests without realizing that the other students are not keen on listening. Moreover, an autistic person might seem shy as (s)he usually does not establish direct eye contact, or show signs of incapability to respond or react to others' utterances and therefore fail to create dialogical social relationships and encounters. Furthermore, people with ASD may be poor at working or communicating in groups, showing empathy or managing a task on a larger scale such as writing a thesis (Walsh 2011:7). Similar issues exist

already in the early years of schooling. According to Ribble (2011:18), people with autism also tend to become perplexed, inattentive and even anxious in social interaction with others, or they might exhibit problems with understanding and following others' speech. However, Ribble (2011:19) also stresses that many students with autism do not have problems with hearing or recording audio input. Thus, all kinds of different social interactions with other people can trouble students with autism although they themselves may not be aware of the nature of the issues.

Many autistic people can be excellent imitators but they may find it difficult to engage in a certain action. Dyrbjerg et al. (2007:49) explain that people with autism usually learn by copying and imitating others. However, as they usually lack the skill of taking initiative, it is crucially important to support them as effectively as possible to develop this skill in them which will gradually lead to a more independent life without always having to resort to the help of others. In the pursuit of independence, it is important to let the student with autism gain as much positive experiences of independent work as possible so that they are encouraged to take pleasure in doing and completing the task without the continuous help of the teacher or the school assistant. Farrell (2006:33) highlights the role of the teacher as a modeler of correct examples of language use and a shaper who encourages the student to act and respond in a desirable manner and who praises the student for his/her efforts. Hence, the lack of self-direction is a stumbling stone for many autists and it should therefore be taken into consideration in autism education in order to make autistic students more independent and let them take advantage of their strengths such as imitation.

The ability to fix one's attention to what is necessary at each time is generally troublesome for people with autism. LePage (2014:162) stresses that concentration and maintaining focus can pose a significant issue in the academic studies of an autistic child. For example, shouting across the classroom to a student with autism is futile as (s)he will probably not be listening and following you. It is therefore crucial to find connection with the student and encounter him/her by making sure that (s)he is maintaining focus

on you and on what you are trying to say (LePage 2014:163). People with autism tend to be very capable of plunging into their own thoughts and their own world, and block input from the outside world.

Moreover, limited and obsessive spheres of interest as well as compulsive fears also form a part of the reality in which autistic people live. An autistic person may be obsessed with a fear or trauma which (s)he then frequently and repetitively comes back to or which (s)he endeavors to avoid at all cost, as in the case of adverse memories (LePage 2014:158, Canavan 2016:8). LePage (2014:159) elucidates that many people with autism develop obsessions in order to handle indefinite life situations and, for example, make life safer and more predictable, orderly, and structured. Obsessions and fascinations can, moreover, be things in life in which autists find sheer pleasure, enjoyment, and relaxation. Further, obsessions can be a tool to begin and maintain conversations. On the other hand, despite the positive and protective aspects of the formation of fascinations, their heavy, repetitive, and active manifestation in an autistic child's speech, for instance, may cause frustration in their peers and teachers alike. Therefore it is important to lay down limits and restrictions so that the student will not be able to constantly delve into the world of his/her obsessions (LePage 2014:160). LePage (2014:162) concludes that obsessions and fascinations can also be capitalized on and the teacher can opt for motivating the student via his/her passions such as devising various writing assignments or math problems in relation to his/her passions. In brief, obsessions may lead to challenges as well as triumphs in the education process of an autistic individual.

In relation to academic skills, writing poses particular challenges to many students with autism. Walsh (2011:8), Ribble (2011:24), and Farrell (2006:32) note that when it comes to writing exercises, it is generally recommended that the student with autism will be granted more time when completing such tasks, whether they form a part of an exam or not. Farrell (2006:32) adds the relevance of giving abundant examples, warm-up activities, pre-tutoring, post-lesson tutoring, over-learning and rote learning in form of repetitions to enhance the

autistic student's confidence and, thus, to reinforce his/her learning process. Alternatively, Ribble (2011:18) suggests that the autistic student could receive help from a note-taker from the specific group (s)he studies in. However, Walsh (2011:8) mentions that this does not necessarily always lead to accomplishments in the given assignments. Moreover, students with autism tend to have a very efficient and even extraordinary long-term memory but they may have severe problems with short-term memory (Ribble 2011:23). Hence, writing exercises may pose a major challenge for students with autism as writing greatly involves the use of short-term memory. LePage (2014:161) reveals that if a student with autism faces serious troubles in academic studies, this is usually reflected in his/her handwriting and overall comprehension. Writing should therefore be supported along with other academic skills.

In spite of all the possible threats and challenges in the learning processes of autistic students, Ribble (2011:20) underlines that as for people with dyslexia or who study English as a second language, individuals with autism are also capable of growing and improving both academically as well as in other life skills.

2.8 Autism and the visual channel

Ribble (2011:23) explicates that many of the subjects in which students with autism show signs of excellence involve the use of the visual channel as many autistic people have a very strong visual memory and capacity to process visual information, which explains the common employment of images and symbols in autism education. The visual channel is therefore a common strength that many autists share and it should be exploited in educational contexts, too.

Some autistic people have difficulties with following and understanding spoken language. Ribble (2011:28) and LePage (2014:161) explicate that some students with autism may have issues with processing auditory information and expressive language and therefore resorting solely to aural input will not achieve satisfactory results. Auditory processing is an area in which children with autism have a particular tendency of experiencing delays (LePage 2014:16).

Other such delayed areas include visual and verbal processing. On the other hand, many people with autism may be highly visually-oriented learners and thus will benefit from an environment and interaction in which visual images and signs are employed (Ribble 2011:28). However, those autistic students who, then again, are capable of processing auditory information or even have it as their primary style of learning, will not benefit from visual aids but instead from the auditory input and support in the form of repetitions, clarifications, and well-articulated and slow enough utterances, to mention a few (cf. Farrell 2006:32). Ribble (2011:28) clarifies that students in general education, too, have different learning styles through which they operate but these differences seem to be expanded in the case of autism. Farrell (2006:33) also welcomes all kinds of visual and auditory aids to support communication and understanding. Even though the visual channel is conventionally believed to be stronger for autistic people, the auditory channel along with all the other sensory channels should not be neglected but instead taken advantage of to tailor for each autistic individual separately.

The employment of images is not a direct fast lane to successful communication with an individual with autism but instead one must pay attention to the actual content of the pictures in use. Dyrbjerg et al. (2007:109) offer various practical hints and tips for the utilization of images in autism education. They highlight that whether the teacher opts for communicating via the use of visual aids such as photos, pictures, written notes, images, support cards, PECS symbols, drawings, physical items, or, as Farrell (2006:33) suggests, via sequenced, structured or pre-recorded instructions, what is crucial is that the information is being communicated clearly and succinctly to the student with autism. Dyrbjerg et al. (2007:109) conclude that in most cases less is more when delivering a message to an autistic person. Further, it is advisable to employ Velcro tape primarily or, alternatively, magnets for pictures and cards in order to be able to rearrange them swiftly and smoothly on the board, on the student's daily schedule or in his/her picture booklet, for example. This will help the student adapt to changes more easily. Additionally, the use of lamination for all kinds of pictures and symbols is highly recommendable as

they protect and prolong their use. Thus, the content and conciseness of images used in autism education is of priority target.

Pictures can also aid autistic students to concentrate. Dyrbjerg et al. (2007:15) elucidate that there are many students with autism who have difficulties in targeting and maintaining their attention and focus on a specific task and therefore a picture may help him/her to remember what (s)he was supposed to do. Once the student has completed the given exercise or completed a part of the daily routine, such as eaten lunch, then (s)he can stow that particular picture or flip it upside down to demonstrate that that particular action has been successfully carried out. Dyrbjerg et al. (2007:26) go on to illustrate that these pictures are usually placed visibly on the daily schedule, which also is beneficial, as it gives the student a wider picture of the whole day and its events. Additionally, some students may benefit from a "First" and "Then" continuum in which two consecutives actions are presented. This keeps the information concise and clear enough for the student with autism and prevents him/her from being overloaded with too much information and therefore losing focus. Hence, when used wisely and systematically, images can be of assistance for autistic students to stay attentive and to be more mindful of the on-going events.

2.9 English as a foreign language learning and teaching

Many challenges, solutions and recommendations that have been presented generally for autism education, are suitable also in language teaching. Thus, an EFL teacher for students with autism should not only be aware of the general guidelines of language teaching but also be mindful of certain principles of autism instruction and interaction. In the following paragraphs, the English language along with EFL learning and teaching will be discussed in brief and in general. In addition, connections to autistic students and autism education will be made.

Broughton (1980:1) illustrates that there are some four or five thousand languages spoken in the world and out of all of those it is English that is clearly

the most widely used language, although it is a runner-up to Chinese in the number of native speakers. However, English is spoken as a mother tongue in all continents, comprising clearly over 300 million native speakers, and, additionally, there are over 250 million second language speakers of English around the globe. Broughton (1980:6) goes on indicating that, in addition, English is spoken and taught as a foreign language in the rest of the world. In Finland it is compulsory to study English as a foreign language at some point, and this includes the sphere of special education and therefore autistic students, too, according to their abilities (cf. Finlex 1998). Broughton (1980:6) points out that although English is not necessarily needed to advance in studies or climb the occupational ladders, its role is becoming increasingly essential in the job markets and especially business world today.

Johnson (2013:4, 5) indicates that there are different motives why people desire to learn English as a foreign language. Some see it as an asset or even as a necessity to advance in professional life while others have the desire to use it as a lingua franca abroad and in international communication with people from different countries. English is therefore learned and used in order to, for example, communicate and connect with English-speaking people around the world, to read and follow news and books in English or to be able to get along on a holiday trip in a destination where English is used as a lingua franca (Broughton 1980:7). The fact is that there is not only one English that is spoken throughout the world but instead several Englishes. This is also reflected in EFL instruction: in many European countries, it is British English that is predominant in EFL classrooms and materials whereas in countries like Mexico and the Philippines it is American English that is most probably primarily employed. EFL learning and teaching has, thus, distinct features in different parts of the globe.

There are various reasons behind why English is generally taught at schools. Broughton (1980:9) observes that being able to be in contact with a foreign friend via the use of English is, naturally, a by-product of the whole EFL learning process but, overall, English, along with other school subjects, is an

important ingredient in the curriculum, which helps the student to become a more mature, contributory, and active member of a given society. Thus, it is also fundamental in the case of students with autism. Broughton (1980:10) adds that since language learning entails new culture, new vocabulary, new grammar systems and new views of the world, the foreign language learner will be able to conceptualize and grasp the reality around him/her through a broader and a more multifaceted way when (s)he views it through the lenses of different languages. Moreover, Broughton (1980:11) describes that even though this is true for all the languages, it is usually the language of a neighboring country or a world language, such as English and Spanish, that are more likely to be chosen and focused on. This phenomenon has led to an increasing number of time and other resources channeled into English instruction, more than into other school subjects.

There are many sorts of English learners. Johnson (2013:7) notes that there is a great number of individual differences in EFL learners with some excelling rather effortlessly while others stumbling in many areas of language learning. This is the case for autistic language learners, too. There are also people between the two extremes who can develop and cope with a foreign language at least to some extent (Johnson 2013:8). It should be borne in mind that one does not need to be intellectually gifted in order to learn a foreign language. However, certain methods of language learning should be intelligently followed to make the language learning process more fruitful. Students' attitudes towards and perceptions of the native speakers of a given foreign language can have an effect on his/her overall learning and motivation. Parental support and attitudes can play a major role in one's language learning and parents' influence can have both uplifting and downshifting impacts. In a school setting, the subject teacher of a foreign language can largely affect one's opinions about the target language (s)he is responsible for teaching. Thus, there are various factors at play which can affect an EFL learner's attitudes and overall motivation to learn English.

EFL teaching is largely concerned with the learning of the four language skills. Johnson (2013:278) explains that when teaching any given foreign language, teachers and students alike come across the four skill areas which are to be mastered. These skills are speaking (productive), listening (receptive), writing (productive), and reading (receptive). Even though some approaches to language learning and teaching have the idea of instructing each of these skills separately by, for example, organizing reading-only lessons or lessons merely focusing on the skill of spoken language, the view of the majority is to intertwine these different skills into teaching so that many of them, if not all, can be practiced during each lesson at least to some extent.

Moreover, language lessons tend to follow certain patterns. Autistic students benefit from structured lessons, which bring about a sense of security (cf. Hannell 2006:27 and Janzen 1996:8). Broughton (1980:46) describes that each language lesson consists of three procedures, which are: presentation stage of new material, practice stage of already known material, and test stage of new material. Some sort of practice counts for roughly 90% of lesson time. In general, new language material should be as seamlessly as possible woven into familiar knowledge of language in order to support effectively the learning process.

Error correction is something that each teacher must consider. Broughton (1980:47) reports that continual use of an erroneous language item can leave a permanent mark in one's language use. However, tolerating no mistakes in class can be very demotivating and create a tense, even fearful atmosphere in the language classroom, which can negatively affect sensitive autistic students in particular. On the other hand, the language that is presented should be error-free so that students are given correct examples of language use. All in all, motivating students is a fundamental principle, the corner stone of all teaching. There are thus various advantages and shortcomings involved in the amounts and ways of correcting students' mistakes.

Testing is a common phenomenon of all education, including EFL learning and teaching. Johnson (2013:301) urges all educational professionals to

understand the necessity and relevance of testing due to two clear factors. Firstly, testing offers students insights of their language proficiency and progress as well as gives the teacher clues of the effectiveness of his/her instruction. Moreover, parents or guardians as well as future school administrations or employers are also keen on gaining evidence of learners' overall know-how. Secondly, Johnson (2013:301, 302) states that "for better or worse, tests and exams exert control over what goes on in classrooms" and continues by saying that a significant part of language instruction tends to present and practice language items with the goal of succeeding in a prospective test or exam. Depending on the realization and results of the exams, the learning and teaching processes of both students and teachers alike can be either positively or negatively influenced. The evaluation and overall teaching of students with autism should be differentiated and the students should be assessed by individual parameters with the aim of reinforcing and encouraging their learning process (cf. Finnish National Agency for Education 2014).

