

” You treat a person as a person.”
Higher education English teachers’ experiences
and views of teaching multicultural groups.

Bachelor’s thesis
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| Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Maahanmuutto, kehittyneet tiedonkulun ja matkustuksen keinot, sekä lisääntynyt kansainvälisyys työelämässä ovat tuoneet monikulttuurisuuden osaksi arkipäivää myös Suomessa. Monikulttuurisuuden lisääntyminen näkyy myös koulu- ja korkeakoulumaailmassa, mikä tuo opettajille ja heidän ammattitaidolleen uudenlaisia haasteita. Vaikka monikulttuuristen ryhmien opettamista on tutkittu aikaisemmin peruskoulukontekstissa, korkeakoulukontekstiin sijoittuva tutkimus on vähäisempää. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää korkeakoulujen englannin opettajien näkemyksiä ja kokemuksia ko. ryhmien opettamisesta.</p> <p>Tutkimus toteutettiin teemahaastatteluina. Haastateltavat ovat kolme suomalaisissa korkeakouluissa englanninopettajana työskentelevää henkilöä, joista kaksi on syntyperäisiä suomalaisia ja yksi syntyperältään ja kulttuuritaustaltaan pohjoisamerikkalainen. Haastattelumateriaali analysoitiin käyttämällä laadullista sisällönanalyysiä, joka toteutettiin aineistolähtöisesti.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat monikulttuuristen ryhmien opettamisen olevan opettajien kokemuksen mukaan sekä palkitsevaa että haastavaa. Toisin kuin aiemmassa tutkimuksessa, haastateltavien mainitsevat haasteet eivät kuitenkaan liity opettajan omaan jaksamiseen tai resurssien ja koulutuksen puutteeseen, vaan suurimmalta osin opiskelijoiden kielitaitotason eroihin. Erot nykyisen ja aikaisemman tutkimuksen tulosten välillä liittyvät peruskoulu- ja korkeakouluopetuksen välisiin eroihin niin opetuksen luonteen kuin opiskelijoiden iänkin suhteen.</p> | |
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1 INTRODUCTION

The societies and countries around the world have become increasingly multicultural. Humanitarian crises leading to massive flows of immigrants in the Western world, the rapidly developing ways of communication and traveling that make cultural mixing easy, as well as the internationalization and growing amount of multicultural co-operation in working life have changed the way culture and multiculturalism are met in daily life. The increasing amount of different cultures present in the society is a part of the present-day life in Finland as well, thus presenting new types of challenges to our society. Although Finland has its own cultural minorities that have been present for a long time, e.g. the Sámi and the Romani people, the steady flow of people from different and, to our society, new cultures sets challenges to both the society at large as well as the individuals.

The changes in the cultural landscape of Finland have an effect on the educational sector as well. Faced with the increasingly multicultural groups of students, the ways teachers are coping with the aforementioned changes in their work are put to test. Although multicultural education is not a new phenomenon around the world and is thus rather widely researched, a view point that has received less attention is the way teachers themselves see their task of teaching multicultural groups. Since teachers are the ones who face the challenges provided by these increasingly culturally heterogeneous classrooms in their day-to-day life and in a very basic, practical level, it would be of utmost importance that their voices be heard when the matter is discussed.

Teachers' experiences and views of teaching multicultural groups have previously not been studied to a great extent in the Finnish context. Furthermore, the few studies conducted on the topic (see Suutari 2010 and Xerri 2016) are focused on the experiences and views of teachers who work in basic education, which leaves the experiences and views of higher education teachers an uncharted area. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to conduct research on the aforementioned topic in relation to higher education teachers. For this study, three English teachers working in Finnish higher education institutions were interviewed regarding their experiences and views of teaching multicultural groups. The study focuses on the rewarding aspects of teaching multicultural groups as well as the challenging or negative aspects of the aforementioned.

Next, the theoretical background of the present study will be discussed, followed then by a short overview of the methods used while conducting this study. After these, the results will be reported

and discussed in detail. The conclusion of the present study explores the possibilities for further study on the topic.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, previous research regarding culture, multiculturalism and multiculturalism in education are discussed. First, definitions of culture and the concept of multiculturalism are examined. Second, multiculturalism in education, especially in Finnish context is discussed, after which, the focus will be on teaching multicultural groups.

2.1 Culture and multiculturalism

When discussing *culture*, it is easy to focus on the visible aspects of it, e.g. clothing, food, ways of greeting, objects of art and traditions (Clayton 2003: 14, Pennington 2016: 1). Although it would be tempting to define a culture only by these aspects, culture as a concept encompasses much more than what can be seen on the surface (Clayton 2003: 14-15, Räsänen 2007: 18-19). In fact, according to Pennington (2016: 11-12), culture encompasses everything: It is the framework for how we see and understand ourselves, our lives, other people and even the whole universe. In a somewhat more restricted way, although following the same line of thought, Reeves-Ellington and Yammarino (2010: 23) propose that the definition of culture should encompass “objects and symbols, and the norms, values and beliefs that set the cultural boundaries recognized in the community and constructed by it”.

Moving towards more concrete ways of defining culture, Claytons (2003:15-19) defines six rather simple characteristics of culture, which can also be found in more complexity in the research by Pennington (2016: 11-23). Firstly, *culture affects all areas of life*. It shapes thinking, perceiving and behavior. Secondly, *culture is learned*. Children grow up learning the culture of their family as well as the larger social circle of the family, meaning that culture is not something genetic but something everyone learns. Thirdly, *culture is shared*. Communities have certain cultural features that are shared by its members but not necessarily by people outside the community. These feats are constructed by the members themselves. Fourthly, *culture is dynamic*, i.e. over time, it tends to change. Fifthly, *people rarely pay attention to their own culture*. Since culture is something everyone learns in childhood, it is easy to see one’s own cultural assumptions and beliefs as self-evident. Finally, *culture is the root of a person’s identity*. It is the core of our being, a great part of what makes us who we are.

