

Teachers' perceptions of early foreign language learning

A qualitative study

Bachelor's thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Suomen perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelmaan tehtiin 2018 muutos, jonka seurauksena 2020 keväästä lähtien A1-kielen opetus aloitetaan jo ensimmäisellä ja toisella luokalla valtakunnallisesti. Opetussuunnitelmaan lisättiin kaksi vuosiviikkotuntia A1-opetusta, nostaen vuosiviikkotuntimäärän kuudestatoista kahdeksantoista. Molemmat lisätyt vuosiviikkotunnit tulee sijoittaa ensimmäiselle kahdelle vuosiluokalle. Muutoksen perusteiksi opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö antoi epätasa-arvon vähentämisen vieraiden kielten opetuksessa, tarkoittaen sitä, että A1-kieleksi valittaisiin vähemmän englantia ja enemmän muita vieraita kieliä. Toinen peruste oli lasten herkkyyksiän hyödyntäminen kielenopetuksessa. Herkkyyksiän teoriasta on kuitenkin tutkimusta molempiin suuntiin. Lisäksi tutkimukset osoittavat vanhempien opiskelijoiden oppivan tehokkaammin korkeamman kognitiivisen kyvyn takia (Luz Celaya 2012).</p> <p>Suomen opetussuunnitelmaan kirjatut tavoitteet ensimmäiselle kahdelle kouluvuodelle A1-kielen suhteen ovat avoimia, eivätkä anna kovin tarkkoja oppimissaavutuksia oppilaille. Tästä herää kysymys siitä, oppivatko koulujemme nuorimmat vieraita kieliä yhtä tehokkaasti kuin vanhemmat oppilaat, millä tavoin ja missä aiheissa. Olisiko kuitenkin parempi sijoittaa kaksi ylimääräistä vuosiviikkotuntia vanhemmille oppilaille, jotka oletettavasti oppivat tehokkaammin aivojensa kehityksen takia?</p> <p>Tässä tutkimuksessa pyrittiin selvittämään opettajien kokemuksia ja havaintoja varhaistetusta kielenopettamisesta. Tutkimus toteutettiin haastatteleamalla kahta opettajaa, joilla on alustavaa kokemusta ministeriön määräämästä uudistuksesta. Opettajilta tiedusteltiin miten nuoret oppilaat oppivat, millaisia kokemuksia heidän opettamisestaan opettajilla on, miten heidän oppimisensa on verrattavissa vanhempien oppilaiden kielenoppimiseen, ja miten nuorempana kieltenopiskelun aloittaminen voisi vaikuttaa saman kielen opiskeluun myöhempinä kouluvuosina. Opettajien vastauksia heijastettiin aiempaan tutkimukseen, mutta selvitettäväksi jää vielä se, onko teoria suoraan sovellettavissa käytännön opettamiseen Suomessa.</p> <p>Opettajien näkemykset aikaistetusta kielenopettamisesta eivät olleet täysin positiivisia eikä täysin negatiivisia. Haastatellut kokivat nuorempien oppilaiden vaativan enemmän kielenopetuksen ulkopuolista ohjausta, joka vei aikaa pois varsinaiselta opiskelulta. Vaikka opettamisen ja oppimisen mainittiin olevan hitaampaa, haastatellut ajattelivat aikaistetun A1-opetuksen olevan oppilaille edullista iän tuomista vaikeuksista huolimatta.</p>	
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1 Introduction

For most Finnish people, English is the second language that they learn. Previously, most people began studying English in primary school in the 2nd or 3rd grade. Schools had some freedom in designing their curriculum and deciding when to start first foreign language teaching (from now on abbreviated as A1), but as of late, this has changed. Beginning in the spring semester of 2020, all Finnish schools are to start A1 teaching to students in the first grade. The new implementation of foreign language teaching has its' justifications from the authorities, but it is worth studying whether the sentiment behind the change is reasonable, if the execution of the new system works and if not, how could the system be improved.