The issues discussed in the present and the previous chapters should be borne in mind in EFL teaching for students with autism, too. Hence, when considering one's teaching methods, it is important to be aware of certain factors and general guidelines, such as autistic students' sensitivity to sounds, deficits in social skills, necessity of concreteness, formation of obsessions, and strengths in the visual channel. These issues can also be supported and reinforced in language teaching. However, since the spectrum of autism disorders is so extensive, each student with autism should be dealt with individually according to his/her needs through An Individual Plan Relative to Arrangement of Instruction. All in all, the goal of equipping autistic students with practical vocabulary and necessary oral skills in order for them to be able to communicate in common everyday life situations in English is at the core of their EFL learning and teaching.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

In the following paragraphs the research questions, the participants and the methods of analysis will be presented.

3.1 The research questions

The present study endeavors to find out information on the following questions:

1. **What perceptions and experiences do students with autism have of EFL learning and teaching?**

   a. **What are the students' views on study materials, homework and evaluation on EFL classes?**

   b. **How do the students perceive the role of the teacher and school assistant in their learning?**

2. **What perceptions and experiences do EFL teachers and a school assistant have of students with autism?**

   a. **What is the role and content of study materials, homework and evaluation in the EFL studies of students with autism?**

   b. **How do the teachers view their own role and that of the school assistants in the EFL learning process of students with autism?**

3. **How can EFL teaching for students with autism be improved in the future?**

3.2 The data collection and participants

The data of the study was predominantly collected by the means of audio recorded interviews, in-class observations and written notes. The main topics were selected based on former knowledge and experience gained from working with students and adults with autism. A semi-structured interview, which does not employ a firm set of questions in the correct order, was therefore used in

order to be more flexible but still have certain principal themes to ask and analyze at a later stage (Dufva 2011:133).

The chief interviewees comprised eight (8) students, three (3) teachers and one (1) school assistant. The interviewees will be distinguished by the use of labels "Student 1", "Teacher 1", and "School assistant 1", and so on. Students 1, 2, 7 and 8 studied English integrated into general education (yleisopetus, in Finnish) classes while others studied in their autism unit's classes. Furthermore, Students 1, 2, 5 and 6 studied in junior high school (yläkoulu, in Finnish, grades 7 to 9), or higher, while Students 3, 4, 7 and 8 were still studying at elementary school level (alakoulu, in Finnish, grades 1 to 6) at the time of the interviews. Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 taught English in general education classes, Teacher 1 in junior high school and Teacher 3 in elementary school. Both of them had autistic students in some of their classes while Teacher 2 taught English solely in her own autism unit class. Moreover, School assistant 1 helped autistic students both in autism classes as well as in integration lessons. In addition, two subject teachers who had students with autism integrated into their classes, were interviewed without a recording device. Hence, altogether twelve (12) of the interviews were voice recorded and they make the main body of the research data. Table 1 summarizes the interviewees' educational context and their involvement in integrated EFL lessons in general education.

Table 1. Participants of the study according to their year(s) of schooling and their involvement in integrated EFL lessons in general education.

Participant of study	Year(s) of schooling	Involved in integration
Student 1	9	Yes
Student 2	8	Yes
Student 3	6	No
Student 4	6	No
Student 5	In working life	No
Student 6	In vocational education	No
Student 7	4	Yes
Student 8	4	Yes
Teacher 1	Teaches grades 7-9	Yes
Teacher 2	Teaches grades 6-9	No
Teacher 3	Teaches grades 3-6	Yes
School assistant 1	Assists grades 1-9	Yes

Observations were carried out in two EFL lessons (grades 6 to 8) in autism education and three English lessons (grades 8 and 9) in general education into which students with autism were integrated. Additional observations were made in elementary school general education EFL and other foreign language lessons in the presence of integrated autistic students. School assistants were always present in the English lessons in the autism unit but not always in integrated EFL lessons.

3.2.1 The schools under study

The study was carried out in two different schools in Southern Finland. The schools' principals were contacted prior to the study and given general information about it. After their consent, the education bureau of the city was contacted in order to get an official permission for the realization of the study. Other schools were contacted, too, but without the teachers' approval or other form of unsuitability, the schools were left out. Initially, it looked like it would be difficult to find convenient schools and, in particular, enough participants. Autistic participants were contacted via their special education teacher who forwarded the research permits to the students' care-givers who either approved or disapproved of the participation of their son/daughter in the present study. In spite of initial difficulties, in the end a sufficient amount of approved permits were returned and, thus, the study including its observations and audio recorded interviews, could be conducted. The study was carried out in a time scale of four days in the elementary school and three days in the comprehensive school.

The schools in question are comprehensive (grades 1 to 9) or elementary (grades 1 to 6) schools. In the former, autism education is offered to all students between grades 1 and 9 although many of the autism classes have students from several grades, such as students from grades 1 to 4 or 7 to 9 in the same group. In the latter, the autism classes also comprise mixed groups including children from preschool to grade six. Moreover, inclusion and integration are welcomed and widely put to use in both of the schools, which makes the movement to and fro autism education and general education smooth.

However, no matter how actively an autistic student participates in integration classes, (s)he additionally has a homeroom in the autism unit where studying outside integration takes place.

Thus, in addition to having special education classes specifically designed for students with ASD, in both of the schools of the present study some autistic students are integrated into certain lessons of general education based on their degree of function of autism, skills, intellectual or motor capacities, and depending on the student's own will. One is not required to be able to communicate verbally. In fact one of the students participates in integrated English lessons with the help of a speech facilitator device and a school assistant who supports the student in her communication. In both schools included in the study, autistic students are integrated into various lessons of different school subjects such as foreign languages, history, physical education, handicrafts, music, and visual arts.

Moreover, it is evident that inclusive education is encouraged in both of the schools in the study and this is visible particularly in the amount of integration lessons, mutual morning openings, lunch times and recesses in which all of the students participate in the same area. According to Brock et al. (2006:3), inclusion is a contemporary trend in schools, and it has an explicit role in some schools' syllabuses in Finland, too. In addition, inclusion is promoted in article 6 of the Constitution of Finland (Finlex 1999) and in the United Nations Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). Since integration plays such a major role in particularly the education of high-functioning autistic students and in the contemporary educational field in general, it was necessary to include students taking part in integration in the present study.

3.2.2. Student diagnosis

In the beginning, I had a desire to concentrate primarily on older, pre-teen students because I knew that they were the ones who at least were involved in integrated classes in general education but also had experiences from schooling in the autism unit. Moreover, I thought that more mature students were a more

intriguing and fruitful target group as I assumed that they had more experience from EFL lessons and because their English proficiency was supposedly higher than that of elementary school aged students. Further, I believed that older students would be able to participate and cooperate more actively in the interviews and the observation made in class. Having thorough enough answers was important in order to draw more valid conclusions about the research questions mentioned above and complete the present study. In addition, I had also met and spent time with some of the students prior to the execution of the study, which was an asset in the planning and realization process of the study. However, I was surprised how contributive younger elementary school aged students were for the present study and, together with older students' responses, I was able to form firmer, more versatile and more dialogical analyses about the research questions.

Every one of the interviewed students in the present study has been diagnosed with some kind of ASD. All of them can be considered being high-functioning autists because of their high skill levels and learning capacities. Student 1 is a year 9 student who is integrated into general education EFL lessons usually without an accompanying school assistant. Likewise, Student 2 is integrated into English lessons with his same-aged peers in general education. He himself is a year 8 student and is usually accompanied by a school assistant. Student 3 is a year 6 student who studies English in the autism unit with the help of the special education teacher and a school assistant. Student 4 is a year 6 student who takes part in English lessons in the autism unit similarly to Student 3.

Student 5 and Student 6 no longer studied English at the time of the interviews but they wanted to share their experiences on the subject. They had studied in their own special education class under the supervision of a special education teacher and school assistants. Student 7, then again, is a year 4 student who primarily studies in the autism class but who is integrated into foreign language lessons in general education. Similarly, Student 8 is a year 4 student who attends EFL lessons with students of general education. Both

Student 7 and Student 8 were accompanied by a school assistant in their EFL integration lessons. All of the student participants are males.

3.2.3 Teacher and school assistant diagnoses

Teacher 1 is a qualified subject teacher of English and French with several years of teaching experience but without studies or training specifically in special education. She has, however, learnt "through practice". Teacher 2 is not a fully qualified special education teacher as she was completing her Advanced studies (aineopinnot, in Finnish) in special education at the time of the interview. Nonetheless, she has completed teachers' pedagogical studies in addition to having work experience of children with various special needs. Then again, Teacher 3 is an English subject teacher who has many years of work experience as a teacher and who has worked also as a school assistant in general education and special education classes.

At the time of the interview, School assistant 1 worked chiefly in an autism unit class comprising students of grades 7 to 9 but she also accompanied them as well as other students from different autism classes into their integration lessons. Furthermore, she had several years' work experience of children with autism and worked or was at least in contact with all of the school's autistic students from year 1 through 9 on a daily or weekly basis.

Having views from a special education teacher from the autism unit as well as two subjects teachers of English in both elementary and junior high school made the data even more multifaceted. Not to forget the contribution of the school assistant who had experienced school life for a number of years with autistic students both in the autism unit and in the integrated language lessons on all grades.

3.3 The methods of analysis

The data will be discussed mainly via qualitative content analysis with reference to literature and previous studies. All information in relation to the

participants is strictly confidential and, hence, participants' names have been changed into generic ones.

In the end, I opted for using a semi-structured interview (or theme interview) in the present study to have the possibility of being more flexible and freer in the actual interviews and the following analysis of the data collected. Before executing the interviews, I listed dozens of topics I wanted to discuss and questions I liked to ask. I planned separate question sheets for students, teachers, and school assistants, with some recurring themes in all of them in an attempt to find consensus among the data derived from the participants' interviews. The main themes dealt with students' likes and dislikes, teachers' teaching methods and materials, and integration. The question content of students' interviews was somewhat different compared to the ones designed for teachers and school assistants as they focused primarily on the personal experiences, comments and opinions about their English studies. I did not have a rigid set of questions to follow, but instead I asked certain basic questions that I had devised beforehand, but also built upon the interviewees' answers and comments and asked additional questions based on them.

Even though there are more participants than in the original Bachelor's thesis, the number of interviewees is still relatively small, which means that the results and conclusions obtained can be generalized only with caution. They might, however, shed light into some underlying phenomena occurring in EFL learning and teaching for students with autism in Finland. Additionally, by the means of semi-structured interviews it was possible to discuss broader and more multifaceted issues without the fear of having to stick to a strict, inflexible list of questions. I also believed to gain more objective answers through the employment of semi-structured interviews.

However, there was a great time difference between the interviews as Students 1-4 were interviewed approximately five years prior to Students 5-8. This is also the case for Teacher 3 whose interview was recorded several years later than those of Teacher 1, Teacher 2 and School assistant 1. In addition, there

are disproportions in the number of quotations and references between the teacher participants since Teacher 3 is focused on in the present study due to the fact that Teacher 1's and Teacher 2's interviews have already been analyzed more in depth in the Bachelor's thesis. Further, there were disparities in the overall lengths of the recorded interviews. For example, the interview of Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 were over 20 minutes (total of 51 and 55 minutes, respectively) longer than that of Teacher 1 and School assistant 1. The same issue occurred in the case of student interviews in which the shortest interview meted merely a little over 7 minutes (Student 7) and the lengthiest one almost 28 minutes (Student 4).

My initial idea was to video record lessons in order to be able to observe the lessons in detail also afterwards. I did not, however, receive any permits for videoing and therefore I had to opt for taking notes myself while attending lessons. Having video footage would have made the present study more complete and accurate as it would have made it possible to return to the learning situations and analyze them in more depth in an endeavor to make more solid conclusions. The problem with notes is that they are always restricted to specific aspects that the observer happens to pay attention to in the given moment, which naturally means that some in-class events go without notice. Nevertheless, the alternative to voice record almost all of the interviews helped to obtain a sufficient amount of data and to analyze and interpret it properly and, ultimately, make the study more reliable and valid.

Bearing in mind all that has been mentioned, it was only natural that the interviews and the observations made in class were dealt with and interpreted qualitatively taking into account literature and previous research on the topics discussed. However, some quantities of the data will be pointed out and presented in table form. The interviews were transcribed in a content-based form, that is, not written down word-for-word as the present study does not put emphasis on discourse analytic aspects of the data, but rather their content. The interviews were translated into English as they were held in Finnish. However, in some quotes, the Finnish equivalents are also offered to clarify and

specify some utterances. All of the participants were interviewed separately. However, I endeavor to make connections between the different data to deepen the analysis, make more solid conclusions and produce dialogue and reciprocity between the various perceptions shared in the interviews. The results of the present study will be discussed and elaborated on in the following chapters.

4 RESULTS

This chapter discusses the main findings focusing on the themes derived from the interviews and observations. These include autistic students' perceptions and experiences of EFL learning and teaching, the contents of EFL study materials, homework and evaluation, and the roles of teachers and school assistants in autistic students' EFL studies. In addition, ideas about the ways in which EFL teaching for students with autism could be improved will be introduced. Emphasis will be laid on the interviews of the student participants.

Table 2 gathers the data obtained from the voice recorded student participant interviews in a roughly categorized presentation. It is an overview of the autistic students' opinions about various phenomena, such as tasks, materials and activities, related to EFL learning and teaching. The numbers on the horizontal x-axis indicate the student interviewees: 1 for Student 1, and so on. The items positioned on the vertical y-axis are diverse phenomena concerning EFL lessons that the student interviewees commented on when they were asked about their likes, dislikes, eases and challenges in their EFL studies. Moreover, in Table 2, L refers to students' likes, E stands for students' eases, D for their dislikes, C for their challenges, and N stands for neutral meaning that in some cases the participant likes and in other cases dislikes the issue in question. If a cell has two or more letters separated with a slash (e.g. L/E), it means that both or all of the requirements were met in that particular case. Empty cells signify that the particular student participant has not given an explicit opinion on the particular subject. Table 2 is interpreted by the author.