Since the deep cultural structures are such an essential part of one’s identity, challenging them often leads to difficult situations and even conflicts (Räsänen 2007: 19, Lewis 2006: 9). These structures,

i.e. worldviews, beliefs and values, usually get challenged when people from different cultural backgrounds meet, which makes finding an attitude of mutual respect an absolute necessity (Lewis 2006: 9) According to Nieto (2010: 67), one possible approach for addressing potential conflict and inequality as well as fulfilling the need for finding mutual understanding between cultures is *multiculturalism*. Multiculturalism is a movement originating in the United States in order to fight the Eurocentric ideals regarding the society and the hegemony of the culture of the majority (Ravitch 2016: 2-4). However, multiculturalism has developed over time and is considered a broad umbrella term for various definitions and aspects (Ravitch 2016: 2-4, Lewis 2006: 11). Clayton (2003: 169-170) defines multiculturalism as an approach that sees the differences between different cultural groups and appreciates them. As she goes on to point out, instead of aiming to fade away the distinctive features of different cultural groups, i.e. assimilating them with other groups, multiculturalism promotes equality and equal chances for people from different cultural backgrounds.

2.2 Multicultural education

Multicultural education, also called *intercultural education* in some parts of the world, is an approach that adapts multiculturalism into the educational domain (Ravitch 2016: 4, Nieto 2010: 67-68). Having its roots in the civil rights movement in the United States of 1950's and 60's, multicultural education as a concept has developed and gained different variations over the decades (Holm and Zilliacus 2009: 14, Ramsey et al. 2003: 17-19). However, weaving through the different variations is the main idea of accepting and accommodating to racial, cultural as well as lingual pluralism in class (Holm and Zilliacus 2009: 4). Nieto's (2010: 68) definition of multicultural education includes seven characteristics of multiculturalism. According to Nieto (2010: 68), multicultural education is 1) *antiracist education*, 2) *basic education*, 3) *important for all students*, 4) *pervasive*, 5) *education for social justice*, 6) *a process*, and 7) *critical pedagogy*.

When discussing multicultural education in the Finnish context, it is first important to consider the cultural setting of Finland. In relation to Finnish society and its culture, it seems to be common to assume that the cultural landscape of our country has been rather homogenous and unvaried right until recent years and the common trends of immigration (Dervin, Paatela-Nieminen, Kuoppala and Riitaoja 2012: 1-3, Graeffe and Lestinen 2012: 110). However, this view leaves without attention the quite rich cultural, lingual and religious variety that can be found within the minority communities in Finland (Dervin et al. 2012: 2, Graeffe and Lestinen 2012:110). As Graeffe and Lestinen (2012:110-

112) point out, Finland's history and geographical closeness with both Sweden and Russia have contributed to the variety of cultures in the country, which can be seen in the official status of the Swedish language and the Swedish-speaking Finns as well as the fact that today Russians are the largest lingual as well as ethnic minority in Finland. Graeffe and Lestinen continue with the important notion of other lingual and cultural minorities, including the Finnish indigenous people, i.e. Sámi, as well as the Romani. Both of these groups have their own distinct cultures within the larger majority culture. In addition to the aforementioned ethnic and lingual minority groups, all of which have been present in the Finnish society for a long time, the number of immigrants from all over the world has been going steadily up during the past years (Finnish Immigration Service 2017a, 2017b). This has led to new kinds of cultural challenges for the Finnish education system.

Promoted in the national core curricula of the 1970's and 1980's under the concept of 'international education', the multicultural education agenda has been present in the Finnish educational landscape since the beginning of the school reform (Räsänen 2007: 19). The national core curricula of 1990's and those of 2004 further on stress the importance of multiculturalism as a core value for education for global responsibility (Räsänen 2007: 19-21). As Räsänen (2007: 20-21) points out, the 2004 National core curriculum for basic education states that when aiming for the endorsement of multiculturalism in education, it is important to take into consideration the roots of Finnish cultures, the minority culture within the majority culture, as well as the growing diversity within the majority culture due to the arrival of immigrants from various cultural backgrounds. The new National core curriculum for basic education (Opetushallitus 2016: 24) continues promoting the same views on multiculturalism by stating that Finnish basic education aims to support the cultural heritage of the pupils and to help them grow as active members of their own society, all the while enforcing interest and respect towards those with different cultural backgrounds and values. The curriculum goes on to mention that "basic education lays the foundation for global citizenship that respects human rights and encourages the pupils to act for positive change" (Opetushallitus 2016: 24).

Graeffe and Lestinen (2012) have researched the practical implementations of multicultural values and practices in two Finnish educational institutes, Meri-Rastila school in Helsinki and Itä-Suomen koulu (The Finnish-Russian School of Eastern Finland) that operates in Joensuu, Lappeenranta and Imatra. According to their observations, both of these schools have managed to see cultural variety as a strength and an aspect that should be embraced in everyday school practices. Taking in consideration the lingual, cultural and religious differences among the pupils and providing both support for one's own culture as well as tools for learning to respect and value other cultures has

proven to be a successful approach to the challenges of multicultural classrooms (Graeffe and Lestinen 2012: 120-122).

2.3 Multiculturalism from the teacher's perspective

The increasingly multicultural classrooms in Western societies, including Europe and Finland, demand relevant and fitting approaches from the teachers in order to respond to the challenges provided by these multicultural groups (Gay 1986: 155-156). According to Räsänen (2014: 137), since the teacher is in the position of building bridges and creating mutual understanding between pupils and parents from different cultural backgrounds, it is of utmost importance to learn the skills needed for this task during teacher education. In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture has faced this demand by creating plans for education for internationalization purposes as well strategies for internationalization of higher education institutions (Räsänen 2014: 136-137). However, as Räsänen (2014: 137-138) points out, in spite of these plans and strategies, many researchers have noted that teacher education still provides somewhat inadequate skills for reaching the goals of successful multicultural approach to education. According to the summary Räsänen goes on to make based on previous research, there are five important multicultural competencies that are important for future teachers to learn during their education: 1) knowledge of one's own culture, 2) knowledge of the cultures of others', 3) attitudes and skills in relation to communication, 4) societal knowledge and responsibility, and 5) special pedagogical skills as experts of multicultural education (Räsänen 2014: 138).