The number of weekly lessons per year (a system where one weekly lesson per year equals a total of 38 hours of teaching per year in that specific subject throughout grades one through nine) for A1 teaching will increase from 16 to 18 in Finnish schools (Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö 2018). Essentially, the number of A1 lessons is not staying the same, therefore, they are not being reallocated. From January 1st, 2020 onwards, two weekly lessons per year are to be allocated in the first two years of primary-school education (Finlex 793/2018). In a seminar arranged by the University of Helsinki (2018) regarding early language teaching, it was stated how the weekly hours of primary school-students would also increase with the new plan. It was also stated during the seminar that the average weekly lessons for primary-school students will increase as a result of the new A1 teaching changes, increasing the average number of lessons from 19 to 20.

The purpose of this thesis is to cover the motives behind the new curriculum, to gather some insights on the practicalities of the implementation from teachers, to discuss the findings and to assess possible future course of action. As this implementation is new in Finland, the applicability of previous research to the Finnish curriculum is uncertain. Therefore, there is reason to gather information regarding topics with pre-existing data, such as student participation in the classroom, as it is possible that research results may differ depending on systems of education and culture, and as practical implementation will not always correspond to theory. Two primary school teachers with experience on early L2 teaching were interviewed for this study, with the research questions reflecting the changes to the curriculum as well as some ideas and notions from previous research on the topic of early foreign language learning.

The integral question of this study is that of teacher perceptions of students' learning in an early L2 classroom.

2 Background

The Ministry of Culture and Education (2018) states on their website that from spring 2020 onward, Finnish schools are to teach first-grade students a foreign language. The ministry states that this change hopes to reduce inequalities caused by socioeconomic and geographical factors, and to more fully make use of the students' sensitive period of language learning.

This part is dedicated to covering relevant research on the critical period hypothesis, the application of said research on language learning and acquisition, relevant details of the changes in the Finnish curriculum and the research gap. Multiple perspectives and findings on the critical period hypothesis will be covered and taken into consideration.

2.1 The critical period hypothesis

Abello-Contesse (2009) explains the critical period hypothesis as a period of heightened language acquisition, which ends during a person's puberty. However, the author also brings up the notion of multiple periods of heightened language learning, with different periods accelerating different aspects of language. Furthermore, he notes that the term 'critical period' is somewhat inaccurate, as studies have shown that the claimed critical period is more akin to a sensitive period of language learning, as opposed to a critical one. Essentially, the period is not critical in language learning, but instead, learners are more sensitive to learning. Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) cite two criteria given for a learning period to be critical from Colombo (1982) and Bernstein (1989). These criteria are that: 1. Learning during a critical period is predictable and similar among learners regardless of their circumstances and that 2. Learning processes and outcomes between critical learning and regular learning differ. Applying these ideas to second language learning would therefore imply that there is a point in a person's development when he is more susceptible to learning. Therefore, capitalizing on this period is understandably an attractive idea for educators and the decision makers regarding education.

Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) criticized the general misunderstandings that exist regarding the critical period. The authors categorized the three erroneous ways of viewing the critical period as misinterpretation, misattribution and misemphasis. According to Marinova-Todd et al., misemphasis is the most common flaw in critical age research. The authors claim that excessive emphasis is placed on unsuccessful L2 (second language) learners when gathering data. Environmental factors, such as motivation, were also argued as contributors in

learning, from which the argument could be made that motivated older learners have little to no disadvantages in language acquisition. The authors point out the existence of data that indicates how older learners are more efficient language learners than children, as children must see more effort to learn languages. Their paper also covered a multitude of studies and their findings, paired with their implications on the critical period theory. While some studies covered by Marinova-Todd et al. did support the theory, many other covered studies showed results disproving or specifying the misconceptions presented by Marinova-Todd et al. In another study by Hakuta, Bialystok and Wiley (2003), an experiment was conducted on the existence of discontinuity on English language learning across two hypothesized points (15 and 20 years of age). In this context, discontinuity means a point of notable change in learning on the age continuum (e.g. a point in a person's development when language is notably easier or harder to learn in comparison to the adjacent periods). The study was conducted on an enormous pool of participants, with more than 2 million speakers of Spanish and more than 300 000 speakers of Chinese. Hakuta et al. did not find discontinuity in English language learning, however, a steady decline in the attained level of English language proficiency based on the age of immigration was discovered.