Table 2. Autistic student participants' views of various aspects in relation to their EFL studies.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total answers	Total Ls
Teacher	L	L	D	L	L	L			6	5
School assistant		N	D	L				N	4	1
Textbook	L		L	L		L			4	4
Listening	L	L/E	L/E	N		D/E			5	3
Short writing assignments (incl. gap-filling)	L/C	L/E		N	E	L	L	E	7	4
Oral tasks in pairs	L	C	D/E	D/C	L/E	L/E/C	L		7	4
Pronunciation	L/E	C		L/E					3	2
Reading	L	L/E	L	L/E		L			5	5
Music	L	L	L	L					4	4
Games			L	L				L	3	3
Certain vocabulary	E	L/E	N	D/C		N/C		L	6	2
Translations	D	E	D	L/E			L		5	2
Certain grammar items	L	E/C	N	N/E/C		D			5	1
Internet exercises	L	L/E	D	L		L		L	6	5
Exams	L	E/C	D/C				D/C	D/C	5	1
Text chapters' content	L		L	L		L			4	4
Images and visual content		L/E		L	L	L	L		5	5
Exercises in table form				L	L		L		3	3
Multiple choice Qs				L		L			2	2
Listen and repeat				D					1	0
Connect with a line				C			L	E	3	1
Crosswords				L		L			2	2
Word labyrinths						D			1	0
Word worms						L			1	1
Flashcards			D	L					2	1
Homework	N	L/C	D	L/C		L	D		6	3
Handouts		L	D			L			3	2

Table 2 reveals that none of the items received an explicit opinion from all of the interviewees when they were asked to share their views of various aspects concerning their EFL lessons. Short writing assignments (including gap-filling)

(7 answers), oral tasks in pairs (7), certain vocabulary (6), Internet exercises (6), teacher (6), and homework (6) were the items that collected the most responses whereas listen and repeat (1), word labyrinths (1), word worms (1), crosswords (2), multiple choice questions (2), and flashcards (2) acquired the least reactions. The disproportions in the number of respondents is explained by the fact that, due to the nature of a semi-structured interview, not every single one of the interviewees were asked all of the same questions and neither did all of them have the same teacher nor the same methodology nor materials including the textbook. In addition, although the student participants were not very unanimous with their dislikes and challenges, exams were seen as the most challenging (4) and disliked (3) item. The most liked items, however, were teacher (5), reading (5), Internet exercises (5), images and visual content (5), textbook (4), short writing assignments (including gap-filling) (4), text chapters' content (4), and oral tasks in pairs (4), although the latter was also viewed as a challenge (3) on some occasions. Then again, the clearest areas of ease for the student participants were short writing assignments (including gap-filling) (3) and oral tasks in pairs (3).

Table 3 assembles the data attained from the audio recorded teacher participant interviews in a roughly categorized demonstration. The numbers on the horizontal x-axis denote the teacher respondents: 1 for Teacher 1, and so forth. The teacher participants were asked to assess and comment on their autistic students' survival in various aspects of EFL learning, such as grammar, tasks and materials, in order to gain insights into the students' strengths and weaknesses. The items located on the vertical y-axis are those different phenomena related to autistic students' EFL lessons that the teachers assessed. Additionally, in Table 3, S refers to the autistic students participants' strengths while W stands for their weaknesses, according to their teachers' views. Empty cells signify that the particular teacher interviewee has not shared an explicit opinion on the particular topic. Table 3 is construed by the author.

Table 3. Teacher participants' opinions about autistic student participants' strengths and weaknesses concerning various EFL phenomena.

	1	2	3	Total answers	Total Ss
Oral production	S	S	S	3	3
Concrete nouns	S	S	S	3	3
Basic/action verbs		S	S	2	2
Irregular verbs		W		1	0
Pronouns		W		1	0
Comparative/superlative adjectives		W		1	0
Prepositions		W		1	0
Reading comprehension		W		1	0
Listening comprehension	W			1	0
Pronunciation	S		S	2	2
Short writing assignments (including gap-filling)	S	S	S	3	3
Written compositions	W		W	2	0
Vocabulary quizzes	S		W	2	1
Exams	W		W	2	0
Images and visual content	S	S	S	3	3

Table 3 shows disparities between the amounts of responses as some items received answers from all three teacher participants (oral production, concrete nouns, short writing assignments, and images and visual content) whereas several others obtained replies from only one respondent (irregular verbs, pronouns, comparative or superlative adjectives, prepositions, and reading and listening comprehensions). Oral production (3 answers), concrete nouns (3), short writing assignments (including gap-filling) (3) as well as images and visual content (3) were seen as the most distinct strengths among the autistic student participants. On the other hand, longer written compositions (2) and exams (2) were considered the autistic students' most prominent weaknesses by the teacher interviewees.

All of the autistic students' (8 respondents), their teachers' (3) and school assistant's (1) interviews along with Table 2 and Table 3 will be analyzed more in depth in the following paragraphs.

4.1 Perceptions and experiences of EFL learning and teaching

Generally, when speaking of the English language, all of the student participants of the study, excluding Student 3, have positive perceptions and experiences of English. This is shown by using words like "pretty cool", "nothing wrong", "interesting sentences" (Student 4); "great", "I liked" (Student 5); "pretty good", "pretty nice" (Student 2); and "rather nice", "nothing unpleasant" (Student 7) in the interviews, to name a few. However, Student 3 is of the opinion that English classes are rather nasty because of all the work done there. Nevertheless, he did find some positive aspects in his EFL lessons in the end. Hence, the autistic participants' experiences and perceptions of EFL lessons are mainly positive.

Moreover, Year 9 Student 1 considers English useful and "a lot more useful than Swedish". Year 8 Student 2 views English important and notes that "in the future English studies are needed … it's important to know [English]". Student 4 thinks that it is very good to learn English without which one cannot travel overseas and only stutters in speech. In general, he thinks that in English there are "rather interesting sentences", "no faults" and "everything is pretty cool" and later adds "pleasant", "a little funny", "a bit hard", "not vain", "interesting" and "intriguing" to describe his EFL lessons. Opposite to Year 6 Student 3's views, Year 6 Student 4 is of the opinion that English teaching is rather good and that Teacher 2 teaches very well, for example, irregular verbs and other verbs and all their forms, which he considers "very useful". Thus, in addition to commenting on their likes and dislikes concerning EFL, some student participants also observe English in relation to its usefulness, importance and necessity not only in the classroom but also in the future and the outside world (cf. Broughton 1980:7 and Johnson 2013:4, 5).

Moreover, Student 4 mentions the use of pictures in EFL lessons, which has been recognized as one key method through which autistic individuals tend to learn (Ribble 2011:23). Student 5, who is already involved in working life, is very positive towards English but does not like other foreign languages. Then again, Student 6, who studies in vocational education, views English as a

versatile language. Year 4 Student 8 likes studying English because he is able to learn new things whereas Year 4 Student 7 neither particularly likes nor dislikes English and comments that it is a rather "nice" school subject despite the difficulties he had experienced. In brief, the student participants have various comments and opinions about their EFL lessons, most of which are chiefly positive.

The favorite school subject of Student 1 is English because he is satisfied with the good grades he had received after studying for the exams. On the other hand, Student 2, Student 4 and Student 6 are of the opinion that mathematics is their favorite school subject because, according to Student 4, it is "nice to count all kinds of numbers that I like". This is a surprising finding since School assistant 1 claims that mathematics, chemistry, and physics are the most difficult school subjects for their students with autism. However, even though Canavan (2016:7), Ribble (2011:23) and Hannell (2006:24) indicate that autistic students may exhibit extraordinary talents in areas such as mathematics and physics, this may change when subjects such as mathematics becomes more abstract in the latter years of comprehensive school. In spite of the largely positive perceptions and experiences of EFL, only one of the student participants named English as his favorite subject at school.

4.1.1 Likes, eases and strengths

Student 1 likes English assignments in general, particularly listening comprehensions, short writing assignments as well as oral and pronunciation tasks (see Table 2). He also enjoys reading out loud text chapters and working on exercises based on the textbook's chapters' texts. Surprisingly, although he likes listening tasks, his teacher (Teacher 1) considers them to be particularly hard for students with autism (see Table 3). This is explained by autistic students' possible challenges in processing auditory input and expressive language as indicated by Ribble (2011:28) and LePage (2014:161). Student 1 considers oral production as his favorite area in the English language when compared with writing, listening and reading. "Quiet", "funny", and "active when raising one's hand" are some of the words Student 1 uses to describe his

EFL lessons. Moreover, English is his favorite school subject. He has also been complimented for his pronunciation and accents, which he considers an easy area of English for him. Student 1 therefore has many spheres of interest in the English language with pronunciation being his area of expertise, and listening, oral production and short compositions being some of his favorite aspects of English.

Student 2 thinks that listening comprehension exercises and short writing assignments in which one has to write words into one's notebook are particularly "nice" in the English lessons. He generally has a good time at his EFL lessons. Moreover, he exclusively likes reading in English as well as doing easy exercises. "Nice", "pretty pleasant", "sometimes pretty good", "funny", "not so difficult", "important", "interesting", and "intriguing" are some of the words Student 2 uses to depict the English lessons. Additionally, he likes his teacher (Teacher 1) and his EFL group into which he has been integrated. However, he specifies that he mostly does pair work with a school assistant but sometimes with a classmate. He is also explicitly in favor of integration and states that he learns better in the integrated lessons, but notes that he has also studied diligently to achieve his goals. Thus, Student 2 has had very positive experiences of integration and he enjoys listening comprehension and short writing assignments in particular.

In spite of many negative views on his English studies, Student 3 gives also some positive credit to the English classes by commenting that "it's nice to have friends" and "I like the English book". He also mentions that computer games and the music in the textbook series as well as some chapters' texts like "Dos and don'ts" or "Driving on the left" are good. Year 6 Student 4 thinks that everything is "nice" in the English lessons and particularly mentions that it is nice to listen to chapters and hear who talks and what. He also prefers pair work over individual work albeit not being a fan of speaking activities. Moreover, he describes the EFL lessons using words like "nice", "a little funny", "a little difficult", "not useless", "interesting", and "intriguing". In addition to Student 3, music in the book series is an important feature for

Student 4 as well who judges some of the chapters by their "boring" or "good" music themes. Similar to Student 3, Student 4 also likes the "Dos and Don'ts" and "Driving on the left" chapters and thinks that they are "interesting" and "funny". In brief, Student 3 likes friends, games, music and the textbook used in the English lessons whereas Student 4 finds particular interest in pair work and listening to the text chapters and their music themes.

In general, Student 5 likes the English language and points out that his teacher is "pretty nice" and that it is nice to "get to speak English", and he even uses English phrases during the interview. Additionally, he likes oral activities, and respects when the teacher deals with troublemakers and silences them. He continues that he likes his English teacher because the teacher gave him chances to answer. This goes perfectly in line with Teacher 3's experiences even though he was not Student 5's own EFL teacher:

> 1. Välil tullu niit onnistumisen kokemuksia et mä oon suullisesti auttanu ja vähä antanu vinkkejä ja hän [autistinen oppilas] on sanonu sen oikean vastauksen ja jes se meni oikein ja antaa siit heti krediittiä heti suitsutusta ja se on antanu hymyn suulle et hei mä osaan jotain mä oon rakastanu sitä nähä kun he on päässy vastaamaan tunneilla kun mä oon kysyny jonkun kysymyksen ja just tällee ku on hyvä kielitaito pääsee vastamaan tieksä ja näyttämään tieksä kukaan muu ei tiedä kenellekään muulla ei oo kättä ylhäällä et hän tietää ja saan antaa hänelle sit siitä pisteet niin se on ollu tosi iso juttu ja nähny sen hymyn tän oppilaan kasvoilla se on aivan mahtavaa myös tällane toinen [autistinen] oppilas joka on heikompi ku hän sit yhtäkkii hän on sillee iha messissä ja tajuu sen ja tietää ja viittaa niin haluun antaa hänelle mahdollisuuden vastata ja se on ollu mahtavaa ja hän on todella ollu siit innoissaan ja hyvillään et on saanu niit onnistumisen kokemuksia tämmösiä ollu kyl paljon ja se on ollu iha mahtavaa huomata se ilo se riemu siit onnistumisesta mikä heillä on ku pääsee loistamaan varsinkin tollasessa ryhmässä mis heitä ei välttämättä oteta sillee huomioon ja mukaan porukkaan ku he saa sit olla parempii ku muut niin se on ollu tosi iso juttu. (Teacher 3)
>
> [Sometimes have come those experiences of success that I've orally helped and given a bit of hints and he [student with autism] has said the correct answer and yes it went right and immediately give credit from that immediately praise and that has put a smile on the face that hey I know something I've loved to see when they've been able to answer in lessons when I've asked some question and just like this when one has good language skills can answer you know and show you know nobody else knows no one else has his hand up that he knows and I can give him points for that that has been a very big thing and seen that smile on this student's face it is absolutely great also this kind of another [autistic] student who is weaker than him then suddenly he is in with us and understands it and knows and raises his hand so I want to give him the chance to answer and it has been great and he has really been excited about it and pleased that has gotten those experiences of success these kinds of things have been a lot yeah and it has been so great to notice that happiness that joy from the success that they have when can shine especially in that kind of a group where they are not necessarily like taken into account and join the group when they can then be better than others so that has been a really big thing.]

Teacher 3's comments exemplify and accentuate the importance of taking notice of the autistic students in the integrated EFL group by supporting them in their search for the correct answer, by providing them with chances to answer and to show their skills, and by giving instant positive feedback for their effort in order to reinforce their self-esteem as a foreign language learner. Positive reinforcement is also encouraged by Farrell (2006:33, 34), LePage (2014:165), and Duran (2016:158). In brief, in addition to many other student participants, Student 5 likes tasks involving speaking and underscores the positive influence of the teacher by pointing out that the teacher lets him answer, which is backed up by the experiences of Teacher 3.

Student 6 considers English a versatile language and thinks that it is "easy to be able to speak [English] and understand what other people mean and speak". He mentions, similar to Student 1, situations outside school in which he has had to speak English or encounter it in some way such as in music, games, and movies. Teacher 1 in particular highlights the oral sphere of English being one of the strengths of students with autism. However, she disagrees with Student 6 and views listening comprehension as one of the areas of difficulty for autistic students. Student 6 puts emphasis also on the use of spoken language and the learning of different words. In other words, Student 6 underlines the role of the oral sphere of English as well as certain vocabulary.

Student 6 sees the teacher as a great authority who has knowledge that the students do not possess and who is in charge of the lessons. Similar to Student 2 and Student 4, Student 6 gives some credit to Internet activities but prefers the use of the textbook and considers it important. Students with autism tend to look up to the adult and expect the teacher to be an expert of his/her subject and are therefore they are also very alert to detect any mistakes, as Canavan (2016:9) mentions. Student 6 also explains that if the teacher says something wrong or writes incorrectly on the board, it "ruins the feeling" and makes him doubt whether the teacher is "a good teacher". In a similar fashion, Student 1, Student 2 and Student 4 also like their EFL teachers because they can teach (rather) well. Additionally, similar to Student 6, Student 5 stresses the

important role of the teacher not only as a giver of correct knowledge but also as the one who is in control of the lessons and his/her students in the pursuit of achieving a good and peaceful studying atmosphere (työrauha, in Finnish). Student 6 agrees that another factor that "ruins the lesson" is if the other students disturb and, for example, throw pencils at him. In brief, Student 1, Student 5 and Student 6 emphasize the role of the teacher not only as the authority of knowledge but also as the authority of class management.

