

**Distance foreign language education in Finland:
A comparison of conceptions and attitudes toward the use
of distance education tools among foreign language teacher
students and distance EFL teachers**

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract Etäopetus on kasvava opetustapa, jolla on pitkä historia ja jonka vaikutuksia kieltenoppimiseen on maailmalla laajasti tutkittu. Tämä kiinnostus etäopetuksen vaikutuksista erityisesti kielten opetukseen on perusteltua johtuen vuorovaikutuksen keskeisyydestä kieltenoppimisessa. Kommunikaatio on kieltenopetuksessa paitsi opetuksen väline, myös sen kohde. Kun tuo kommunikaatio tapahtuu teknologian välityksellä, on sillä vaikutusta niin opetuksen sisältöön kuin opetuksen kannalta parhaisiin sosiaalisiin ja pedagogisiin ratkaisuihin. Suomessa tutkimusta etäopetuksesta on tehty verrattain vähän ja sen vaikutuksista kieltenopetukseen sitäkin vähemmän. Opettajakoulutus on Suomessa yliopistotasoinen koulutus, mutta moni suomalainen yliopisto ei tutkimuksen tekohetkellä tarjoa etäopetuskoulutusta kieltenopettajaksi opiskeleville. Tämä tutkimus kartoittaa minkälaisia asenteita ja oletuksia yhden suomalaisen yliopiston kieltenopettajaksi opiskelevilla opiskelijoilla on etäopetusta kohtaan ja kuinka hyvin nämä vastaavat etäopetusta tehneiden englanninopettajien kokemuksia. Tarkoituksena on tutkia kuinka valmiita kieltenopettajaopiskelijat, joilla on hyvin vähän etäopetuskokemusta, tuntevat olevansa vastaamaan etäopetuksen haasteisiin ja käyttämään hyväksi siihen sisältyviä mahdollisuuksia. Tulokset osoittavat opettajien ja opiskelijoiden välillä niin yhtymäkohtia kuin eroavaisuuksiakin ja viittaavat vahvasti siihen, että kieltenopettajaopiskelijat tuntevat epä tietoisuutta valmiudestaan kielten etäopetukseen. Opiskelijoiden keskuudessa oli havaittavissa joitain oletuksia etäopetuksesta, kuten kieltenoppimiseen kohdistuvan ahdistuksen vähentyminen, joita nykytutkimus ei näytä tukevan. Esiin tuli myös joitain etäopettajien mainitsemia haasteita, kuten oppilaiden vähäinen osallistuminen kontaktiopetukseen, joita opiskelijat eivät osanneet ennakoita. Lisäksi koetut mahdollisuudet nähtiin lähtökohtaisesti opiskelijoiden ja yhteiskunnan näkökulmasta, jolloin potentiaaliset pedagogiset mahdollisuudet jäivät usein havaitsematta. Tutkimus suosittelee kieltenopettajaopiskelijoille vähintään perustavanlaatuaista yliopistotasosta koulutusta kielten etäopetuksesta.	
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1. INTRODUCTION

At first glance the meaning and content of the words *distance foreign language education* may seem rather simple. The intent is to teach students who are, for whatever reason, physically separated from the teacher. However, the act of communicating only through technology seems to give distance education some unique aspects when compared with face-to-face education, which is commonly considered to be the standard for which new teachers are being prepared for during teacher training. Technology is omnipresent throughout the experience, forcing both teacher and student to deal with possible communication failures due both to human elements and the tools they are using. Distance education can also refer to either one teacher tutoring one student or one teacher teaching potentially hundreds of learners at once. Those learners may all be in one classroom, which the teacher then contacts via telecommunication technology or the learners may also be separated from each other, potentially taking part in the education from places all over the world. Furthermore, the teacher and learner can be present at the same time in the same learning environment, or the teacher may have left the learners some materials and exercises with which to interact at their own time and at their own pace. There are also numerous different telecommunication tools, applications, and learning environments that can be used for distance education all with their own differences big and small. All of this becomes even more complex when one is tasked with teaching foreign languages at a distance. Communication plays a large part in the teaching of foreign languages and in distance education that communication is by necessity technologically mediated. The teachers are thus forced to consider how the mediating influence of technology should be taken into account in their teaching of communication. Thus, for a distance foreign language teacher the practical application of distance education can often be anything but simple.

It seems highly likely that distance education will also continue to be a relevant topic in both education research and practice in the coming years. Perhaps the biggest indicator of this is the aftermath of the global Covid-19 pandemic of spring 2020, which forced teachers worldwide to use distance education tools in their teaching. In Finland, the change from face-to-face education to distance education was made in a short timeframe, giving teachers and learners little time to adapt to the new mode of education. Even so, these extraordinary circumstances have shown the possibilities afforded by distance education and thus several sources in Finland seem eager to expand the use of distance education in the Finnish school system (Pantsu 2020, Kosonen 2020). Some parents, however, especially those of young children, have felt that distance education was not properly implemented at the time (Juvonen 2020), arguing for

example that parents were forced to take on the role of teachers and that the quality of distance education varied greatly from teacher to teacher. Regardless, especially for the teaching of minority languages and the survival of small rural schools, distance education has been considered a potential life saver (Heikinmatti 2018). In other words, distance education is likely to be a growing trend. Yet at the time of writing it seems that this reality has not fully translated into distance education training at the university level.