Maria Luz Celaya (2012) emphasizes the difference between research findings of second language learning and foreign language learning in the context of the critical period. The author cites a study by Patkowski (1980), in which 67 US immigrants were studied. As Patkowski's test participants were immigrants, who learned English in an English-speaking country, their language learning would be categorized as second language learning as opposed to foreign language learning. In Patkowski's study, it was found that participants who had arrived in the US before age 15 were rated higher in syntactic ability than those who arrived after 15 years of age. However, when the divide between naturalistic second language learning and non-naturalistic foreign language learning is taken into consideration, older learners learn more efficiently than younger learners, and young learners do not ultimately surpass the foreign language abilities of older learners (Luz Celaya 2012).

In a seminar arranged by the University of Helsinki on 21.9.2018, Minna Huotilainen (2018) presented a case for the plasticity of young children's phonetic maps. The crux of the research presented was that children are more capable of adapting to new phonetic systems than older learners are. It was therefore suggested that merit exists in the introduction of complicated or foreign phonetic systems to children, as it will expand their internal phonetic capabilities outside of their first language with relative ease. As the notion of an increased sensitivity to

pronunciation and hearing comprehension improvement is presented, I believe that there are fair grounds to approach the sensitive period of learning theory with curiosity and openness, as more specific results may be discovered.

In conclusion, there is reason to approach the notion of a critical period (or a sensitive period) in L2 learning and foreign language learning with some discretion. Considering how much contradictory data is available on the effects of a possible sensitive period, making clear outlines on education planning that revolve around the theory might be short-sighted. As one of the reasons given for beginning foreign language teaching in the first grade in Finland was emphasis on the sensitive period, a gap in information and viability can be discovered. I would argue that there is reason to research the rate of learning and the longitudinal effects of early language education in Finnish primary-schools.

2.2 Learning outcomes for foreign languages on grades one and two

The Finnish National Agency for Education (from here on abbreviated as FNAE) lists goals for early foreign language teaching that differ from those of the Ministry of Culture and Education. The goals are listed in their curriculum supplementation document for foreign languages in grades one and two (2019). In this document, there is no mention of inequality prevention or critical period theory. Instead, the mentioned goals are to encourage and to intrigue students into learning new languages and cultures.

As L2 teaching will now begin during the first school year of Finnish students, new guidelines for the content taught have had to be implemented. As the change is somewhat unprecedented, it would be a sensible course of action to implement no strict goals for early L2 learning, and instead, favour learning outcomes that leave room for interpretation. Alongside the implementation of early A1 (first foreign language) teaching in Finland, the FNAE has published guidelines for its desirable learning outcomes. In the new curriculum, the easily measured learning goals set for the first two years of A1 teaching are: 1. The ability to recognize meaning in the target language, 2. The ability to produce language with external support in simple situations and 3. The ability to use common expressions of politeness (Opetushallitus 2019). The corresponding guidelines (found on their peda.net web page) of the teacher training school of the University of Jyväskylä are very similar in the descriptions of teaching and learning goals, and in the contents of these goals. For example, the guidelines on teaching polite mannerisms are nigh identical in description and even in the given examples for polite speech (greetings, good-bye's, gratitude and apologies) between these two sets of guidelines. However,

the methods of teaching are more visible on the latter set of guidelines. While in the former set of guidelines it was stated that one of the goals is for the learner to manage in the most common of encounters with some help, the latter guidelines refers to a similar outcome by listing the most common language encounters, specifying the teaching method and suggested teaching materials.

In the guidelines by the FNAE, it is stated that literacy is not a prerequisite for students in A1 education. This fact brings about questions about the effects of literacy on language learning, as while students are old enough to enrol in education, I find there to be reason to believe that the importance of literacy in language learning might differ from the learning of other subjects. I base this claim on the fact that most children only learn to read their first language in school, which can then be later applied to other school subjects. Also, as writing and reading are major parts of language, learning a second language without a tool such as literacy creates room for doubt on the efficiency of allocating A1 teaching during a period of native language illiteracy.