Student 7 enjoys "a little bit easier" lessons in which one does not need to try so hard. He likes some exercises that are "a bit easier and nicer". He points out pair work done with a peer as one of the positive aspects of the foreign language lesson. This is, to some extent, surprising, as LePage (2014:157) explains that people with autism tend not to make so much contact with their peers, only adults primarily. The student with autism, in this case, is integrated into a foreign language group of the general education and has been able to make contact with the other students of the group, which is a positive phenomenon in an integrated classroom setting. School assistant 1 is strongly of the opinion that it is social interaction that occurs particularly in integration classes that is "good in a way that the student of the autism unit gets social interaction and references and examples of general education teaching and [it is] also good for the general education students to see that there are different learners". Duran (2006:154) agrees on the relevance of social skills in autism education. However, as LePage (2014:45, 89) notes, there is also the threat and possibility of verbal bullying, which had been experienced by Student 7 and Student 1, and was also recognized by School assistant 1 on the basis of her earlier experiences. Thus, foreign language learning poses a challenge for Student 7 both academically and also socially at times, and he is not motivated to do too difficult exercises involving a lot of effort. However, he is keen on working with his peers in general education including doing speaking activities with them.

Student 8 likes to learn new English words. All three teacher participants comment that individual, concrete concepts and words like nouns in particular

are easier for students with autism to grasp. Ribble (2011:24) takes mention of similar discoveries of concreteness. Teacher 3 adds action verbs to the above mentioned list, particularly when they have an accompanying picture when being learned or when they can be connected to a clear action; Students of Teacher 3 enjoy acting out new vocabulary in a kinesthetic manner. In addition, Student 8 likes the use of games in the English classroom and mentions an interactive on-line game called "Kahoot" in which students can simultaneously participate in quizzes using their mobile phones. Farrell (2006:32, 34) promotes the use of games to motivate learning and to teach English grammar, for example. All in all, Student 8 likes to play English games and to learn new words, which can be practiced in a variety of ways.

Even though it is possible to encounter all-encompassing similarities in the strengths between students with autism, the truth is, as previous studies also show (Janzen 1996:9), that there is variation in skill levels in people with autism. Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 highlight this by mentioning that some of their autistic students are very good at creative writing, extrovert and very talkative, while others struggle even with the formation of a simple sentence. Then again, the student participants of the study have some similar and some differing views of what they consider their strengths or what is easy for them in English. Student 1 comments that pronunciation, vocabulary and learning new words are easy whereas Student 2 says that Internet activities, reading, listening with open book, translating orally, nouns and short writing assignments are easy. Student 3 thinks that listening is easier than reading and speaking easier than writing, but otherwise everything seems difficult in general. Student 4 is of the opinion that all things are rather easy in English and mentions translations, pronunciation and the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives as easy or rather easy features of English. Student 5 and Student 6 again view speaking easy while Student 5 adds writing to be on the same line with speaking. Student 8 considers exercises involving the writing of single, context-isolated words on a blank line easy as well as assignments in which one has to connect, for example, a textbook character and his/her object by drawing a line. However, he is unable to identify which of the four language skills (cf. Johnson 2013:278)

he considers easy in EFL language and learning in general. Hence, the majority of the student participants consider listening and speaking tasks the easiest while some of them add short translations and vocabulary exercises to the list.

According to Murray (2012:89), students with autism benefit from the use of computers due to their "safe error-making", for example, and this is something that Teacher 1 and Student 1 point out, particularly when referring to online English mouse-clicking exercises in Sanoma Pro's former Internet activity platform called Opit (Sanoma Pro Oy 2015), which had an array of multiple choice questions, fill-in-the-gap exercises, and equivalent interactive activities. LePage (2014:163) also points out the benefits of using technology, multimedia, and creative arts in autism education. Nevertheless, Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 do not take real advantage of computers: Teacher 3, for example, merely uses the computer for showing answers and for listening to the text chapters' audio files. He agrees, however, that diverting from the book, even if it were as little as a teacher-made handout, is something "fresh" and "different" that both students of general education and students with autism alike enjoy and are motivated by. Nonetheless, Student 1 notifies that although Internet activities are "rather nice" and he does well in them, he claims not to have learned virtually anything because of their limitations in the amount of vocabulary, for example. Teacher participants therefore generally see the use of computers and the Internet as advantageous even though not all of them exploit them in their teaching on a regular basis.

Student 2 summarizes his thoughts of what he considers easy or difficult in EFL by saying the following:

> 2. Lukeminen tai kirjoittaminen substantiivit ja kaikki muut on ihan hyvii ja helppoja muut on kyl vähän vaikeita verbin taivutukset välil helppoja ei oo ollenkaan vaikeita enkkujutut kuuntelu ei ainakaan vaikeita kirja voi olla auki ja seurata tekstejä ku kuuntelee suomennoksia kyl suomennetaa suullisesti kappaleiden tekstejä välil on ollu että katsoen kirjasta suomennoksia vihkoon yleensä suullisesti tunnilla. (Student 2)

> [Reading or writing nouns and everything else pretty good and easy other stuff indeed a bit hard verb conjugations sometimes easy there are no hard English things listening is certainly not hard the book can be open and can follow texts when listening to translations into Finnish yeah we translate chapters' texts orally into Finnish sometimes so that looking at the book translations into notebook usually orally in class.]

Like all of the three teacher participants stress, Student 2 also brings forth nouns as an easy area of English. Then again, as Teacher 2 mentions, verbs and particularly some irregular verb conjugations can sometimes pose a challenge to students with autism, which Student 2 confirms on his behalf. However, in contrast to Teacher 1, Student 2 thinks that listening exercises are certainly not difficult, at least when one can follow the text from the textbook while listening. This supports the view of the teacher participants as well as Ribble (2011:23, 28) and LePage (2014:166), who emphasize the importance of the visual channel for students with autism. Student 2 goes on to say that Teacher 2 often draws or writes on the board and underlines that it is helpful. LePage (2014:166) confirms the practicality and usefulness of having visual content and notifies that particularly older high-functioning autistic students are more capable of coping with written texts without accompanying images. Thus, Student 2 is strongly of the opinion that listening is an easy area in English and he is grateful for the amount of supportive visual input provided in his EFL classes.

All of the teacher participants in the study agree that oral production is easier than written production for students with autism, at least to some extent. Walsh (2011:7) and Ribble (2011:23) confirm the challenge that writing, particularly the management of lengthy texts, poses to autistic students. According to the findings of Lim (2011:184), speech production is greatly related to the level of functioning with high-functioning autistic individuals having a tendency of being verbally more active and prolific than low-functioning ones. All three teacher participants stress the practical, communicative aspect of foreign language studies as stated in the national and school curricula, too (cf. OPS 2016). However, Teacher 3 mentions that beginning students of a foreign language tend to develop their speech later than their writing. Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 consider nouns and some basic verbs as probably the easiest and most memorable areas of language for their students with autism. All of the teachers also agree that short writing assignments involving, for example, gap-filling with a single word or an article, are exercises in which students with autism succeed. Pronunciation is not seen as a problem either and both Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 have an autistic student integrated into

their lessons who has a very fluent native-like accent. Teacher 1 notes that the problems in pronunciation with specific speech sounds are nothing major and they are something that the students of general education also share. All in all, out of the four language skills listed by Johnson (2013:278), the teacher interviewees see oral production as autistic students' asset whereas writing and listening are their weaknesses. The teacher participants are therefore unanimous that the oral sphere of English is the clear strength of students with autism in addition to concrete nouns, some basic verbs and pronunciation.

4.1.2 Dislikes, challenges and weaknesses

The student participants have various thoughts about the challenges and difficulties they face in their EFL studies. When speaking of the challenging areas in English, Student 1 mentions that long written translations into Finnish are time-consuming. Nevertheless, he considers translation exercises rather useful unlike Student 3. Student 2 comments that sometimes exercises are difficult in general. When asked about his difficulties in English, Student 4 mentions the following:

> 3. Sanat ku ei ymmärrä ja täytyy pyytää aikuisen apua tai katsoa itsenäisesti sanastosta ehkä epäsäännölliset verbit voi olla joskus vähä vaikeita ja joskus vaikeita joskus aika helppoja. (Student 4)
>
> [Words when don't understand and have to ask for adult's help or look up independtly in the glossary maybe irregular verbs can be sometimes a little bit hard and sometimes hard sometimes pretty easy.]

Thus, unknown words and irregular verbs are considered challenging by Student 4 and in those cases he resorts to the help of an adult or the glossary. On the other hand, generally not knowing English enough is seen as a difficulty by Student 5. Student 6 says that when engaged in social interaction with an English-speaking person or a peer in class, it can be challenging if the other person does not understand what he means. In brief, some of the student participants encounter difficulties in certain translations, grammar, vocabulary, and mutual intelligibility in social interaction in English.

Student 1, Student 4 and Student 5 have no particular dislikes in English or EFL lessons. In addition to Student 7, Student 2 dislikes difficult exercises, and

notes that he should particularly learn pronunciation and speaking in English. Student 3 does not like various aspects of his EFL lessons including the teacher, use of flashcards, irregular verb forms and "stupid words". Student 6 adds that some English words are "boring". In addition, Student 6 is not so keen on learning new vocabulary as it requires more thinking if one does not comprehend a text at first glance. Even though the majority of the participants have a relatively positive perception of EFL lessons, some of them have negative experiences of certain exercises, grammar topics, vocabulary and the teacher.

Student 7 does not like the fact that English is such a difficult school subject. In general, he views foreign language learning a challenge and he would like to stick with only one language, his mother tongue. He is of the opinion that additional languages are hard, stressful and something that even cause anxiety. Furthermore, Student 7 mentions that the fact why he finds foreign language lessons "a bit nasty" is not because they would be bad in themselves, but he thinks that he is "a little bad at it" and therefore is tired of always trying his best without clear positive results. In addition, Student 3, Student 7 and Student 8 are strongly against exams and consider them particularly difficult. Briefly, Student 7 feels that he does not reach good results despite his efforts and therefore considers foreign language learning challenging, even nasty, particularly when it comes to completing exams.

Student 3 has very strong opinions about the EFL lessons he attends at the autism unit:

> 4. On aika surkeita ku pitää koko ajan tehä jotain [toisen englannin opettajan] englannit iha hyviä mut [Opettaja 2:n] englannit nii huonoja ku pitää koko ajan suomennella ärsyttävää että pitää suomennella kaikkee tehtävien teko ei oo hyvä juttu eikä korttien teko ei korttijuttukaan mis on substantiiveja imperfektejä epäsäännöllisiä verbejä imperfektejä niistä mä en tykkää ollenkaan [toisen englannin opettajan] tunneilla en ole ollut nyt on [Opettaja 2:n] tunnit vaa kiva on että kavereita tykkään englannin kirjasta ne musiikit on ainakin iha hyvät ne kappalemusiikit kiva kappale on dos and don'ts ja myös driving on the left iha hyvä kappale tietokonepelijutut oli kivoja mut mä en hirveesti pelejä pelaile. (Student 3)

> [Are pretty crappy because all the time one has to do something [another English teacher's] English lessons pretty good but [Teacher 2's] English lessons so bad because one must all the time translate into Finnish annoying that have to translate everything into Finnish doing exercises is not a good thing nor making cards not even the card thing where there are nouns imperfect tenses irregular verbs imperfect tenses I don't

> like them at all I have not been in [another English teacher's] lessons now there have been only [Teacher 2's] lessons it's nice to have friends I like the English book those music pieces are at least pretty good those chapters' music themes nice chapter is dos and don'ts and also driving on the left pretty good chapter computer game things were nice but I don't play a lot of games.]

Neither did Student 3 like his English studies at his earlier school where he "learned stupid words". Unlike Student 1, Student 2 and Student 4, Student 3 does not like to deal with online exercises of Opit. Teacher 2 notes that abstract grammar items such as the comparative and the superlative, pronouns, prepositions and irregular verbs cause confusion and they are hard for autistic students to grasp. In spite of his apparent disgust and resentment for translation exercises, Student 3 admits that in his leisure time he sometimes uses Google Translate to translate words and usually has fun with it. Student 3 further hopes that there would be an integrated Google Translate feature in the textbook, somewhat similar to Student 6's wishes. Additionally, Student 3 hates exams and is therefore not burdened with them. In spite of some of his concessions, Student 3 has, in general, a rather negative perception of the EFL classes and particularly dislikes exams, frequent translation exercises as well as certain difficult and abstract grammar points such as irregular verbs.

Then again Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 are of the opinion that writing full sentences or a complete text is difficult for students with autism. When Ribble (2011:23) underscores the challenge autistic students undergo with their writing, Mann (2011:50) points out that in addition to difficulties, there are also rewarding aspects in their writing. Teacher 1 goes on to say that the autistic students generally succeed in vocabulary quizzes but have difficulties in course exams which require more reasoning and therefore are unable to reach the highest marks. Teacher 2 adds that autistic students are challenged by reading comprehension even in their mother tongue. Teacher 1 emphasizes that listening comprehension is also an area of particular difficulty as autistic students' vocabulary is usually narrower than that of general education students as autistic students' EFL studies are scarcer. Thus, difficult words and the speech rate and pace of listening comprehensions require the autistic students more time to answer, which is not always granted when completing

such exercises, although it is recommendable, as Walsh (2011:8), Ribble (2011:24) and Farrell (2006:32) indicate. On the other hand, Teacher 3 does not view listening as an area of particular difficulty and stresses that tasks involving listening comprehension pose a challenge to all beginners in a foreign language because of the speech rate and accent which may differ from those of their familiar foreign language teachers. Hence, Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 agree that long written compositions and rapid-paced listening comprehensions create difficulties for students with autism in particular.