Teaching multicultural classrooms has previously been studied quite extensively from the point of view of teacher education and the intercultural competencies needed by future teachers (e.g. Gay 1986, Dervin et al. 2012, Räsänen 2014). Many of the studies regarding teaching multicultural classrooms fall under multicultural education, which means that many of them take place in the context of basic education (e.g. Gay 1986, Clayton 2003). The studies of multicultural education, including those taking place in basic education context, provide theoretical information on multicultural environment and multicultural classrooms (e.g. Gay 1986, Clayton 2003, Räsänen 2014). For example, the previously mentioned multicultural competencies compiled by Räsänen (2014: 138) provide important theoretical framework regarding the topic of the present study.

The studies focusing on multicultural classrooms and multiculturalism in the higher education context seem to often focus on the point of view of how multicultural values are recognized and taught on campuses (e.g. Ravitch 2016, Coté, Mann, Mukombe, Bach Nielsen and Gonzalez Wahl 2016). The subjective experiences of teachers themselves are rarer as topics of research, although as Hyypä, Kiviniemi, Kukkola, Latomaa and Sandelin (2015) point out, studying experiences of individuals and communities can be useful for the society and working life. According to Hyypä et al. (2015), an individual's experiences can even be characterized as being something fundamental and of utmost importance for the development of human societies and humanity itself, thus making it a relevant topic of research. However, some studies, although not directly focused on experiences themselves, use experiences as a tool for discussion on their topic. For example, Coté et al. (2016) discuss how diversity is seen and treated in American college classrooms, basing their analysis on their own experiences of participating on a course dedicated to race and ethnic relations. In their study, Coté et al. (2016: 52-53) conclude that these courses are not easy on teachers or students since the topic of the course, race and ethnic relations, is a very much personal and sensitive topic. However, they continue to note that although challenging, courses on race and ethnic relations are paramount for helping both teachers and students to understand cultural minorities and to act accordingly in multicultural encounters in higher education. To achieve this, it is important not only for the teachers and the students themselves to gain understanding and to change the patterns of their behavior, but also for the institutions, the colleges, to adapt their policies and practices (Coté et al. 2016: 52-53). Similar to the study of Coté et al. (2016), Acosta, Moore, Perry and Edwards (2016) use their own experiences in discussing how diversity should be taught in higher education.

Another point of view that has been given less attention to in research is that of teaching specific subjects to a multicultural group. As previously mentioned, a great deal of studies regarding teaching multicultural groups are conducted from the point of view of basic education, where subject teachers are fewer. Hence, the studies tend not to focus on teaching specific subjects but teaching classes in general. Suutari (2010) and Xerri (2016) have aimed to fill this research gap by studying the views primary and secondary school English teachers have regarding teaching multicultural groups. In her Master's Thesis, Suutari (2010) discusses the views of eight secondary school English teachers working in the Helsinki area and in Jyväskylä. Suutari concentrates on finding out how these teachers define multicultural teaching, how they perceive teaching English to multicultural groups and how they see their students with diverse backgrounds. According to the study (Suutari 2010: 86), teachers feel there are both negative and positive aspects to teaching multicultural groups, although as Suutari goes on to point out, the amount of challenges seems to be more emphasized than their positive

counterparts. The aforementioned challenges seem to comprise mainly of the lack of support and resources, as well as insufficient training (Suutari 2010: 86, 103). These results are mirrored by those of the study by Xerri (2016: 28-30), which discusses the experiences six Maltese primary school teachers have regarding teaching English in a multicultural classroom environment. According to Xerri (2016: 28), it was common for the teachers of multicultural groups to feel isolated and left alone with their burden – a feeling that was mentioned by the interviewees of Suutari’s study as well.

When discussing the positive aspects of the topic at hand, both studies (Suutari 2010: 103-106, Xerri 2016: 28-30) show that in general, teachers feel that multicultural groups enrich the school environment. Interestingly, the study by Suutari (2010: 89-90, 103) also seems to point towards the fact that many of the teachers do not see it as a necessity to accommodate to pupils from different cultural backgrounds. Suutari mentions that some of them feel like the cultural background of a pupil does not matter, that they are all individuals and should be treated as such. In Suutari’s words, “teachers most often treat all their pupils in a similar manner since they consider them to be teenagers first and foremost, not representatives of a certain culture” (Suutari 2010: 103). However, as Suutari points out (2010: 89-90), this kind of approach to teaching pupils from various cultural backgrounds might be problematic, since for multicultural education to function as intended, it is important for the teacher to knowingly employ it in the teaching.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

In this chapter, the research problem, the methods and the participants of the present study are discussed in detail. First, the research problem and the research questions are presented, after which the participants of the study are presented. To conclude this chapter, the research methods are presented and discussed.

3.1 Research problem

Since multicultural and multilingual classrooms are becoming more and more common in Finland as well as all over Europe (Statistics Finland 2017), it is of utmost importance to research them in order to find solutions for the challenges these new kinds of heterogeneous groups of pupils present, but also in order to find ways to benefit from the rich cultural background of these groups. As mentioned above, teaching multicultural groups has been the subject of a variety of research. While these studies concentrate on teaching multicultural groups, with those by Suutari (2010) and Xerri (2016) concentrating specifically on teaching English to a multicultural group, they are, however, conducted in basic education contexts. Studies with the focus on English teachers working in higher education contexts, e.g. universities and universities of applied sciences, are fewer (e.g. Grasz, McAnsh & Salmijärvi 2009), thus presenting a research gap.

The aim of the present study is to address this gap by focusing on giving insight into the experiences and views that English teachers working in higher education have in relation to teaching English to multicultural and multilingual groups. In the context of this study, the aforementioned groups are synonymous to groups of foreign students on an exchange or studying for a degree in a Finnish higher education institution, or mixed groups of aforementioned foreign students and their Finnish counterparts. In relation to the research questions of the present study, while an emphasis will be given to the challenges of teaching a multicultural and multilingual group, the positive and rewarding experiences the interviewees have regarding the topic are of great importance as well.