Jiang (2011), introduces the concept of the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis. The author goes on to explain that according to the above theory, literacy in a learner's first language acts as a catalyst to L2 reading development. Essentially, the theory suggests that there exists a notable transfer in literacy from L1 (first language) to L2. This theory is supported by a study by Verhoeven (1991) in which the transfer of literacy of Turkish first-grade students in the Netherlands was measured. However, when literacy is broken down into multiple components, such as syntactic, lexical, phonetic and pragmatic, differences in the degree of transfer start to show (Verhoeven 1994). Contrary to the high degree of phonological transfer, the subjects showed little transfer in their lexical and syntactic abilities. Bearing the above in mind, it could be argued that L1 literacy would be marginally beneficial for learners of a new language in the case of L2 literacy. And in turn, this transfer could be applied to first language-foreign language learning. However, as was stated by Minna Huotilainen in the 'Varhemmin, hauskemmin, enemmän' -seminar at the University of Helsinki (2018), there exists a benefit to learning foreign languages at an earlier age. This benefit is that younger learners are shown to adapt to new phonetical patterns and sounds better than older learners. Considering this point, it could be stated that there is merit in early foreign language teaching, when the teaching is verbal.

2.3 The gap

The above review of relevant literature creates a gap in the new plan for early A1 teaching in Finland. While the sensitive period was noted as one of the major drives behind this change,

numerous studies cast doubt on the existence of a sensitive period for foreign language learning in a formal environment. As the amount of A1 language teaching is being increased with no major relocations of weekly lessons per year between school grades, I raise the question: Should we keep studying the age of optimal learning and teaching distribution? I argue for the utility of considering the upcoming change as a test period, during which the perceived learning outcomes and language development of early language learners are studied and reflected upon. Not only should the immediate observations be noted, but a longitudinal study on the development of foreign language skills would be necessary to make informed conclusions on the effectiveness of the new curriculum.

I intend to study the responses of teachers who have had experiences with both early and slightly later A1 teaching. My primary intention is to gather thoughts and opinions on the new curriculum and the possible benefits and disadvantages of early A1 teaching and how it has been perceived by the teachers. The discovery and analysis of the participants' responses will be the focus, and the reflection of the current findings to previous ones will be secondary.

3 Methods

This part is dedicated to explaining the ways that information was gathered, analysed, handled, and interpreted in this study.

3.1 Aim and research questions

The purpose of this study was to observe the implication of the new curriculum. There are two main goals for this study. First, I aim to gather information on the short-term effects of the new curriculum to see, whether first-grade students are at an advantage in some area of foreign language learning when compared to second-grade students. Second, I would like to form grounds on which to build a longitudinal study of learning outcomes brought about by the new curriculum. Essentially, the long-term study would observe if the students who began learning their A1 language in their first year of school eventually, or after some additional A1 education, surpass the learning outcomes of those who began learning their A1 language in their second year of school.

The present study seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How have teachers experienced early L2 teaching?
2. How do teachers think age affects students' L2 learning?
3. What kind of differences have the teachers noticed between student age groups?

The above research questions were influenced by the relevant literature and the gaps of this research, as well as the thoughts of other language teachers with whom I had discussed the new curriculum.

3.2 Participants

The present study sought to gather data from teachers with experience in both early and late foreign language teaching. The reasoning was that having the above experience would enable the participants to review their experiences with different learner ages individually and then to

compare the ways and rates at which the students learn foreign languages. Two teachers fitting the criteria participated in the present study.

The two participants have both been teaching English for first and second-grade students. The students of this study's participants had been studying English for approximately three months at the time of the interviews. However, the second-grade students had already been studying for a greater amount of time. The two participating teachers were from the teacher training school of the University of Jyväskylä.

3.3 Data gathering

The data for this study was gathered by interviewing the participants. As the topic is vast and difficult to delimit, interviews seemed like the most viable method of gathering the participants' thoughts on the changes. The participating teachers were interviewed about their impressions of ESL learning by their own students. The interviews conducted lasted from 40 to 50 minutes and were only between the interviewer and the participant. The interview process was made to be conversational, so that the participant could more freely express their ideas and thoughts and so that the interviewer could ask for clarifications on relevant statements. The questions prepared for the interview were, for the most part, open, while still leading the conversation towards the intended topics. Each interview was recorded using my own recording peripherals and securely stored on a physical memory unit.

3.4 Data analysis

The chosen method of analysis for this study is qualitative content analysis. The data collection method was chosen because I found it to complement the topic of this study, and the qualitative nature of the method supplements the small pool of participants. In addition, as I will be interviewing teachers and not the students, whose perceived learning is the focus of my study, I find this the optimal method of analysis as qualitative content analysis can be targeted at the personal reactions of the participants (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Considering all the above, the analysis should clearly be content focused, meaning that the contents of the participants' speech is what is being analysed.