The lack of self-direction is a particular problem for many students with autism, according to the experiences of Teacher 2, who underlines the issue. The lack of self-direction is a phenomenon that Dyrbjerg et al. (2007:49) refer to, and it can be noticed in challenges in taking initiatives and struggles with advancing progressively when doing an assignment, for example. This phenomenon, Teacher 2 believes, results from the strong presence of school assistants who ensure that help is always at hand and therefore the autistic students can become passive and dependent. Moreover, Teacher 2 identifies problems in social skills and interaction (cf. Frith 2008:8, 9), working together as a group, changing of scene and transitions (cf. LePage 2014:178 and Hannell 2006:19, 24, 27). Additionally, she sees problems in issues related to knowing and understanding language in general. When considering strictly the English language, Teacher 2 mentions that there are difficulties in the comparative and the superlative forms of adjectives, in some prepositions, in some verbs, particularly the irregular ones, and in some pronouns in translation exercises. Hence, according to Teacher 2, the lack of self-direction and certain abstract grammar topics are considered to be some of the stumbling stones for students with autism in their EFL studies.

Teacher 3 underlines classroom management and acquiring a peaceful studying atmosphere to be some of the major challenges he faces in his lessons. This issue is emphasized in the case of students with autism, who are usually sensitive to sounds (Janzen 1996:8, 9; LePage 2014:156). Teacher 3 describes a moment in which a student with autism reacted aggressively by shouting,

throwing violently his books on the floor and leaving the classroom when confronted with too much noise. However, Teacher 3 portrays that by staying patient and calm, talking to the student in a friendly and peaceful manner, lifting the books from the floor, placing them back on the desk and telling the student that it is okay and that there is nothing to worry about, he has been able to resolve such incidents. All teacher participants agree that shouting and outbursts of wrath are not the way to deal with students with autism as it can be incomprehensible to them and they may get more anxious, even aggressive, with the noise overload (see also LePage 2014:162). Thus, the teachers are unanimous in their views that yelling at autistic students should be avoided at all costs, and highlight the importance of achieving a peaceful, calm and quiet working atmosphere in which all of the students can study pleasantly.

4.2 Role of study materials, homework and evaluation

The role of study materials, homework and evaluation, including tests, in both the autism unit and integration lessons will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

4.2.1 Study materials and classwork

Student 1 is of the opinion that the EFL textbook he uses is rather good and it contains good stories, characters, vocabulary and grammar items such as pronouns and adjectives. This is contradictory to the experience of Teacher 2 in particular who strongly feels that pronouns and other more abstract grammar items are challenging for students with autism. When asked about his views of his English textbook, Student 1 comments on its story and grammar content, but then goes on to explicitly point out one of the text chapters in one of his former elementary school English textbooks, which mentioned wolverines as animals and, in addition, referred to Marvel's comic book superhero, Wolverine:

> 5. Se [9. luokan englannin oppikirja] on iha hyvä siinä iha hyvii tarinoita niitä henkilöitä myös sanastoa ja pronomiineja ja adjektiiveja ja ne sellaset yks [englannin oppikirja] sillo ala-asteella oli hyvä yks lausuntarepliikki tekstissä kappale oli "Wolverine" henkilöt oli luonnossa ja selitti että on wolverines ja yks sai päähän että "wolverines X-

Men cool" ja yks sano et "what's he talking about?" ja sitte se selitti et "Wolverine is the comic book superhero" hyvä kappale. (Student 1)

[It [Year 9 English textbook] is pretty good there are pretty good stories those characters also vocabulary and pronouns and adjectives and such one [English textbook] back in elementary school was good one pronunciation line in the text the chapter was "Wolverine" characters in the wild and explained that there are wolverines and one got this idea that "wolverines X-Men cool" and one said that "what's he talking about?" and then he explained that "Wolverine is the comic book superhero" good chapter.]

Student 1 enjoys such story content as he himself likes Marvel's X-Men and other similar films such as Watchmen, his favorite motion picture. Student 1 also acknowledges oral communication as a sphere of English in which he wants to develop, but notes that he can already practice it at school as there is an English-speaking member of the staff with whom he converses in English. Additionally, he mentions listening and reading comprehension assignments beneficial, and particularizes watching films with English subtitles as a good way of learning. All in all, Student 1 has positive experiences of using EFL textbooks and particularly gives credit to their story, vocabulary and grammar content.

When asked to comment on the EFL textbook, Student 4 reveals the following:

6. Ennen en mut nyt alkanut tykätä paljon [englannin tekstikirjasta] mun mielestä on vaa nii kiva jotkut kappaleet voi olla vähä tylsiä esimerkiksi alkukappaleet koska kuulosti musiikki tylsältä ennen vanhaa eikä teksti yhtään kiinnostava [...] "Why Canada?" vaikuttaa ihan kivalta kappaleelta kun lausuin tämä merirosvo kuulostaa aika kivalta minä tykkään merirosvoista kapteeni Cook minun mielestä "Now what?" ei ole kovin kiva mut tämä kappale 7 urheilu aika kiva [...] kappale 12 oli kivat tekstit ja hämähäkki ja "Driving on the left" suomensin siitä hassun suomennoksen ja opettajaki nauroi mä en huomannu aluks sitä ja sit myös tää kappale 10 "Boom!" on aika hyvä ja kiva ja nyt tää "Dos and don'ts" kiinnostaa ja siinä tietokoneasioita jotka mua kiinnostaa. (Student 4)

[Earlier I didn't but now I've started to like [the English textbook] a lot I think it's just so nice some chapters can be a little bit boring for example the first chapters because sounded the music boring before and the text was not interesting at all […] "Why Canada?" seems like a pretty nice chapter when I pronounced this pirate sounds pretty nice I like pirates captain Cook I think "Now what?" is not very nice but this chapter 7 sport pretty nice […] chapter 12 had nice texts and a spider and "Driving on the left" I translated into Finnish a funny translation and even the teacher laughed I didn't notice at the beginning and then also this chapter 10 "Boom!" is pretty good and nice and now this "Dos and don'ts" interests and there are computer things that interest me.]

It is interesting to notice Student 4's positive mention of humor in the interactions between him and Teacher 2. Gerstle (2011:99) encourages the

exploitation of humor in class which usually heartens autistic students to focus more on the teacher, peers and the task at hand. In brief, like Student 1, Student 4 finds the themes of certain textbook chapters interesting and, in addition, mentions the pronunciation, translations, music themes and pictures of some chapters as particularly good.

Student 4 sees exercises involving conversing with a partner as rather boring as they are rather difficult or incomprehensible and therefore he generally does not like doing them. This he mentions three times. Nevertheless, he makes a small concession by pointing out a nice pair assignment in which one must interview one's partner. He also notes that sing-along and nursery rhyme activities, where one must listen and pronounce, are a little boring. This he mentions twice when discussing two different chapters. He does, however, like the picture in one of them. In fact, he seems to have positives perceptions of all kinds of exercises that include visual content and mentions particularly one with a cartoon, another with a picture of a penguin and yet another in which one must draw minute and hour hands on various clock faces. He is fed up with activities involving listening and repeating of words or sentences. Unlike Student 7 and Student 8, Student 4 finds so-called connect with a line exercises in which one must link a picture with a word or equivalent rather difficult. All in all, Student 4 does not find great enjoyment in speaking and listen and repeat activities, but has particular interest in all kinds of visually intriguing texts and assignments.

Student 4 continues to comment on the activity book and, similar to Student 6, likes crosswords because "they form various kinds of things". He mentions this on three occasions. Moreover, he likes exercises involving tables and the selection between a right and wrong answer, which he claims to have done at least ten times. He also likes another table exercise on adjectives with correct and incorrect alternatives to elect from. Altogether, he mentions tables five times in a positive light. Moreover, he takes positive notice of a writing assignment involving writing a letter to oneself and writing Finnish dates in their English form. He is not, however, a fan of all kinds writing exercises.

Above all he likes the games in the activity book. In brief, Student 4 revels in activities formatted in a table, multiple choice questions and games.

Similar to Student 4, Student 7 also thinks that exercises with pictures or tables (in which one merely has to tick a box according to his/her opinions and where one does not need to write anything) and those that involve some sort of pair work with a friend are "pretty nice". However, unlike Student 3, Student 7 enjoys doing assignments in which one has to translate short sentences into the foreign language or in which one has to fill in a blank with an article, for example. Briefly, Student 7 finds interest in those activities that involve tables, pictures, gap-filling, pair work and short translations.

Student 5 and Student 6 have some similar and some differing opinions about the tasks done in the EFL class. Student 5 likes exercises including tables (for example, filling in a week schedule), speaking tasks, and ones with a nice picture. On the other hand, Student 6 likes crosswords, which he mentions three times, but wishes they could be longer. He would like to have more speaking exercises although he generally enjoys writing more. This is surprising since students with autism tend to be better in oral communication and the student in question showed more signs of oral than literary capability. Moreover, Student 6 claims to be more of a crossword person but not necessarily a word labyrinth (sanasokkelo, in Finnish) person. He mentions twice that he does not like word labyrinth exercises or listening comprehension assignments. Then again, he likes text chapters in the book in which there is traveling to a country where the target language is spoken and when there is talk about different countries. He also likes chapters where there are numbers since they are "sufficiently clear" and animals as he himself has a pet. Thus, Student 5 and Student 6 both like oral activities and the display of images and, further, Student 6 likes the fact that the textbook is versatile and does not merely have similar kinds of assignments.

Moreover, Student 6 likes exercises that require choosing between a correct and incorrect alternative. He also likes learning the letters in the alphabet and word worm (sanamato, in Finnish) exercises in which one has to separate

individual words from a long chunk of words put together. Additionally, he enjoys assignments involving geography (for example, the ones which include a map of a country or names of countries and cities), word search from different options, plurals, animals, family or word trees, and those activities in which one has to conjure up new words or questions. He has no problem with the grammar tidbit boxes scattered around the activity book, although he does not like those involving the conjugation of verbs. All in all, Student 6 generally likes certain vocabulary-related exercises, multiple choice questions and those activities with visual content of his interest.

Student 8 is not able to name boring or unpleasant exercises but neither does he find assignments that he would particularly enjoy. However, he uses the word "ordinary" to describe exercises that involve, for example, writing of short sentences, introducing new vocabulary, and doing pair work with fill-in tables according to one's likes and dislikes. Hence, Student 8 does not have strong opinions about good and bad exercises but considers the majority of them merely ordinary.

All of the interviewed teachers agree on the benefits of using images and visually displaying text and they try to take advantage of the visual channel. Teacher 2, who is more experienced with teaching students with autism, comments that in her instruction she quite frequently makes use of functional learning including quick sketches, supportive sign language and all kinds of pictures and photos. All kind of functionality and meaningfulness in autism communication and instruction is strongly encouraged by Duran (2016:151, 157), too. All three teachers have the textbook and its accompanying activity book as their primary source of information and they use it as a foundation for their lessons. However, all of them divert from the books at times by the means of handouts, CDs, and videos, for example. In addition, Teacher 2 employs flashcards with pictures and text to study some English nouns and verbs. Hence, all of the teacher participants stress the relevance of using visual material and despite chiefly resorting to the textbook and exercise book, they also exploit other teaching materials to some extent.

Moreover, Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 use Opit Internet activities while Teacher 3 has executed lessons in which it was necessary to search information or translate words in the Internet. Additionally, all of the teachers utilize YouTube in their teaching through which they, for example, watch and listen to authentic target language material in the form of movie clips or music songs. Teacher 3 thinks that using videos motivates students, gives them examples of authentic language use and lets them do various carry-on exercises based on the viewed clips. Student 1, Student 2, Student 4, Student 6 and Student 8 specifically like the employment of the Internet in class either via the computer or the mobile phone. However, Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 also acknowledge the problem of working on the computer or on the mobile phone in class as some students get stuck with them and it is challenging to turn their focus back on the actual teaching. Teacher 2 thinks this is a problematic scenario for younger elementary school students in particular and Teacher 3's experiences confirm this. Thus, students with autism generally enjoy and are motivated by the use of the Internet but utilizing electronic devices also has its downsides and impracticalities.

4.2.2 Homework

Homework is another recurring theme in the interviews. In general, many of the student participants of the study have rather positive perceptions of homework, which is contrary to the claims of LePage (2014:179). When asked about his opinions concerning homework, Student 2 explains:

> 7. Välillä ruotsista tulee aika paljon [läksyjä] englannista mulle annetaa välil vähän helpompia tehtäviä on hyvä opettaja päättää mitä helpompia tehtäviä tulee opettaja tekee sen päätöksen tykkään tehdä läksyjä välil tulee vaikeita [läksyjä] ja tehdään mutsin kaa yritän ensi itse läksyt auttanu oppimaan englantia. (Student 2)
>
> [Sometimes in Swedish there is much [homework] in English I am sometimes given a little bit easier exercises it's good the teacher decides what easier exercises are given the teacher makes that decision I like to do homework sometimes there is hard [homework] and I do with my mom I first try to do myself homework has helped to learn English.]

Thus, Student 2 generally likes to do English homework although sometimes he finds it hard. Unlike Student 2, Student 1 thinks that English homework is not

difficult and that there is not too much homework. Student 6 says that he gladly does homework even though sometimes there is a lot of it. On the other hand, Student 3 has strongly opposing views about homework and he does not like homework one bit and thus is not assigned homework. Student 7 dislikes homework and during the observations he showed signs of anxiety and even hopelessness every time he was given homework. It must be mentioned, however, that every time Student 7 had his homework done and got positive credit of doing it, he was very delighted about it and seemed to get a boost of motivation, according to his teacher (Teacher 3). Moreover, Teacher 3 pursues building a safe atmosphere in the classroom in which students can make mistakes, too, without being laughed at or scolded (see also Broughton 1980:47). All in all, only Student 3 and Student 7 are clearly against homework whereas other participants acknowledge its relevance in foreign language learning and are either pro-homework or neutral about the issue.

Student 4 gives the following insights into his views on homework:

> 8. Aika kiva ku on tehnyt omat läksynsä sopivasti läksyjä ennen vihasin läksyjä sitten aloin tykätä en koskaan vihaa [läksyjä] aika monet vihaa ja haluaa vaan laiskotella sain stipendinkin joskus läksyt vaikeita mut sit pitää vaan katsoa vaan sanastoa katson ruotsinkielisestä sanastosta suomi on vahvempi mut ruotsi myös aika vahva läksyt opettaa mua aika hyvin erittäin hyvin ehkä jotkut läksyt ei opeta joskus yhtään. (Student 4)

> [Pretty nice when I've done my own homework suitable amount of homework earlier I hated homework then I started to like I never hate [homework] quite a few hate and only want to be lazy I even got an award sometimes homework is difficult but then one only has to look up in the glossary I look up in the Swedish glossary Finnish is stronger but Swedish also pretty strong homework teach me pretty well very well maybe some homework don't teach sometimes at all.]