The research questions of the study are the following:

- 1) What do language teachers working in higher education see as the most challenging aspects of teaching English to a multicultural and multilingual group?
- 2) What do language teachers working in higher education see as the most rewarding aspects of teaching English to a multicultural and multilingual group?

3.2 The participants

The participants of the present study are three English teachers working in higher education institutions in Finland. In order to guarantee the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms are used instead of their actual names, and their workplaces or the locations of these workplaces are not stated. Thus, in the present study, the participants are referred to as Kikka, Matti and Thomas. Although all of them are currently working as teachers, Matti is the only one of the group who has started his career as a teacher. Kikka and Thomas, on the other hand, had gained work experience in other sectors prior to starting their teaching career. Regarding their experiences of teaching multicultural groups, Matti, as the youngest and most recently graduated of the group, had the least experience. Kikka and Thomas both had roughly the same amount of experience between them. A relevant point in relation to the study is that while all of the teachers have past experience of teaching exchange students, or currently teach them, Thomas is the only one who has experience of teaching foreign degree students, which is an aspect of his current work as well. In addition to their work-related multicultural experience, all of the interviewees have relevant experience via their hobbies, student exchange period and/or other free time activities.

Regarding the cultural backgrounds of the participants, Matti and Kikka are both native Finnish speakers, while Thomas is a native English speaker from North America who has been living in Finland since the beginning of the millenium. The fact that the participants differ in their native languages and cultural backgrounds adds an interesting aspect to the present study where cultures and multiculturalism are discussed.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Since the aim of the present study is to examine the subjective views and experiences of teachers, the data was collected by using an *interview*, and to be precise, a *semi-structured interview* as a research method. As Hyvärinen (2017) points out, since the researcher is usually not present while the aforementioned experiences take place, interview is a good way of gathering information about them. Semi-structured interview as a research method allows the interview to be rather free in form but at the same time concentrated on the topic at hand (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2015: 47-48). In a semi-

structured interview, the theme of the interview has been decided in advance, but the questions and their order may vary from one interview to another (Dufva 2011, Hyvärinen 2017). This gives the researcher flexibility as well as opportunities to react to the topics that are possibly raised by the interviewee and that might give the researcher important insight on the theme (Dufva 2011, Hyvärinen 2017, Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2015: 48). Also, while the aim of the present study is to examine the opinions and the views of several teachers, the semi-structured interview makes it possible to shape each interview to fit the interviewees' personalities and experiences.

An important notion regarding the interviews is that of the three interviewees, Thomas and Kikka were interviewed once, while Matti was interviewed twice. This is due to the changes in the aim of the research after the first interview, which made it necessary to complement the first interview of Matti. Another important point to mention is the nature of the semi-structured interview that was the method of gathering data. As discussed in the methods section of this study, the questions in a semi-structured interview vary from interview to interview, while the theme is common to all interviews. This leads to the fact that not all points that were discussed in the interviews were the same between the interviewees, which might reflect on the results. This fact is important to keep in mind in relation to the interview questions which can be found in Appendix 2.

The method chosen for the analysis of the data is *qualitative content analysis*. The type of content analysis that is going to be used is partly *theory-based* and partly *content-based*. This means that the aim is to mainly analyze the data as it is, without letting theoretical background or previous observations direct the analysis process (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 95-96). However, since purely content-based analysis is hard to achieve, previous theory is used as a guideline and background for the analysis, all the while aiming for as much content-based approach as possible (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009: 96-97). When considering the analysis process, it is also important to take into consideration the personal views, experiences and conceptions of the researcher. Although the researcher usually has some preconceptions regarding the topic, it is important to try to be as neutral as possible and not let them direct the analysis process.

4 TEACHER EXPERIENCES AND VIEWS

In this section the results of the study will be discussed in detail. The analysis has been divided into different sections according to the themes that came up in the interviews. However, it is important to acknowledge that the divisions between the sections and the themes are not clear-cut. Firstly, some aspects of teaching multicultural groups were seen as both challenging and rewarding. Secondly, the teachers did not see all the aspects in a similar way. This might be partly due to their different backgrounds, both in personal and working life, a factor that will be discussed in more detail later on.

Another important point regarding the results of the study is the unequal proportions of the results: although both of the research questions were initially stressed equally, during the interviews the challenging aspects ended up being stressed more, thus resulting in the below sections regarding the two research questions being of unequal length. The interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongues, i.e. the interview of Thomas was conducted in English, while those of Kikka and Matti were conducted in Finnish. The quotations of Kikka and Matti in the following sections have been translated to English by the present author.

4.2 Rewarding experiences of teaching multicultural groups

When discussing teaching English to multicultural groups, all interviewees saw positive and rewarding sides to it. Among them, having students from various cultural backgrounds was for a great part thought of as a factor that enriches the teaching, as well as the learning experience – a view that mirrors the results of previous studies as well (see Suutari 2010 and Xerri 2016). Firstly, among the interviewees of the present study, multicultural groups were seen as a setting for interesting and diverse discussions. The discussions both among the students from different cultural backgrounds and between the teacher and the aforementioned students were seen as a positive thing for both the students and the teacher. As Matti put it, when someone from a different cultural background speaks in class, others learn new things or realize something about the other culture that they had not known or understood before.

Quote 1:

It was fun and there were, like, a lot of different kinds of students who quite actively even -- talked and had conversations--. And then you could see a lot [of these situations] -- that some [students] had these, like, big aha moments, that -- when some other student

from some other place talked, for example about some cultural thing, and the other [who was listening], like, looked amazed [thinking] like ‘for real’. And [those] were like positive experiences in my opinion, to me and to all the others as well-- (Matti)

This view was echoed by Kikka, who mentioned the interesting discussions that take place when students from different countries, with different educational backgrounds and levels of English skills come together. According to her, these students often see academic studies from different angles, comparing to both the teacher and the other students, which enriches the classroom work. Interestingly, the aspect of different viewpoints on what academic work means was also seen as a challenge, an aspect that is discussed in more detail in the section 4.3.