4 Results and discussion

The purpose of the interviews conducted for this paper were to gain insight on teachers' experiences and views on early foreign language learning. The data gathered from the research participants was quite balanced between similar and differing thoughts and experiences based on their time teaching first and second graders.

The following four sections will cover the findings of the two interviews. In addition to information based on the research questions, some additional worthwhile notices from the interviewees are noted below. The data will be compared to existing research where applicable, and the chapter will conclude with some discussion on the findings.

4.1 Teacher experiences of teaching early L2

The participants reported to have gained overall positive experiences from teaching L2 English to first and second-grade students. Some described factors in this pleasant experience were younger learners' enthusiasm, their relatively low inhibition and their positive attitude towards learning. The interviewed teachers had already been teaching second grade students for three years, and at the time of the interviews they had been teaching first grade students for approximately three months. Reportedly, there have been some factors which have felt like a hinderance in the flow of lessons with first grade students. One participant expressed some frustration about the increased need for guidance that first-grade students require. This guidance was exemplified in two ways: first, in the need to teach school-oriented skills to students and second, in the proportional amount of time that the teacher speaks as opposed to having the students speak. The second point was elaborated on by stating how the teacher had experienced that students learn a language better when they are the ones producing it, as opposed to listening to it. This point is, to an extent, similar with the findings by Murray and Lang (1997), that there exists a correlation of higher student participation with higher student learning. The researched group in their study was, however, notably different. Regardless of these concerns, the participants of the present study believed that adding L2 teaching into the curriculum for the first year of school was a beneficial change. Despite the consensus on the required attention of first-graders, one participant made the comment that teaching early L2, and more specifically, first-graders, has been incredibly fun.

4.2 Teacher perceptions of learner age and learning

The common comment on the benefits of teaching early L2 made by the participants was on the students' learning, or rather, acquisition of foreign pronunciation. The reasoning given for this benefit had similarities and differences between the participants. One participant drew attention to the presumed flexibility of younger learners' brains, meaning that their phonetic maps were not yet fully developed and could therefore better adapt to new sound patterns. This notion is substantially like the point brought up by Minna Huotilainen (2018) in the seminar for the University of Helsinki.

Another thought shared by one of the interviewed teachers on the seemingly increased capability to learn pronunciation was the notion that younger learners may acquire and learn the new pronunciation, as opposed to just learning it. This was elaborated on by speculating that the students' illiteracy removed the possibility to seek help from the language suit of a word, which literate students may associate with Finnish pronunciation. Essentially, the argument is that when the written word is removed or missing, students lose the middle agent from which to seek confirmation, and thus, they must trust the teacher and listen carefully to the pronunciation of words.

When asked about their thoughts on existence and applications of the sensitive period hypothesis, the participants did not completely dismiss or embrace the theory. One participant drew attention to the question of whether the sensitive period hypothesis primarily regards language learning or language acquisition. It was speculated that younger learners might acquire foreign pronunciation better, when they are immersed in the target language. The type of immersion mentioned in the interview was a foreign language daycare, where the students were constantly subject to the language. This is where a division between the theory and practical teaching was drawn. A comparison between a daycare setting and a school setting was made, which highlighted the difference in content and time available. It was stated that in a daycare center, the foreign language spoken is not as restricted as it is in school, and that in the participants' respective schools, the time available for L2 teaching for first and second grade students was a mere 2 sessions of 37.5 minutes each week. The participant continued by stating how despite the open nature of the Finnish curriculum, she wanted students to have studied certain specific things before moving on to the third grade, which diminished the freedom of the teacher in choosing what to teach. Overall, the sentiment was that a teacher has stricter

conditions to work with than a daycare worker does, and that the classroom is primarily an environment for learning as opposed to acquisition. The enabling of learner acquisition was stated to be an applicable method of teaching L2, but time constraints in classroom teaching were described as an obstacle to its use. The participant called for new research in which the application of language acquisition methods would be tested in a heavily restrained environment like the classroom. A suggestion was the examination of efficiency of foreign language immersion for small children with time restrictions akin to those of the participants' classes, and the reflection of learning outcomes to the goals set by the FNAE and the individual school.