Hence, nowadays Student 4 likes to do homework and acknowledges that sometimes he learns by doing homework but other times he finds homework hard and therefore he has to look up the words in the glossary. It is interesting to notice that even though many of the student participants are rather positive in their views on homework, Student 4 points out that generally many students hate to do homework.

Teacher 3 comments that one of the students with autism in his classes does his homework conscientiously although he complains about it and is perplexed

why Teacher 3 always gives out homework. Teacher 3 believes that homework is an essential part of foreign language learning and that one does not learn a foreign language merely by attending two 45-minute lessons every week. However, both Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 agree that perhaps they should sometimes give less homework to the students with autism due to the extra stress and anxiety that foreign language learning in an integration class may cause them. Teacher 2 highlights that doing homework and completing exams depends a lot on the student: Some always leave their homework undone whereas others always have done it well. Another special education teacher in one of the autism units comments that it is practically impossible to assign homework to some autistic students as they are so confined to the idea that school work only exists within the school boundaries and its daily timetables, as also LePage (2014:179) mentions. Teacher 2 claims that checking and going through homework is sometimes challenging as some autistic students do not always make it to lessons together with the rest of the group due to their integration classes. On the other hand, Teacher 3 does not think that there is any problem with integration timetables. Thus, Teacher 3 does not compromise homework for his integrated students with autism and unlike Teacher 2, he does not find integration problematic at all.

4.2.3 Tests and evaluation

Student 1 is the only student who confesses to like exams as he has done well in them. Student 2 acknowledges the importance of tests and thinks that at times they are easy while at other times difficult. Not of all of the student participants take tests into account in their responses. Nevertheless, Student 7 and Student 8 point out that exams and tests are boring and unpleasant things in foreign language learning. Student 7, in particular, is shocked every time there is an exam and can only do it in the presence and with the help of the teacher or another adult (cf. LePage 2014:156). Like Ribble (2011:24) recommends, Student 7 is usually given a substantial amount of more time to do his written exams and he has even been offered the possibility of using his textbook when completing an exam. Student 8 brings up oral exams as particularly

challenging. Moreover, Student 3 hates exams and is released from their burden by Teacher 2. It must be pointed out that all of the student respondents who dislike exams also consider them a challenge. Hence, Student 1 has particularly positive whereas Student 3, Student 7 and Student 8 particularly negative experiences of exams despite adult intervention, support and assistance.

Teacher 2 does not use a lot of tests in her teaching while Teacher 1 and in particular Teacher 3 are rather conventional language teachers who hold exams and put emphasis on them (cf. Johnson 2013:301, 302). Teacher 3 himself helps the autistic students in exams by giving them extra time (cf. Ribble 2011:24), offering them hints and tips, letting them answer orally, and allowing them to use the textbook and activity book for reference. Teacher 3 urges that all this has had positive effects and it has calmed the autistic students down. Additionally, Teacher 3 differentiates (eriyttää, in Finnish) his autistic students' evaluation and he shows mercy by, for example, giving full points in case the student with autism has answered in the foreign language instead of Finnish, or by not evaluating the exercises that the student is unable to finish despite being given additional time. Moreover, the integrated students in Teacher 3's lessons do not receive a final grade but instead an "S" (for "pass", suoritettu, in Finnish) for their completion of the course. Teacher 3 also accentuates the importance of not having too extensive exam contents and in the future he wants to organize tests or other forms of assessment in shorter intervals and therefore alleviating the stress and burden of all students, particularly those integrated from the autism unit. In addition, Teacher 3 evaluates his students via exams, vocabulary quizzes, active classwork (which does not always mean raising one's hand all the time but instead it refers to all forms of active participation including written and pair work done in class), homework and behavior. In brief, Teacher 3 prefers active participation in class and other forms of evaluation in addition to exams.

In comparison, Teacher 1 assesses her students according to the national curriculum and she is unbiased in her evaluation although she mentions that in some cases in which the autistic student's oral skills are superior to his/her

written skills, she chooses to put emphasis on the oral sphere of English and makes her assessments based on those skills. Moreover, the integrated students in Teacher 1's lessons usually complete their exams in the autism unit together with a school assistant or a special education teacher. This differs from the exams held by Teacher 3 in whose lessons there are no accompanying school assistants but he himself endeavors to offer autistic students assistance and support. In other words, Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 both hold exams and they use some methods of differentiation (eriyttäminen, in Finnish) in the evaluation of integrated students with autism.

Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 note that students with autism are capable of achieving very high marks in vocabulary quizzes involving the use of single, usually concrete, words such as nouns and action verbs while writing complete sentences with grammatical content is an issue for the majority. Teacher 3 underlines that all kinds of exams, both vocabulary quizzes and particularly course exams, are very challenging for almost every one of his autistic students, excluding the most gifted ones, and exams tend to cause stress, anxiety, and even panic. This is demonstrated in the following quote:

> 9. Näis kokeissa varsinkin alussa ei tajunnu et toiselle [autistiselle oppilaalle] kokeiden tekeminen oli hirvee tuska jopa yksittäisen sanakokeen ja kuulemma tää autistinen oppilas hän oli ennen koetta aivan ei pysyny ollenkaan housuissa meni ihan ranttaliksi ja hän oli satuttanut itsensä ja kaikenlaista tämmöstä aika hurjaakin tapahtu sitten jos itekin on ollu kuumotuksessa kokeiden kanssa niin voi vaa kuvitella että autistisille oppilaille jotka eivät ehkä ole niin tottuneet kokeisiin niin se on vielä isompi juttu varsinkin kun ei ole avustajaa mukana helposti jää heillä junnaamaan päälle että en mä osaa en mä osaa sellanen itsesäälimeininki vaikee päästä pois siitä siit kierteestä. (Teacher 3)

> [In these exams especially in the beginning didn't understand that for the other one [student with autism] doing exams was a horrible pain even a single word quiz and I heard that this autistic student before the exam had not been able to control himself and went all berserk and had hurt himself and all these kinds of things pretty intense stuff happened if I myself have been nervous about exams can only imagine that for autistic students who maybe are not so used to exams it's even a bigger thing especially as there's no assistant with him easily becomes stuck that I don't know I don't know that kind of self-pity thing hard to get out of that vicious circle.]

Hence, the nervousness and panic that an autistic student may experience on the event of an exam may even lead to him/her getting hurt. It may also be difficult to help the autistic student out of the self-piteous vicious circle if (s)he gets overly stressed about the exam and not knowing answers to it. Teacher 1

believes that the major issue in course exams for autistic students is the fact that they require the ability to deduce answers, for example, in a reading comprehension exercise or when producing a longer written composition. All in all, even though some students with autism do very well in exams, vocabulary quizzes in particular, many are overwhelmed by them and are virtually incapable of completing them without teacher or school assistant intervention, presence and support.

4.3 EFL teacher and school assistant roles in the learning process of autistic students

The teachers and the school assistants have an important role and influence in the autistic students' experiences in the EFL lessons either positively or negatively. In the following chapters, the views on teacher and school assistant roles and interactions in the EFL learning process of students with ASD will be discussed.

4.3.1 EFL teacher role

Teachers in particular seem to have a significant role in the studies of students with autism. For example, Student 5 notifies that he likes English because "the teacher was pretty nice" and because "the teacher gave me a chance to answer". Student 5 stresses the importance of the help of the teacher but, unlike all the other student participants, does not even mention school assistants at all. In addition, Student 5 describes that a nice English lesson is when everyone listens to the teacher. Similarly, Student 1 says that he hopes that his classmates would behave "differently" and "in a better manner" towards Teacher 1 who he thinks is "rather nice, but of course not the best". Student 2 likes Teacher 1 "pretty much" and thinks that she can teach well. Many student participants consider the teacher's role to be that of a giver of knowledge as well as an administrator and enabler of a good studying atmosphere. In general, many of the student participants like their teachers at least to some extent and consider their role crucial and irreplaceable as head of the class.

For Student 3, the role of the teacher is emphasized and he would want to change his EFL teacher (Teacher 2) and the actual English classroom, too, as he had had better experiences with another EFL teacher to whom he kept on referring and who operates in Student 3's homeroom. Teacher 2 points out that as she is in charge of the EFL lessons in the autism unit, there is a lot of hassle with the changing of classrooms, which does not suit every student as students with autism can react very strongly to sudden changes of schedule and location. This has also been observed in research (see e.g. Hannell 2006:19, 24, 27). Janzen (1996:8) illustrates that for students with autism familiarity brings about a sense of security which leads to a safe way of advancing forward. Unlike Student 3, Student 4 thinks that Teacher 2 is a rather good teacher who "teaches the English forms very well" when referring to the irregular verb tenses taught via the use of flashcards. Thus, out of all the student participants, only Student 3 has very negative experiences with his current EFL teacher.

When asked about adult-student interactions, Teacher 1 comments that her interaction with the autistic students is "easy and natural" while School assistant 1 describes it using words like "direct", "confidential" and "sincere". Teacher 3 depicts the interaction with the following words:

> 10. Yleisesti hyvä vuorovaikutus hommat toimii ja itellä on tietynlainen rauhottava vaikutus ja tuun hyvin toimeen erilaisten ihmisten kanssa se on ollu iso vahvuus samoin kuin kokemus autistisista oppilaista niin osaa olla ja päästä heidän aaltopituudelleen se on tosi siistii ku pystyy kommunikoimaan ollu aika resiprookkista se meidän vuorovaikutus se on hyvä ja se toimii meil on myös hauskaa mä tykkään heistä ja he tykkäävät minusta ja tulevat tuntien ulkopuolella juttelemaan ja kertomaan omista jutuistaan ja intresseistään esimerkiksi näyttäämään YouTubesta jonkun jutun mun mielestä meil on tosi positiivinen vuorovaikutus. (Teacher 3)

> [Generally good interaction things work out and I myself have a certain kind of calming effect and I get along well with different people it has been a big asset as well as experience of autistic students so know how to be and get to their wavelength it is very cool when you are able to communicate has been pretty reciprocal that our interaction it is good and it works we also have fun I like them and they like me and come to talk outside lessons and tell about their own stuff and interests like show something from YouTube I think we've got very positive interaction.]

All in all, the teacher participants along with School assistant 1 have mainly positive experiences of their interactions with students with ASD.

4.3.2 School assistant role

School assistants seem to have an important role in the everyday studies of virtually all autistic students and this can be deduced through in-class observations as well as through frequent references to school assistants in the student and teacher participants' interviews. School assistant 1 points out that in their school it is not the subject teacher's job to modify his/her teaching to meet the needs of integrated autistic students, but it is, instead, the responsibility of the school assistant. Moreover, since Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 have not received specific training into autism education, they naturally do not divert explicitly from their methodology that they use with all the other students. Hence, Teacher 1 resorts to the help of the school assistant and expects the autistic students to be functioning and skilled enough to follow the teaching without grand problems. Another EFL teacher whose remarks were not recorded comments on the same principle of practically not altering her course contents and lesson plans due to the presence of autistic students in her classes. All of these exemplify and underline the importance of having school assistants. School assistants therefore play a major and influential part in the daily studies of students with autism in particular.

When asked about roles, School assistant 1 says that her job was to support, adjust and ease the teaching for the autistic student. She goes on to say that some school assistants are of the opinion that their role is merely that of a helper of the autistic students while others think that it is their duty to be of assistance to other members of the class as well and to deal with the general discipline of the class as it also "affects the autistic student if he cannot concentrate and there is a lot of noise". Generally, School assistant 1 thinks that the students with autism "keep up pretty well with their group" even though at times they are not so fast writers and may not be able to complete all given tasks: For example, "out of five exercises they might finish three or four". Additionally, School assistant 1 indicates that school assistants are present in class to ensure that homework is jotted down into the notebook, which is something that autistic students may miss without the promptings of an adult.

In brief, according to the opinions of School assistant 1, school assistants are there to support and adjust teaching to be more suitable for integrated autistic students so that they are able to keep up with the rest of the group.

School assistant 1 points out that the only thing in which she really needs to intervene is to ensure that the autistic students' focus is on the things done in class so that they would not immerse into their own world (see also LePage 2014:162, 163; Ribble 2011:18 and Dyrbjerg et al. 2007:15). She goes on to comment that autistic students expect the school assistant to support not only their learning but to take care of the overall learning of the whole class, that is, that there is a good, peaceful atmosphere for studying. She mentions that autistic students are proud of their assistants when they "do the thing". However, she notes that challenges may arise if one assistant has to assist two students with autism at the same time as many of them would require one-on-one attention and presence all the time. Thus, the primary role of the school assistant is to make sure that the student with autism can concentrate on the essential things done in class and this may involve intervening with the overall working atmosphere of the class.

As for EFL lessons in the autism unit, School assistant 1 comments that the students there have even more deficits in learning as well as weaker language skills and knowledge, which naturally leads to more help and support asked from the school assistants and other educational personnel. Furthermore, School assistant 1 believes that it is generally the autistic students' job to find the answers first themselves. She admits, however, that occasionally due to time restrictions she sometimes helps so that the autistic student can proceed with the rest of the group. Overall, School assistant 1 thinks that school assistants are needed even though in some cases students do well without one in integration classes. The more independent the student with autism is, the more likely (s)he is to grasp homework and in-class tasks and perform well on them even without the presence of a school assistant. In brief, promoting and encouraging student independency is one of the goals of school assistant support.

When speaking of school assistants, Student 4 is strongly of the opinion that it is good to have a school assistant and emphasizes that he could never be without an assistant and that it would not feel nice to be in English classes without an accompanying assistant. Student 1 originally had a school assistant with him in English classes but not anymore and he thinks that "it's pretty nice alone" and he gets along well independently and prefers not to have an assistant in his EFL lessons. He has never had English classes in the autism unit either but instead always has been integrated into general education foreign language lessons. Student 6 acknowledges the relevance of the two school assistants in his class but insists that he would usually survive without them and prefers teacher intervention and help. Student 2 usually has a school assistant with him but nonetheless says that "sometimes it's also a good thing if the assistant is away". Student 3 claims that the school assistant who accompanies him in the EFL lessons "is not very good but he is pretty okay", but Student 3 would rather work with another school assistant. Student 7 sometimes has a school assistant with him in the English classes. On the one hand, Student 7 explains, along the lines of School assistant 1, that the help of the assistant is rather indispensable in order to keep up with all the things done in class. On the other hand, Student 7 also thinks that he is not always in need of assistance. Student 8 always participates in EFL classes with a school assistant although this had not always been the case. Student 8 adds that at times it was nice to have an assistant with him in class and comments that the school assistant helps him with everything that is difficult for him. In general, some student participants seem to be rather positive or at least neutral towards school assistants although some also prefer not to have an accompanying assistant with them on all occasions.