Secondly, a rewarding aspect that comes up in the quote by Matti above as well, is the way students gain insight into something. According to Kikka, the most rewarding part of teaching both multicultural and culturally homonymous groups is when students learn to dare to speak up and use English even if they feel that their skills are not perfect or that they lacked in grammar or vocabulary. As she put it, to her it is rewarding when students notice that what they know and can do with the language is enough to get the message through even if it is imperfect. However, it is interesting to note that as Kikka said it, to her this aspect is the most rewarding one teaching *both multicultural and culturally homonymous* groups. Keeping these insights by Matti and Kikka in mind, it could be questioned whether the above-mentioned instances should be treated as something especially related to multicultural groups, or, indeed, something that is applicable to all learning instances. Seeing a student learn something or use the language with courage in spite of making mistakes seems like something every language teacher, whether of multicultural or culturally homonymous groups, would find rewarding.

Related to the above aspect of teaching English to multicultural groups, Thomas pointed out how the incoming students’ English skills have become better overall. According to him, the level of English skills among students from all over the world is rather high. The fact that the students’ English level is quite high enables Thomas to use English as a language of instruction in class, which he finds very rewarding. Interestingly, according to Thomas, when teaching multicultural groups and using English as the language of instruction, the students who most commonly find studying in English frustrating are Finnish. It is not rare for the Finnish students to come and ask for clarification in Finnish about the topics discussed during class in English, says Thomas. This feature might be due to the exchange students and foreign degree students being already used to using English as the lingua franca in their

studies and probably on their free time when living in a foreign country, while the Finnish students most probably are used to using Finnish both in their studies and in their free time.

An interesting aspect of rewarding experiences brought up by Matti was the way he is able to teach both language and culture, and to be precise, Finnish culture. According to him, exchange students coming to Finland are usually interested in learning about Finnish culture and the way of living in this country, which gives the teacher an interesting opportunity to tell them about these things. This way of being able to teach both language and culture felt like a benefit to Matti. Interestingly, the aforementioned teaching of language and culture did not, at least in Matti's case, coincide with each other: the language he teaches is English, while the cultural aspects seem to be, according to him, those of Finnish culture. This might be due to the fact that the cultural environment where the teaching takes place is that of Finnish higher education, which functions as a common factor between the students from various cultural backgrounds. In addition to this, Matti's own cultural background may be a factor as well: He is Finnish, and as he admitted during the interviews, he does not have any deeper knowledge of any English-speaking cultures, which makes teaching those cultures a challenge.

All in all, among the interviewees, teaching multicultural groups was mostly seen as a rewarding aspect of their work, for both the above-mentioned reasons as well as the nice and friendly atmosphere of these classes. As Matti put it, whether the reason behind the great atmosphere is culture-related or having to do with the exchange aspect, exchange students quite often seem to be enthusiastic and open, socially active people. In addition to the aforementioned possible reasons for the atmosphere, it is important to note that the way the students are open and enthusiastic can be a personality trait as well. Defining how much each of these reasons, culture, personal traits and being on an exchange, have an effect on the way students act and create a certain atmosphere would be an interesting point for future study.

4.3 Challenges of teaching multicultural groups

Although teaching multicultural groups was seen as an enriching aspect of their work, the teachers saw some negative or challenging sides to it as well. Of the three interviewees, Thomas did not bring as many concrete examples of challenges into the conversation as Matti and Kikka did. When asked about challenges, he admitted that there had been some challenging situations regarding multicultural groups during his career and that multicultural teaching overall presents challenges. However, during

the interview, his main focus was on discussing the positive and rewarding sides of the issue. He also stressed the way the possible challenges could or should be faced and dealt with.

Quote 2:

In the end they're all people, I mean it doesn't matter to me what bureaucracy is behind any of it. Once they're in the classroom or they're online with me and we're sharing some experience. That -- will always be the same in my mind, that you treat a person as a person. -- the rest of it, I hope, would be mostly transparent that which school did this person come from or even which country did they come from. -- I think that it's largely the case that we are able to concentrate on what the objectives are, why we're here and -- hopefully everybody's able to take what they're able to take from the course. -- that I've designed the experience well enough that it will benefit them regardless of where they've come from or where they're going. (Thomas)

This way of thinking and seeing the students as unique persons and first and foremost as individuals was echoed in previous studies as well (e.g. Suutari 2010). For Thomas, not talking about the challenges in great detail did not mean that he ignores them, only that he feels very much on top of the problems with the solutions he has come up with in regard to them. The fact that he chose not to describe the challenging situations he had faced in great detail might have also been because of his cultural background. Being originally from North America, it might be more natural for him not to state negative factors out loud or directly. Again, as is with the majority of the aspects that are considered as culturally related in the present study, defining whether the way the interviewees discuss or do not discuss the challenges is related to their cultural background or their personal traits is not easy to do. Being able to distinguish personality traits from those that the interviewees have been acculturated to would require deep knowledge of their personalities and their lives – something that is not possible in the framework of a study this size.

Since Thomas did not discuss the challenges or negative aspects related to the topic to the same extent that Matti and Kikka did, his views and experiences are featured less in this section than those of the other two.

4.3.1 The students' English skills

A challenging aspect that came up most often in the interviews was the differing levels of English skills between students. Although it is important to note that these differences can be individual, varying from student to student even within the same cultural group, the interviewees saw them also

as a phenomenon related to the student's country of origin and cultural background. According to Kikka, the differences in the students' English skills manifest themselves in various ways. Firstly, students from some countries generally seem to have a weaker set of English skills than students from other countries. Even though the students' English skills are usually tested before their acceptance to study in a Finnish higher education institution, Kikka felt that some of the students still have weaker English skills than others, which makes academic studies in the Finnish context harder for them. The reasons behind the fact that students from certain countries have weaker English skills than students from other countries have are probably manifold. It would be an interesting topic of future study to define these reasons: Whether the weaker English skills have to do with the way English is taught at schools, the role of English language in the societies of these countries, the culture, or other possible reasons.