The participants showed consensus on the idea that younger learners had lower cognitive abilities than older learners. Lower cognitive abilities of younger students were attributed the inability to analyze language to the same degree as older learners. Additionally, it was perceived that younger students have more difficulties understanding things outside of the content of tasks and exercises, which was exemplified by the difference between first and second graders, who were tasked with the same activity. Second-grade students were reportedly quicker to understand instructions, and therefore, they had more time to work on the language learning task. First-grade students, however, required more explanation, and so, more time of the lesson was spent on confirming that the students had understood what they were to do. Evidently, this factored into the perceived outcomes of learning, as older learners had more time to spend on the educational exercise itself. Additionally, in the given example it was stated that student motivation was perceived as higher when the students had more time to concentrate on the activity.

4.3 Teacher perceptions of learner age and classroom behavior and preparedness

This subsection will refer to learner age, but the way in which it does so differs from the previous part in that while the previous part covered age as a factor in learning intrinsically, this part will consider age an instrument to certain factors, which will be evaluated in the context of language learning.

A common perception between the participants was that younger learners have not yet learned how to behave in a school environment. One participant drew attention to the lack of classroom and school-oriented skills. It was noted, however, that the differences within equal schoolyears was a major factor in the students' required supervision and guidance regarding their school-oriented skills. Reportedly, second and third graders had a larger gap in their adaptation to the school environment and its rules and customs than first and second grade students. The unfamiliarity with a school's norms affected language teaching by including non-language teaching in the classroom, effectively reducing the time spent on language teaching.

The participants reported perceiving higher motivation to learn foreign languages in younger learners. The increased degree of motivation was reportedly more visible in first and second-grade students, and one participant noted how learning motivation seemed to decrease in the third grade. It was speculated that older learners begin comparing themselves to other students, and so, become more self-aware, which may cause these students to fear failure. Anxiety caused by self-awareness may result in students, for example, intentionally misspelling words from the studied foreign language, which might function as a defense mechanism protecting the learner from trying and failing. The participants believed to some degree that allocating L2 teaching within the first two years of primary school will ultimately be beneficial. One participant stated how when comparing those L2 students who began studying said L2 in their third year of school and those who had participated in early L2 teaching a year prior, the latter group was observed to make significant leaps in learning similar concepts.

One of the most recurring themes in the comparison of younger and older students was the existence or degree of literacy. One participant reported that as students will usually have learned how to read by their second year, there has been little variation in second grade students' preparedness to learn L2. First grade students, however, exhibit much more variation in their capabilities, as some can read while others cannot.

An observation on the comparison of the subject classes and ages was made by one participant. The observation's main point was that the participant perceived the groups as so diverse and so different, that it was difficult to attribute differences in their learning strictly to their age. Two groups of the same schoolyear were stated to have such vast differences, that they were comparable to differences between schoolyears, meaning that one group of first grade students may be more advanced in some regards than a group of second grade students.

4.4 Discussion

This segment will be a critical reflection on the above findings. The comments and speculation will be my own speculations on the material gathered from the interviews.

I find a possible connection between the hinderances towards learning stated by the interviewed teachers. I believe that the hinderances are not entirely related to the learners' age, but instead, have to do with the learners' developmental stage. I find it plausible that children, who had yet to learn how to behave at school, did not achieve learning outcomes slower due to their age, but due to what they had not yet experienced or learned due to their age. Immaturity, illiteracy and unaccustomedness to the new environment were mentioned by the participants as some of the perceived hinderances to early L2 learning. All these hinderances could be attributed to the child's experiences instead of solely their age. This claim could be tested by studying children who started school at an earlier or later age than normal (6-7 years in Finland).

Regarding literacy and maturity in first grade students, I believe that the shortcomings in understanding instructions can be alleviated with careful planning. As was mentioned in the data, younger learners required more time to be invested in explaining activities than older learners do, which decreased time spent on learning. I would suggest that the difficulties younger children face in understanding instructions is not entirely due to their age, and that the gap in time spent on explanations can be cut by developing more appropriate means of instruction for younger learners. For example, as first grade students do not know how to read, it is obviously unthinkable that assigning tasks with written instructions will work as well as it would with literate children. Therefore, I would argue that by offering instructions in a way that illiterate children understand the described issue could be alleviated. As teachers gain more experience in teaching L2 to first grade students, I believe that new strategies will begin to naturally emerge. I suggest that first grade students do not need more explanation, but rather, different explanation.