Teacher 1 is of the opinion that it is crucial to have a school assistant with the student with autism in class as there are also other students in the group who are in the need of assistance. She adds that it is preferable if the school assistant is always the same person to ease collaboration. While Teacher 1 thinks that it is vital to have a school assistant in her EFL classes, School assistant 1 considers that generally integrated students can work independently without an assistant.

However, School assistant 1 admits that if the general education class is restless, it is good to have a school assistant to "even things out". In addition, School assistant 1 explicitly praises integrated students with autism who behave themselves very well, never cause trouble, do their homework, are always on time, and, overall, are positive role models to the whole class. Hence, Teacher 1 is strongly in favor of the presence of school assistants whereas School assistant 1 does not consider assistants always indispensable in an integration setting.

Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 are generally pro-assistant in their views. Teacher 2 agrees on the importance of school assistants but also likes to work one-on-one with an autistic student. She underscores that since students with autism have a tendency of having a poor self-direction, the role of school assistants is accentuated. In an ideal situation there is always an adult, whether a teacher or a school assistant, available to work individually with each student. Teacher 3, on the other hand, thinks that having an assistant is an asset and preferable but he claims to do rather well without one. However, Teacher 3 does agree that many times he finds himself unable to help and support the students with autism sufficiently enough as there are "15 or 20 other students to cater for". Thus, it is possible to come to a conclusion that having a school assistant in integration lessons is a major benefit albeit not always totally necessary if the integrated autistic students are gifted or independent enough to keep track on what is happening.

4.4 Improving EFL lessons

All of the participants in the present study have personal opinions about how they would make their EFL lessons better, nicer and more enjoyable. Some of these views will be discussed below.

Student 1 has clear ideas about the ways in which his EFL lessons could be improved:

> 11. Ois kiva jos luokkalaiset ois toisenlaisia opettajaa [Opettaja 1] kohtaan työrauhaa ei englantiin varsinaisesti vaan luokkaa kohtaan toiveita enemmän englanninkielistä musiikkia ois kiva ja lauseita tai tiettyi repliikkei suullista tai vois myös kirjottaa parityö ois vähä enemmän kivempi tehä parin kaa ku yksin. (Student 1)

[It would be nice if classmates were different towards the teacher [Teacher 1] peaceful working atmosphere not actually towards English but instead hopes towards the class more English music would be nice and sentences and quotes of certain type oral or could also write pair work a bit more nicer to do with a partner than alone.]

Similarly to Student 5 and Student 6, Student 1 is concerned mostly about the way other students behave and how they treat the teacher. He mentions twice that students could comport themselves better in class. He also hopes for a more peaceful working atmosphere. In addition, he would like to have more authentic English material in the form of music and more tasks involving pair work with peers. This is surprising since LePage (2014:157) claims that autistic students tend to find it challenging to connect with their peers. However, Student 7 also stresses the importance of the fun in working with a partner. Student 1, Student 5 and Student 6, hence, emphasize the significance of achieving a good studying atmosphere above everything else.

Similar to Student 1, Student 2 would like to have music in the English lessons and also adds videos onto the list. Gerstle (2011:99) encourages the use of cartoons with autistic students due to their comedy and carefreeness and insists that he has had positive experiences with employing cartoons in autism education. Student 2 would, furthermore, like to have less pair work and homework but more reading, more handouts and more listening. This goes in line with the experiences of Teacher 3 who underlines the positive effect of having fresh and different types of tasks outside the textbook such as handouts, music, video clips on YouTube, and translation exercises completed with the help of an online or mobile phone translator or dictionary application. He claims that, in general, there is already enough of practice done in class. Then again, Student 6 thinks that a good EFL lesson comprises speaking English, all kinds of different words, new knowledge and information about the English language, reading out loud, handouts, Internet activities but foremost using the textbook. Thus, when Student 1 and Student 2 yearn for more authentic audiovisual material, Student 6 is primarily happy with the use of the textbook but would enjoy if there were more oral activities involving speaking or reading out loud.

Student 3 would rather want to have his own special class teacher as his English teacher and have the English lessons in his own home classroom. In addition to being very willing to change his EFL teacher, Student 3 explains:

> 12. [Toinen englannin opettaja] englannin opettajaksi enemmän musiikkia todella vähän paritöitä en halua ollenkaan monisteita puhumisharjoitukset ei kans mikään hirveen hyvä en pysty olemaan yleensä enkun tunneilla ei niistä voi tehdä kivempiä kivempia jos ois [toisen englannin opettajan] luokassa […] substantiiveja haluaisin opetella ja adjektiiveja ja verbejä muttei imperfektejä haluaisin opetella tietokonesanoja ja bussisanoja. (Student 3)

> [[Another EFL teacher] as the English teacher more music very little of pair work I don't want handouts at all speaking activities neither nothing very good I can't usually be in English classes they can't be made nicer nicer if would be in [another EFL teacher's] class […] nouns I would like to learn and adjectives and verbs but not the imperfect tenses I would like to learn computer words and bus words.]

Unlike Student 2 and Student 6 and particularly Teacher 3, Student 3 dislikes handouts. Neither does he like oral activities in pairs which he would like to limit to a minimum. This is rather surprising since oral tasks are favored by many of the student participants and they are considered as one of autistic students' strengths by the three teacher participants. It is interesting to notice that Student 3 wants to learn new words and grammar, such as nouns, adjectives and verbs, but not the imperfect tenses of verbs. This goes in line with Teacher 2's experience with irregular and so-called odd verb forms that she considers challenging for students with autism. Student 3's comment on wanting to learn computer and bus words, which are some of his fascinations, further suggests that it is important to present new vocabulary particularly according to the students' needs and interests (cf. LePage 2014:162). In fact, Teacher 3 is keen on taking advantage of his autistic students' interests and sees it as a motivational tool. In addition, Student 3 wants more music incorporated into his EFL lessons. Student 3 concludes by saying that he learns the best by reading from the book. Briefly, Student 3 would like to learn certain new words, particularly those in his sphere of interest, and certain grammar items.

Student 4 views reading as "easier" and the best area of English but he also thinks that he learns by the means of writing, speaking and listening. Student 4 sums up that he would like to learn to write more in English although generally he is satisfied with his EFL lessons in the autism unit. He does, however,

mention another teacher in whose English classes he used to participate. The other teacher had taught English in a slightly different manner and used more online exercises and pictures. Nevertheless, the former teacher did not employ board games unlike his current teacher, Teacher 2, at the time of the interview. Moreover, Student 4 does not like listening comprehension activities but enjoys listening to chapters which he hopes to be focused on in the EFL lessons in addition to reading. Conflictingly, even though he wants to learn to write more in English, he desires less writing tasks and, surprisingly, more oral tasks although he generally does not enjoy them very much.

Student 6 is of the opinion that a "nice" English lesson should include the following aspects:

> 13. Siel pitäis puhua englantia ja kaikenlaisia erilaisia sanoja ja sellasta tietoo mitä mä en englannista tiiä siel ois pulpetteja ja pöytiä ja sinne menis oppilaat sit yks opettaja kertois antais kaikille jotkut paperit ja pitää lukee luokalle ääneen kirjatkin menee ihan hyvin ei siin mitää kyllä internet-tehtävätkin menee siinä ja siinä oon enemmän kirjan puolella. (Student 6)
>
> [English should be spoken there and all kinds of different words and that kind of information that I do not know about English there would be desks and tables and students would go there and then one teacher would tell give everyone some papers and have to read out loud in class books go pretty well there is nothing there yes Internet activities go to some extent I am more on the side of books.]

Hence, Student 6 is in favor of a rather traditional classroom setting with the presence of desks and tables. He sees the teacher as the authoritarian force who possesses knowledge students do not have and who is in charge of all of the issues addressed in class and the ways in which they are dealt with (cf. Broughton 1980:47). Student 6 further promotes the use of the textbook but also acknowledges online activities to some extent. Above all, he underscores the importance of spoken English which can be manifested, for example, through reading texts out loud in class. In spite of the fact that he prefers the use of textbooks, he also considers the textbooks childish and hopes that there would be "more adult-like books". He also argues that new vocabulary should be available on the computer or mobile phone in an interactive form. In other words, Student 6 puts emphasis on the central role of the teacher, the oral

sphere of English, and the textbook although he would like to make some adjustments to it.

Both Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 note that they could differentiate their teaching to be more tailored for students with autism so that their learning could be more efficiently supported. Teacher 3 strongly feels that there is simply not enough time, material and staff resources to cater for all the special needs in his classes as in addition to having students with autism there are other students with various learning and behavioral difficulties. Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 in particular stress the flagrant need for additional training for those not inclined with teaching autistic students such as those involved in teaching integration classes. Teacher 1 also makes mention of the insufficiency of time as she is occupied with other duties and responsibilities at the school, too. Teacher 2 is of the opinion that at least the school assistant resources are adequate and sufficient to meet the needs of autism education. Nonetheless, another special education teacher in the autism unit of the other school explains that it is an annual struggle to receive enough school assistant resources permitted by the educational bureau. In addition to ensuring that there is a sufficient amount of school assistants, all of the three teacher participants identify the necessity and benefit of extra training for all teachers participating in teaching students with autism.

Additionally, both Teacher 1 as well as Teacher 3 underline the importance of giving instructions in clear speech and simple language and, favorably, using written texts or images to demonstrate what is to be done. Directness, conciseness, clearness and understandability are the key in communication with and teaching of autistic students as Farrell (2006:32) suggests. Farrell (2006:32) adds that this involves paying attention to the grammatical structures in one's speech and he also stresses the relevance of checking, by means of questioning, that utterances are being comprehended by the autistic student. Teacher 2 mentions the employment of quick sketches to support the effective delivery of a message. Farrell (2006:33) supports the utilization of all kinds of visual and auditory aids to enhance dialogical and understandable communication. Thus,

using simple language, clear speech and visual presentations of information are seen as an asset when teaching and interacting with autistic students.

Moreover, Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 are strongly of the opinion that it is important and beneficial to be in contact with integrated autistic students' special class teachers in the autism unit. Teacher 1 regards that this is useful in order to obtain practical background information of the integrated autistic student which, then again, helps her to make decisions concerning her teaching methods and materials. Stone (2004:69) accentuates the relevance of becoming mindful of autistic students' needs as well as understanding the fundamental guidelines of autism instruction. Teacher 3 hopes that special education teachers in the autism unit could be like mentors who would share their first-hand knowledge and experiences of the integrated autistic students. Further, Teacher 3 thinks that it is preferable to be in contact and share experiences with the special education teachers on a regular basis if only possible. In addition, Brock et al. (2006:2, 3) highlight the importance of raising autism awareness in the whole school setting. Establishing positive communication between the professionals involved in the life and studies of an autistic student is also encouraged by Duran (2016:157). In brief, sharing knowledge and experiences and working cooperatively with the integrated autistic students' special education teachers is essential.

In summary, the teacher and student participants have some similar and some differing thoughts about the ways to improve EFL lessons for students with autism. On the one hand, the student participants generally seem to agree on the importance of the teacher not only as a mediator or deliverer of knowledge but also as the police force who takes care of overall class management. However, there are discrepancies in the opinions about the balance between spoken and written tasks with autistic students generally leaning more towards the oral sphere of foreign languages. Music, videos and exercises beyond the textbook such as handouts are also welcomed in spite of some objections. Students with autism seem to have high respect for the textbook and tend to view it as the primary source of information in addition to

the teacher as the source of knowledge and example of correct language use. On the other hand, the teacher participants agree that they ought to use more visual cues, divert more from the textbook, differentiate their teaching to become more tailor-made for autistic students, work more one-on-one with the special education student and generally gain more knowledge and experience of autistic students cooperatively with other teachers involved in autism education. All in all, the teacher and student participants find areas requiring adjustment, alteration and improvement in the EFL classes.

5 CONCLUSION

Students with autism partake in EFL teaching in two different domains either in special education classes in the autism unit or as integrated students in general education classes. The autistic students are placed into one of these two contexts depending on the severity of their condition and their degree of function. However, the decision may be altered in the course of their schooling. All of the student participants seem to be satisfied with the domain in which they study English even though they also see the need for improvements.

The teacher and school assistant participants are all very pro-inclusion in their thinking and promote integration despite some of the challenges they have faced. Stone (2004:69) agrees that autistic students' integration into a socioemotionally safe environment usually leads to uplifting learning experiences which likely boosts students' motivation and confidence. Similarly, LePage (2014:170) has an optimistic view towards integration and indicates its commonness in the case of high-functioning autistic students.

Many of the student participants of the present study had positive perceptions and experiences of the English language and EFL lessons in general. The strengths of autistic students seem to lie predominantly in their oral skills, pronunciation, concrete nouns, action verbs and gap-filling exercises according to the three teacher participants. Then again, the teacher interviewees viewed listening comprehensions, long written compositions and abstract grammar items and vocabulary as some of the challenges and weaknesses in

the EFL studies of autistic students. Many of the student participants liked all kinds of tasks involving reading, music, listening, the textbook along with its chapters' text content, short writing assignments, speaking and working with a partner, and the Internet. Moreover, some of them considered oral tasks, pronunciation, listening, reading, short writing assignments and oral or written translations easy whereas others received them with mixed feelings. Out of all the students' dislikes, exams stood out the most. Additionally, certain grammar items (such as pronouns, irregular verbs and comparative and superlative forms of adjectives) and vocabulary were seen as boring, nasty or difficult by some of the student participants. All of the above mentioned stumbling stones ought to be taken into consideration when dealing with EFL teaching for students with autism. Since autistic students generally seem to have positive perceptions and experiences of EFL, it is important to take advantage of it and their other spheres of interest and strengths related to EFL learning and teaching.