On one hand, the differing English skills of the students present challenges to students as well as the teachers, since these sometimes rather considerable differences affect the way the classes are planned and executed. On the other hand, Matti saw these differences as a positive thing as well, in addition to the challenges they provide:

Quote 3:

--of course, it can make things harder too, but on the other hand I think it would be quite boring if everyone was, like, on the same level. To me, [the fact] that there are people with different levels [of English skills] makes it, like, the learning within the group and to and from each other kind of make sense. -- because then, I think, the stronger ones can kind of like teach the others by being an example --. (Matti)

Secondly, the differences are not always visible in the overall level of the students' English skills, but in either written or oral language production or the balance of these two within a student's skill set. Interestingly, one of the few differences brought up by all three interviewees was the variety of different levels of writing skills between the students. This unanimity might be a result of the fact that writing exercises are a part of higher education English studies where the students' level of skills can be seen rather clearly. Some written tasks, i.e. essays or course papers, are usually checked quite thoroughly and graded by the teacher, which allows the teacher to get a fairly good picture of the written skills of the students. In addition to this, the way the teachers agree on this point might be due to the relative easiness of defining good written skills: There are certain rules that the written language, especially academic written language, has to follow. Whether the student knows how to follow these rules, i.e. grammar, the proper use of vocabulary, etc., or not, shows his or her level of written English skills.

Although it was important to all of them to try to avoid stereotyping or categorizing students, all of the interviewees could see some correlation between the writing skills of the students and their countries of origins. As Kikka pointed out, the level of a student's writing skills can depend on how English has been taught in schools and universities in the student's country of origin. In addition to the written skills, this applies to the oral skills and the balance of these two within a student's set of skills as well. According to Kikka, for example in some Asian countries the written skills and grammar are stressed much more than the oral skills, which leads to problems when coming to study in Finland:

Quote 4:

And then there are things that have an effect, like, that in some countries, like for example France and Japan, grammar is taught a lot but the oral skills are not, like, important or it hasn't been, like, taught in the home country. And then it comes as a shock that here [you] have to speak -- that things can't be handled just by writing. (Kikka)

On one hand, these problems with having to speak in class can be seen as related to cultural differences regarding speaking and conversation, things that will be discussed in more detail later on. On the other hand, they can also be seen as directly related to the student's oral English skills, which can differ rather extensively within a multicultural group of students. In Matti and Kikka's experience, one problem related to oral communication that presents challenges for the teacher is the students' way of pronouncing English. Heavy accents or mistakes in pronunciation that e.g. are related to the differences between the phonetic system in the student's native language and the phonetic system of English are some pronunciation-related challenges Kikka mentions having faced during her career. For example, in some Asian languages, the letters "l" and "r" are pronounced the same way, which sometimes makes pronouncing English difficult to the students speaking these Asian languages as their mother tongues. As is the case with writing, these problems were seen partly as related to the students' countries of origin as well as their native languages, a factor which can be seen in the previous comment by Kikka regarding the phonetic systems.

Facing the situations where a student's pronunciation skills are creating problems with understanding him or her can be challenging for a teacher. However, when faced with these situations, it is vital to find a way to communicate and to understand the message the student is trying to convey. Achieving this might not be simple, and the way the situations is being handled should be carefully considered.

Quote 5:

That is just a difficult situation, because I kind of would like to be, or I have to be careful there not to make [the student] feel like -- he doesn't dare to or want to talk. So then I usually try to keep [the situation] as positive as I can and -- ask about the thing in some other way -- to understand [him]. -- I prefer to let it happen in a way that I, like, don't say that 'now I didn't understand'. -- it could be quite a harsh experience [for the student] if [one] just says that 'yeah, I couldn't make any sense out of that'. (Matti)

Interestingly, a majority of the above-mentioned challenges having to do with differing English language skills are not limited to just teaching and learning instances, for they can be noted in other intercultural communication situations as well. Taking this into consideration, it could be questioned whether these challenges are unique to the educational domain, and should thus be treated as such, or if they should be seen as a part of the larger intercultural communication setting, including communicational instances outside educational setting as well. This point of view will be discussed further in the section 4.3.3, for it affects the said aspect of teaching multicultural groups as well.

4.3.2 Academic skills

Another challenging aspect that came up during the interviews was the differences in the students' academic skills. When discussing this point, it has to be recognized that the definition of academic skills, i.e. what is perceived as academic in higher education institutions around the world, is varied, as is the level of higher education altogether. Since even the word 'university' can have various different definitions and practical implementations in different cultural contexts and countries, simple definition of academic or academic skills are not easy to provide. Furthermore, students who come to study in Finnish higher education institutions may have different views of what these studies entail. This might result in some clashes between the teacher's and the students' ways of working and studying in an academic setting.

In the present study, academic skills or the lack of them are discussed from the perspective of Finnish higher education institutions and their ways of defining the aforementioned skills. Although the definition of academic skills was not specifically discussed during the interviews, it could be seen as an underlying assumption that what was meant by it was clear when discussing the topic. As one aspect of academic skills, Matti mentioned academic writing skills. As he pointed out, the students of multicultural groups might have differing views on academic writing and how it should be executed well, resulting sometimes in problems with e.g. references and citing. However, according

to Matti, these kinds of challenges can be anticipated and prepared to by the teacher. With good preparation prior to class, followed by thorough instructions of what kind of academic practices are used during the course, the challenges regarding academic writing skills can be overcome and even eliminated. Even though the groups are being taught English, the academic practices followed in the class are those that are used in Finnish higher education, Matti points out. The differences in the academic writing skills, or the lack thereof, was mentioned by Kikka as well. According to her, low levels of academic writing skills are directly related to the work load of the teacher when dealing with written tasks and the process of checking, correcting and giving feedback on them.

4.3.3 Cultural aspects of social intercourse

Although mainly seen as an enriching aspect of teaching multicultural groups, the way students behave in social situations was mentioned as being occasionally a challenge. It is important to note that when discussing the topic of social intercourse, making clear distinctions between the personal characteristics, the effects of cultural background and the upbringing of a person is rather hard. In addition, as Clayton (2003: 15-19) points out, culture itself is a complex concept that encompasses all areas of life, including the three aspects mentioned above. However, when discussing this topic with the interviewees, they mainly focused on the easily visible and almost stereotypical aspects of culture, and of these, mostly on aspects related to conversation culture, i.e. the way students speak, take turns in conversation and listen.