It may be beneficial if the prescribed learning outcomes for early L2 were changed in the future. Based on the findings of these interviews, I argue that the strengths of early L2 teaching are not completely in line with the learning outcomes declared by the FNAE. The relevant research and

the participants both suggest that younger learners acquire a more defined pronunciation than older learners, with both suggesting that it has to do with the acquisition of pronunciation, not the learning of it. In this sense, there is a reason to refer to the notion of a sensitive period of second language acquisition, not second language learning.

I find that the topic definitely requires more research before any conclusive arguments or changes can be made, but I believe that further research has the potential to shape early L2 teaching and the learning outcomes set for it to better facilitate the learners' age.

5 Conclusion

This study was conducted to research the applicability of previous research in the new Finnish curriculum, and to gain insight on the real-life changes the new curriculum has caused in the Finnish A1 classroom. Additionally, participant input on how the changes can be seen and how the participants view the new A1 curriculum were gathered. As previous research is not completely in accordance with each other, the present study had to be critical of existing information, or at least, not favour or cast focus on one previous find or the other.

I believe that the findings of this study were fruitful, as the studied phenomenon is young in its applied environment. In essence, the findings show that the participants of this study felt that early A1 teaching posed difficulties due to learner immaturity and unaccustomedness to the school environment, but that despite these issues, early A1 teaching seems like a beneficial change to them. To summarize the findings respective to the research questions: the participants viewed early A1 teaching as a positive experience, regarding both learning and teaching A1 languages. The prevalent view on the effects of learner age on A1 learning was that while cognitive differences between older and younger learners was a potential factor, the largest impact of learner age on A1 learning was in their illiteracy and lack of school-oriented skills. The participants also mentioned how they have noticed those who start A1 learning younger seem more motivated and enthusiastic about learning, and that the students who had started studying at a younger age did better on average than those who started learning later. This comparison is, in my opinion, unfair, as it means that that for example those who started A1 in the second grade did better in the fifth grade than those who started in the third, essentially comparing three and two years of A1 learning.

I would argue that the fruitful nature of this study is best represented by the potential in further research. The reports of the interviewed teachers do not fall exactly in line with previous research, meaning that new research in the specific environment of this study may yield new data. While the participants showed agreement on the fast learning exhibited by younger learners, they offered more possible explanations than what was found in relevant literature, like the notion by Minna Huotilainen on the plasticity of young children's phonetic maps (Helsinki University seminar, 2018). The reasons could be those of motivation, enthusiasm, maybe even geography or background, as the present study was conducted within one school. The previous research criticizing the notion of a sensitive period in foreign language learning cannot be disregarded based on the findings of this study, rather, this study has given us reasons

to further study the phenomenon in its' specific circumstances. It could also be argued that existing theory is not, at least, directly applicable to the specific situation in which teaching is executed. Based on the findings of this study, future research on the topic could be reformatted in both topics and methods.

Methodically, the three improvements that could be implemented in future research on this topic are 1: the expansion of the source material in relation to newfound data, 2: a larger group of participants and 3: the implementation of a longitudinal research process. As during this study, the strengths and weaknesses of early foreign language teaching were uncovered and specified, future research is in a position of homing in on the findings. Additionally, I would argue that any further research would benefit from having an increase in participant numbers, as the small number of interviewed teachers in this study was sufficient to discover issues and strengths in early A1 teaching, but to accurately study these factors, a larger pool of data would be a clear benefit. Finally, regarding the gathering of information from the participants, I find merit in the transition from a one-time interview to a longitudinal study. As the studied phenomenon is new in Finland, I suspect that teacher experience will heavily impact both the perceptions and adaptation of teachers as well as the gathered data in that teachers will come to discover how beginning A1 teaching early has effected learners over time. In short, I would encourage further research on the subject to amplify the research process, and to accentuate the findings of this study.

Some unanswered questions left by this study could be given additional attention in future studies. The present study could have been improved with more research data, but given how recent the researched topic is, this study functions as a decent introduction to the topic, and works to highlight the merit in additional research while also giving it some direction in method and content. It would not be an overstatement to say that the subject of this study is alive, and we may see further short-notice changes in the curriculum released in 2018 as the change is processed and applied to teaching. With that in mind, any future research will, of course, need to reflect upon the current situation of early foreign language teaching.

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