The student participants had some similar as well as some differing opinions about the materials used in the EFL classes. None of the student participants were explicitly against the textbook but instead perceived it positively or neutrally, and even seemed to emphasize the role of the textbook and see it as the primary source of information and classwork content. Out of all the student interviewees' answers, all kinds of tasks and materials including fascinating images, tables, online resources, games, speaking in pairs and intriguing story content were mostly viewed in a positive light. Other exercise types that came to the fore were translations, multiple choice questions and crosswords. The teacher participants, on the other hand, were chiefly of the opinion that autistic students exceled in oral activities as well as in gap-filling assignments which require the use of single words instead of writing longer sentences. These findings encourage future teachers to exploit the visual channel in their teaching and preferably inspire them to use intriguing material linked to the spheres of interest of their autistic students in particular. In addition to the textbook, the data suggests that exercises beyond the textbook such as handouts or online activities ought to be taken into account as well. Oral production in

pairs should also be focused on in the future as well because it is within the likes and strengths of students with autism and since it also involves social interaction with peers or adults, which is an important part of autism education in general.

Although some student participants were positive or neutral towards homework, others did not like homework at all and considered it to be one of their greatest dislikes in foreign language learning. The teachers of the present study generally viewed homework as an essential part of language learning. However, all of them made exceptions and modifications in homework and evaluation to some extent in the case of students with autism. Moreover, due to the various learning difficulties, deficits and overall anxiety experienced by some students with autism, it can be argued that homework should be lessened or at least modified to be more encouraging, supportive and tailor-made for autistic students in their EFL studies. As for evaluation, the communicative aspect and the development of practical oral language skills are highlighted in spite of the fact that Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 are still relatively conventional in their teaching and use course exams and vocabulary quizzes as a base for much of their evaluation. Then again, three of the student participants are explicitly against exams and have very negative experiences of them, which suggests that autistic students should be assessed primarily through different methodology and distinct criteria such as putting emphasis on all kinds of active participation in both classwork and homework. Such emphases are already taken into consideration by all three teacher participants. This form of continuous assessment is also underlined in the national curriculum and prompted in the curricula of the two schools of the present study.

The essential role of the teacher as a mediator of knowledge and authority of classroom management was highlighted by many of the student interviewees, most of whom also acknowledged the importance of having school assistants although some older students minimized their relevance. The significant role of school assistants was also pointed out by the teacher participants. The school assistant was seen particularly as a differentiator of classroom input to be more

sensitive for the needs of autistic students and therefore enabling them to stay focused on the actual teaching as well as helping them to participate and advance in activities done in class with the rest of the group in an integration setting. The one school assistant interviewed for the present study did not recognize her role as indispensable but rather saw her role as that of a facilitator, supporter and instructor for the autistic student to help him/her to actively follow teaching and thus benefit from the EFL classes. The interaction between these educational professionals and their autistic students was mainly found to be positive. In brief, teachers and school assistants play a vital role in the studies of students with autism both positively and negatively. It can be concluded that in addition to having good and sensible teachers it is crucial to have a sufficient number of school assistant staff due to their relevant role in autism education in all its contexts.

The participants of the present study also shared their ideas about the ways in which EFL lessons could be improved. The analyses derived from student interviews suggest that, in general, the oral sphere of English should be emphasized although this idea was confronted by some interviewees. The data also encourages the use of authentic audiovisual materials, such as music and videos, as well as handouts or equivalent assignments beyond the textbook in addition to the employment of the actual textbook. Achieving a good and peaceful studying atmosphere was seen as a clear priority target. The teachers were rather unanimous that more visual support in the form of images, quick sketches, supportive signs and written text should be provided for the autistic students according to their individual needs. Moreover, simplicity, concreteness, compactness and clarity of teacher output ought to be enforced. Further, more training is needed to equip future teachers with the necessary knowledge and know-how to encounter students with special needs such as those with ASD. Hence, EFL learning, teaching and training for students with autism is in need of improvements and modifications.

It is to be borne in mind that the present study is based on the individual experiences of the student, teacher and school assistant participants. Although

some common views can be identified, each autistic student still has his/her individual needs and wishes concerning EFL learning, which is also underlined in the literature review. Naturally, the age of the student participants in addition to other factors also affect the students' perceptions and experiences. Moreover, even though in some cases many students and teachers shared similar views on certain aspects, such as on students' strengths in oral production and the visual channel, it is interesting to notice that in other cases many students and teachers had dissimilar perceptions of some phenomena in relation to EFL learning. For example, whereas the teachers were of the opinion that listening and reading comprehension were one of their autistic students' weaknesses, the students themselves considered them as one of their strengths and likes. All in all, a language teacher involved in autism education must consider how to take autistic students' wishes and special needs into account, but still hold on to the learning objectives.

Despite the benefits of a flexible semi-structured interview, perhaps a more structured method could have been employed in order to narrow down the themes and specifically fix on certain topics in all of the interviews and therefore obtain more precise perceptions of those particular issues. In addition, more than merely one school assistant should have been interviewed to gain more valid insights into their work and thus draw firmer conclusions. Further, more student and teacher participants from different schools should be interviewed in order to reach more reliable conclusions, gain a broader and a more objective outline of the current situation, and even make plausible generalizations. This was not, however, possible to carry out in the scope of the Master's thesis. An additional problem with all of the teacher participants in the present study was their lack of qualifications as special education teachers in spite of their previous work experience with children with special needs. Then again, perhaps the present study does depict the current situation in Finland since EFL education specifically designed for students with autism continues being a relatively novel and undeveloped phenomenon and, furthermore, it is not even effectively realized in all schools in Finland in which there are students with autism.

Even though the student participants shared experiences from both the autism unit and the integration setting, one of the drawbacks was that Student 5 and Student 6 no longer studied English at the time of the interviews and therefore their answers do not reflect the current issues in EFL learning for autistic students. Additionally, since students of different ages, classes and schools were interviewed, it naturally led to the fact that the participants, studying contexts and materials such as textbooks were very heterogeneous. More reliable conclusions of, for example, teaching materials could have been drawn if all the students had been of the same age group in the same school and therefore most likely had used a similar textbook. However, there is also an asset in the heterogeneity of the present study as it can possibly paint a more versatile depiction of the current situation of EFL learning and teaching for students with autism in Finland.

Moreover, there was a time gap of approximately five years between some of the voice recorded interviews. There were also disproportions in the overall lengths of the interviews. Furthermore, all of the student participants were males and therefore it would have been important and interesting to include females as well in order to gain a more multidimensional picture of the overall phenomenon. All in all, despite the differences in time, space, age, materials, and content, perhaps the present study gives insights into the on-going issues in EFL teaching for autistic students in Finland in the course of the last few years.

Additionally, English is a widely employed and useful language in international communication. Hence, depending on the learner's skill levels and degree of function, it is also important to give students with disabilities, such as those with autism, the opportunity to study English in order for them to cope better in and integrate into the changing, globalizing and ever more international world around them.

In conclusion, due to the restrictions of the Master's thesis and the vastness of the area of study, there were certain aspects that could not be tackled within the boundaries of this thesis. It would have been intriguing to further analyze,

compare and contrast in depth, perhaps quantitatively, certain perceptions that autistic students, their teachers and particularly their school assistants have on EFL learning and teaching both in autism education as well as in integration contexts. However, it is something that can be researched in the future, possibly in a doctoral dissertation on a similar issue.

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APPENDICES

*Lomakkeen täyttöohje: Ole hyvä ja täytä **kaikki** Sinulle sopivat vaihtoehdot.*

SUOSTUMUS TUTKIMUKSEN OSALLISTUJAKSI

Tutkimuksen suorituspaikka:
Tutkimuksen tekijä:
Tutkimuksen ohjaaja:
Tutkimusta tekevä yliopisto ja laitos:

Kyseessä on Pro gradu -tutkielmaa varten tehtävä tutkimus, jonka nykyinen päätarkoitus on selvittää, mitä käsityksiä opettajilla, koulunkäyntiavustajilla ja autismin kirjoon kuuluvilla oppilailla on englannin kielen opiskelusta ja opettamisesta. Tutkimus toteutetaan seurannan, muistiinpanojen ja ääninauhoitettujen haastatteluiden avulla. Seuranta tapahtuu joidenkin tuntien ja/tai koulupäivien aikana. Aineistoa tutkitaan laadullisesti. Tutkimus olisi tarkoitus tehdä maaliskuun ja huhtikuun aikana 2017. Lisätietoja varten voi ottaa yhteyttä tutkimuksen tekijään.

Tutkimusta varten kerätty aineisto käsitellään niin, että osallistujan henkilöllisyys ei paljastu. Aineistoa säilytetään tutkimusta tekevässä yliopistossa ja se sijoitetaan tutkimuksen päätyttyä kirjaston sähköiseen arkistoon. Osallistujalle kerrotaan, milloin ja missä tilanteissa tutkimustietoa kerätään. Tutkimuksen osallistuja voi halutessaan myös perua osallistumisensa.

1. Suostun siihen, että kirjoittamiani tekstejä kerätään ja tallennetaan ☐
2. Suostun siihen, että tutkimustilanteessa tuottamiani kirjallisia materiaaleja kerätään ja tallennetaan ☐
3. Suostun siihen, että haastatteluni
    ☐ ääninauhoitetaan
4. Suostun siihen, että vuorovaikutustani
    ☐ ääninauhoitetaan
    ☐ seurataan nauhoittamatta
5. Näin kerättyä minua koskevaa aineistoa saa käyttää
    ☐ tieteellisissä tutkimuksissa ja julkaisuissa (esim. tässä Pro gradu –tutkimuksessa)
    ☐ tieteellisissä esitelmissä
    ☐ opetus- ja koulutilanteissa

Paikka:

Aika:

Allekirjoitus:

Nimen selvennys (etunimet ja sukunimi/nimet):

*Lomakkeen täyttöohje: Ole hyvä ja täytä **kaikki** Sinulle sopivat vaihtoehdot.*

HUOLTAJAN SUOSTUMUS: LAPSEN OSALLISTUMINEN TUTKIMUKSEEN

Tutkimuksen suorituspaikka:
Tutkimuksen tekijä:
Tutkimuksen ohjaaja:
Tutkimusta tekevä yliopisto ja laitos:

Kyseessä on Pro gradu -tutkielmaa varten tehtävä tutkimus, jonka nykyinen päätarkoitus on selvittää, mitä käsityksiä opettajilla, koulunkäyntiavustajilla ja autismin kirjoon kuuluvilla oppilailla on englannin kielen opiskelusta ja opettamisesta. Tutkimus toteutetaan seurannan, muistiinpanojen ja ääninauhoitettujen haastatteluiden avulla. Seuranta tapahtuu joidenkin tuntien ja/tai koulupäivien aikana. Aineistoa tutkitaan laadullisesti. Tutkimus olisi tarkoitus tehdä maaliskuun ja huhtikuun aikana 2017. Lisätietoja varten voi ottaa yhteyttä tutkimuksen tekijään.

Tutkimusta varten kerätty aineisto käsitellään niin, että osallistujan henkilöllisyys ei paljastu. Aineistoa säilytetään tutkimusta tekevässä yliopistossa ja se sijoitetaan tutkimuksen päätyttyä kirjaston sähköiseen arkistoon. Osallistujalle kerrotaan, milloin ja missä tilanteissa tutkimustietoa kerätään. Tutkimuksen osallistuja voi halutessaan myös perua osallistumisensa.

1. Suostun siihen, että lapseni kirjoittamia tekstejä kerätään ja tallennetaan ☐
2. Suostun siihen, että lapseni tutkimustilanteessa tuottamia kirjallisia materiaaleja kerätään ja tallennetaan ☐
3. Suostun siihen, että lapseni haastattelu
　　　☐ ääninauhoitetaan
4. Suostun siihen, että lapseni vuorovaikutusta
　　　☐ ääninauhoitetaan
　　　☐ seurataan nauhoittamatta
5. Näin kerättyä lastani koskevaa aineistoa saa käyttää
　　　☐ tieteellisissä tutkimuksissa ja julkaisuissa (esim. tässä Pro gradu –tutkimuksessa)
　　　☐ tieteellisissä esitelmissä
　　　☐ Opetus- ja koulutilanteissa

Paikka:

Aika:

Allekirjoitus:

Nimen selvennys (etunimet ja sukunimi/nimet):

HAASTATTELURUNKO

OPETTAJALLE

Opettajankoulutus/täydennyskoulutus

Miten koulutuksessa on otettu huomioon vieraan kielen opettaminen autistiselle oppilaalle? Millainen tarve on lisäkoulutukselle?

Oppilasaines

Minkä tyyppisiä autistisia oppilaita koulussasi on?

Oppiaines

Mitä oppimateriaaleja käytät?

Mitkä asiat helpottavat autistisen oppilaan englannin opiskelua?

Opetus ja opiskelu

Miten koulussasi englannin opetus järjestetään?

Miten eriytät opetusta?

Mitä haasteita on englannin opiskelussa tai opettamisessa?

Mikä on vahvin/heikoin osa-alue englannin kielessä? (Kuuntelu, kirjoittaminen, lukeminen, puhuminen, kielioppi, lausuminen…)

Mikä on opetuksen tavoite/painopiste?

Minkä tyyppisistä tehtävistä oppilas hyötyy eniten englannin opiskelussa?

Millainen vuorovaikutus on sinun ja oppilaan välillä?

Mitä onnistumisen tai epäonnistumisen kokemuksia sinulla on opettamisesta?

Autistisen oppilaan arviointi

Miten arvioit oppilasta? (ml. läksyt, kokeet)

Käytäntö

Miten kehittäisit opetustasi? Mitä käytännön vinkkejä antaisit opettajalle, joka alkaa opettaa englantia autistiselle oppilaalle?

Kysymyksiä? Kommentteja? Lisättävää?

AVUSTAJALLE

Miten ohjaat/tuet autistisen oppilaan työskentelyä tunnilla?

Miten tärkeänä pidät avustajan roolia tunneilla?

Mikä on haastavinta avustajan työssä?

Mitä onnistumisen kokemuksia sinulla on avustajana englannin tunneilla?

Mitä käytännön vinkkejä antaisit aloittavalle avustajalle?

Kysymyksiä? Kommentteja? Lisättävää?

OPPILAALLE

<u>Yleisesti</u>

Tykkäätkö opiskella englantia? Miksi? Mikset?

<u>Opiskelun kuvailu</u>

Minkälainen on kiva/ikävä englannin tunti?

Mikä on kivaa/helppoa englannin opiskelussa?

Mikä on ikävää/vaikeaa englannin opiskelussa?

Minkälaisista tehtävistä tykkäät? (Valitse kirjasta tai kerro.) Miksi?

Minkälaiset tehtävistä et tykkää? (Valitse kirjasta tai kerro.) Miksi?

<u>Avustus</u>

Millaista apua tarvitset tunnilla?

Kysymyksiä? Kommentteja? Lisättävää?