Quote 6:

-- on the face of it, [culture] brings to my mind -- habits that have evolved in some particular place, and, like, traditions and ways of doing things that have, like, evolved in a certain way in that environment and with certain people. That's what culture first brings to my mind. -- [the habits, the traditions and the ways of doing things] are a little different because of coincidence, or the location, different circumstances or something like that -- in different parts of the world. (Matti)

Based on the previous notion, it seems that noticing these easily visible aspects of culture is quite natural and common, even if the person doing the observations were educated on culture and knew about its various meanings and complexity. This can be seen in Matti's way of discussing culture as well, since before making a notion on the topic, he mentioned having studied ethnology. Even though he pointed out that the concept of culture can be seen from various points of views, the simple, easily visible things were the first things on his mind as well. Both Matti and Kikka brought up some

challenges of social intercourse related to these easily visible aspects of culture. Possibly due to the nature of a language class, the concrete examples of these challenges were mostly related to conversation culture. For example, according to Kikka, it is sometimes hard to engage students with certain cultural backgrounds in conversation or debate. As she pointed out, this is probably due to the fact that stating one's own opinion or trying to convince someone is not typical in these cultures.

Another point regarding the culture of conversation brought up by Kikka and Matti was that of how much students with different cultural backgrounds speak out loud and how they take turns. According to Kikka and Matti, differences in the aforementioned aspects sometimes cause challenges in class due to the fact that some students might be so eager to converse that others might not have a chance to state their opinion. For example, as Kikka and Matti pointed out, students from some Asian cultures are not accustomed to speaking up as much as students from example Spain are.

Quote 7:

-- there might be some Japanese student who -- is not accustomed to talking and then -
- doesn't get it out and then waits that everyone else has said what they want and then
me last and the opportunity [to speak] has kind of passed. -- there might be a Spanish
student who has a very small vocabulary but because the communication culture is, like,
different there [in Spain], so he comes, if necessary, even through a wall to say what he
wants to. -- the span of different communication cultures is wide too. (Kikka)

This was seconded by Matti, who said that while he tries to avoid stereotyping or acting according to them, some cultural stereotypes seem to have some kind of truth in them. Interestingly enough, this could be seen in the way both Kikka and Matti used Japanese and Spanish cultures as an example of the differences in the culture of communication.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to find out about the experiences and views higher education English teachers have regarding teaching multicultural groups. All in all, to a great extent, the interviewees found teaching the aforementioned groups to be an enriching and rewarding aspect of their work. They did see challenging aspects to the topic as well – aspects mostly related to the differences between the students' English as well as academic skills. However, as previously mentioned, the line between challenging and rewarding aspects was not always clear: Some aspects were seen as both or even something in between.

The results regarding the rewarding experiences of teaching multicultural groups are largely in line with the results of previous studies (see Suutari 2010, Xerri 2016), while the results regarding the challenges and the negative aspects of the topic differ from those of the previous studies. This might be due to the fact that the studies by Suutari (2010) and Xerri (2016) focus on the experiences and views of teachers working in basic education, while the present study is interested in those of higher education teachers. While most of the challenges presented in the previous studies are to do with the teachers' feelings of not having enough resources, support or proper education for teaching multicultural groups, these aspects did not come up in the present study. The reason behind this is probably grounded in the differing natures of basic education and higher education. First of all, the students in basic education are a great deal younger than the ones in higher education, thus demanding different types of resources and attention from the teacher. Secondly, the duration of higher education English courses is quite often much shorter than the English lessons in basic education, which are often conducted throughout the academic year. The courses being shorter in length may be a factor contributing to the feeling of having enough resources. Thirdly, as one of the interviewees, Matti, also mentioned, one of the purposes of basic education, in addition to teaching the students the school subjects, is to educate them. Naturally, educating children is at its nature something rather different from teaching students in higher education, thus possibly demanding more from the teachers.

Another interesting point regarding the present study is that of the possible influence of a teacher's own cultural background on the results. For example, the way the interviewees of this study decided to discuss the challenges regarding the topic, or in the case of Thomas, not discuss them to a great extent, might be related to their cultural background as well as their current situation as a foreigner immersed in another culture. An interesting topic for further research would be to study these differences and to try to determine whether their roots were in the said cultural backgrounds,

differences in their personalities, or their attitudes towards the topic. An interesting aspect of this would be to also take into consideration the previous work experience of the interviewees.

The number of interviewees participating in the study was not extensive, which leads to the results not being widely generalizable. Because of the framework for this study is that of a Bachelor's Thesis, the extent of it, including the number of interviewees and the way the topic is being narrowed down, depends very much on the limits of the said thesis. However, when experiences are discussed, individual views are important as well, even if one could not apply them to the wider group of teachers. The topic of multiculturalism and multicultural groups in education is highly relevant to the challenges faced by the present day educational system in Finland, thus making the present study relevant.

The topic of teaching multicultural groups is a vast area of study with multiple possible aspects for further research. The increasingly multicultural societies have an effect in all areas of life, including the educational domain, which makes the topic of teaching multicultural groups a highly relevant one to research. By finding out what the teachers who deal with multicultural groups in their day-to-day life feel and think about the topic – what they see as rewarding and what kinds of challenges they face – makes it possible to develop new approaches and solutions for facing multiculturalism in higher education. Using teachers' experiences in developing multicultural education further on and thus providing teachers with tools for working with multicultural classes is an important task for future research. If the levels of immigration keep rising and the societies keep getting increasingly multicultural, the aforementioned development of multicultural education will indeed be much needed in the near future.

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APPENDIX 1: ORIGINAL QUOTES IN FINNISH

Quote 1:

Oli kivaa ja oli erilaisia niinku, paljon erilaisia opiskelijoita jotka toi niinku tosi aktiivisestikin toi niinku kaikkee, tai jutteli ja keskusteli ja kaikkea tämmöstä uutta ideaa ja. Ja sit siellä näky paljon sitä että niinku jotku, jotku sai tosi semmosia isoja ahaa-elämyksiä, että, että niinku ne tajus ku niinku toinen opiskelija jostain toisaalta puhu, vaikka jostain kulttuurillisesta asiasta ni sit toinen niinku ihan ihmeissään siellä katto että ”oikeesti”. Ja, ja niinku se oli positiivisia kokemuksia mun mielestä itselle ja kaikille muillekin mun mielestä siinä. (Matti)

Quote 3:

No en mä tiiä, totta kai se voi vaikeuttaakin mun mielestä se ois aika tylsää, jos kaikki ois niinku samalla tasolla sitte toisaalta. Että, musta se, että siellä on eritasoista porukkaa ni se tekee siitä niinku tavallaan siitä ryhmän sisäisestä ja toisten opettamisesta ja toisilta oppimisesta nimenomaan niinku järkevää -- mua ei haittaa se ollenkaan se sekaisuus mikä siellä on että siellä on niinku tosi paljon erilaista porukkaa, koska must sitte ne vahvemmat voi sit taas tavallaan niinku opettaa esimerkillään toisia ja niin eespäin et siinä tulee sellasta oppimista. (Matti)

Quote 4:

Ja sit semmoset asiat vaikuttaa niinku että joissain maissa opetetaan paljon kielioppia, kirjallista kieltä, niinku vaikka Ranskassa tai just Japanissa, mut suullinen taito ei oo niinku tärkeä tai sitä ei oo niinku siellä kotimaassa opetettu, ja sitte tulee shokkina että täällä pitää puhua ja olla joku mielipide että asiat ei selviä pelkästään kirjottamalla. (Kikka)

Quote 5:

Se on just se hankala tilanne koska tavallaan mä haluaisin, tai pitää olla hyvin varovainen siinä, ettei aiheuta semmosta oloa että niinkun...sit se ei uskalla puhua tai ei halua puhua. Ni sit mä yleensä kyllä yritän pitää mahdollisimman positiivisena tai jotenki niinku, kysyä vaan toisella tavalla sen asian uudestaan tai jotain vastaavaa et siitä sais silleen selvää koska. Ja sitte jotenki aina ku sellanen mahdollisuus on, niin sit ku mä saan sitä dataa siitä ihmisestä niin sitte ne antaa jonkinlaisia vink- niinku semmosia tarkkoja käytännönläheisiä vinkkejä että miten sitä ääntämistä vois parantaa, mutta, mutta. Mut mieluummin tosiaan annan sen mennä silleen, että en niinku sano että nyt en kyllä saanu selvää tai että. Vaan niinku mieluummin jotenki muuten yritän jotenki -- koska, koska se...se mun käsityksen mukaan voi olla aika tyly kokemus, jos sanoo vaan että joo että tosta ei kyllä saanu mitään selvää, että. (Matti)

Quote 6:

-- mutta ehkä kulttuurista mulle tulee päällisin puolin mieleen sellaset, jonkun tietyn paikan, niinku tietyssä paikassa kehittyneet tavat ja niinku perinteet ja toimintatavat mitkä on niinku siinä ympäristössä kehittyneet sellasiks tietynlaisiks tietynlaisten ihmisten kanssa. Se tulee mulle ensimmäisenä mieleen kulttuurista. Ja site ne on vähän erilaisia syystä että sattuma tai se sijainti, erilaiset olosuhteet tai vastaavaa, niinku eri puolilla maailmaa. (Matti)

Quote 7:

Se haitari on tota aika suuri, ja sitte riippuu tosiaan kulttuurista et voi olla joku japanilainen opiskelija joka osais hirveen hyvin mutta ei oo tottunu puhumaan ni sitte ei niinku, ei, ei saa sanottua sitä asiaansa ja sitten odottaa että kaikki muut on saanu sanottavansa ja minä viimeisenä ja sitte se on tavallaan menny ohi se tilanne. Että tota voi olla joku espanjalaisopiskelija jolla on hyvin pieni sanavarasto mutta koska siellä on niinku toisenlainen kommunikaatiokulttuuri ni se tulee

vaikka seinästä läpi että se saa asian sanottua. Niinku, siinä on iso haitari myöskin että minkälaisesta kommunikaatiokulttuurista tullaan. (Kikka)

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions in Finnish

- 1) Taustakysymyksiä:
 - Minkälainen koulutus sinulla on?
 - Minkälainen työkokemus sinulla on?
 - Kauanko olet työskennellyt nykyisessä työssäsi?
 - Minkälaista aiempaa kokemusta sinulla on ulkomaalaisten vaihto-opiskelijoiden opettamisesta? Oletko muuten ollut tekemisissä vaihto-opiskelijoiden kanssa?
 - Minkälaisia kursseja olet opettanut nykyisessä työssäsi?
 - Oletko itse kulttuuritaustaltasi suomalainen? Minkälaista aiempaa kokemusta sinulla on monikulttuurisuudesta ja/tai vieraista kulttuureista?

- 2) Kysymykset vaihto-opiskelijakurssiin liittyen:
 - Mitä odotat tulevalta vaihto-opiskelijoiden kurssilta?
 - Mitä tavoitteita sinulla on kurssille?
 - Miten olet valmistautunut kurssiin? Onko valmistautumisessasi eroja verrattuna suomenkielisten tutkinto-ohjelmien opiskelijoiden englannin kursseihin valmistautumiseen?
 - Minkälaisia haasteita luulet tulevan vastaan kurssin aikana? (Opettajan / opiskelijoiden näkökulmasta)
 - Onko joku tietty opettamisen osa-alue joka saattaa tuottaa enemmän haasteita tällä kurssilla?
 - Minkä oletat olevan palkitsevaa kurssilla?

Questions in English

- 1) Background questions:
 - What kind of an education do you have?
 - What kind of work experience you have?
 - How long have you been working at your current job?
 - How long have you lived in Finland?

- 1) About teaching multicultural groups:
 - What kind of experience do you have of teaching multicultural groups (exchange students and/or non-Finnish degree students)?
 - What do you find rewarding in teaching multicultural groups?
 - What do you find challenging regarding teaching multicultural groups?