In fact, despite the importance of the topic, there has been very little research on the way distance education is carried out in the Finnish educational system. Internationally distance education has been widely studied from its level of effectiveness (Blake 2008, Cavanaugh 2013, Xu and Jaggars 2014), the importance of motivation for distance learners (Murphy 2011, Giesbers et al. 2013, Peck 2018) to skills distance educators, and distance foreign language educators especially might need (Hampel & Stickler 2005, Compton 2009, DiPietro 2010, Moore-Adams et al. 2016). However, there has been little study on the state of the field of Finnish distance education (Lehtinen & Nummenmaa 2012, Nummenmaa 2012) and even less on foreign language distance education (Kotilainen 2015). The current study thus aims to fill some gaps in the research on Finnish basic education through the means of distance education, specifically as it pertains to foreign language education. The emphasis on foreign languages in this context is justified since in language education communication is not just a method of teaching but the object of it too. Thus, the mediating role of telecommunication technology may have a greater effect on foreign language education than many other fields of education.

This study will be contrasting the expectations of foreign language teacher students with the experiences of more experienced English as a foreign language teachers when it comes to distance education. The data being analysed was gathered before the Covid-19 pandemic began. Thus, the drastic increase in the use of distance education since the beginning of the pandemic is not reflected in the answers given by the participants. Due in part to the lack of previous research, the purpose of the study is not to test the accuracy of a pre-existing theory, but to see whether the coming generation of foreign language teachers feel prepared to teach at a distance and to what extent their expectations of distance education mirror those beliefs.

In the beginning of the paper a definition of distance education is offered, followed by a brief history of the field, while also covering some relevant terminology. The opportunities and challenges offered by distance education, possible best practices for distance educators and potential future prospects will then be addressed followed by an explanation of the study itself.

2. DISTANCE EDUCATION

Before studying the different aspects of distance education in the context of second language teaching one must define the term *distance education*. There is not one universally accepted definition that is used consistently across the field, so I will look at a number of definitions from varying sources in order to find a common thread. I will then give a brief history of distance education, in order to grant the reader a more accurate understanding of the potential future of the field. I will also define and examine some of the central terms used when discussing distance education, such as *asynchronous* and *synchronous* distance education and the *theory of transactional distance*, since these are central to much of the research and theory in question.

2.1. Definition

Holmberg (2005: 10) says that the term *distance education* was first used in the 1970s and that it was officially adopted in 1982 when the International Council for Correspondence Education changed its name to the International Council for Distance Education. Moore (2013: 68) mentions that the term was first defined in 1972 at the World Conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education. The definition it was given was:

The family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviors are executed apart from the learning behaviors... so that the communication between the learner and the teacher must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical, or other device. (in Moore 2013: 68)

After this definition, many more have been given as more research has been made and the development of technology has made it possible to offer distance education in an ever wider variety of ways. What follows is a small sample of the various ways distance education is being defined by researchers in the 21st century.

Distance education, or distance learning, is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and instructional system designs that aim to deliver education to students who are not physically "on site" in a traditional classroom or campus. (MacTeer 2011, preface:i)

Here MacTeer makes several points about distance education. She separates three distinct aspects of distance learning: pedagogy, technology and instructional system designs. Pedagogy is by itself not a surprising find in this context, but its addition does seem to imply that the pedagogy of distance education differs somehow from the pedagogy of face-to-face learning, to a point where the study of it could be meaningfully separated from the study of face-to-face pedagogy. The inclusion of technology is important because it is central to how distance education is practically carried out. Distance education can only take place through the intermediary of some kind of technology or tool, ranging from letters to internet applications.

A teacher shouting instructions to a student across a football field does therefore not count as distance education. However, this is not because the distance between them is too short, but rather because they do not make use of technology to mediate their interaction. The concept of instructional system designs is a rather new concept and refers mostly to distance learning via the internet. The design of learning platforms and websites weaves together findings from both the pedagogy and the technology of distance education. It thus means the creation of software and learning environments that make the best use of the technology available all the while delivering the best pedagogical tools for teaching and learning.

Distance education is defined as institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors. (Schlosser and Simonson 2006: 1, See also Simonson et al. 2006)

This definition is interesting in the way it posits that distance education must be institutionally based and formal in nature. Schlosser & Simonson justify this stance by arguing that it “is what differentiates distance education from self-study” (Schlosser & Simonson 2006: 1). However, it would seem that what one needs in order to make this distinction is not necessarily an institution, but simply a teacher. If the teacher is working as an individual, and thus not representing an institution, one might argue that they could still engage in distance education with a student, say a relative or a friend. The writers also mention that what is needed for distance education is the separation of teacher and student, interactive telecommunication, and sharing of data, voice and video in order to create learning experiences. This definition seems very thorough and strict, perhaps even needlessly so, as shown by the example of the need for institutions mentioned above.

Distance education is characterised by teaching and learning being brought about by media: in principle students and their teachers do not meet face to face. One or more media are used for their interaction and for communicating subject matter ... In this sense we talk about mediated teaching and learning. (Holmberg 2005: 9)

Holmberg makes it clear that in his view the most important distinction between distance education and education delivered face-to-face is the fact that distance education is mediated by something. In other words, he downplays the idea of distance itself as a distinguishing factor and concentrates more on the consequences of said distance to teaching and learning. This seems a reasonable point to make; after all, if the teacher and the student both sit on a computer and the teaching takes place through the intermediary of a computer network it makes little difference how much geographical distance there is between them. Even if they were sitting right next to each other, separated only by a thin wall through which no sight or sound may

pass, a distance often much smaller than the average student and teacher in a classroom setting, it would make no difference. As long as the only way they can communicate is through the intermediary of some kind technology they are engaging in distance education.

Based on the definitions from these three sources one can gain a rough idea of what distance education means. One could summarise it as teaching and learning taking place in conditions where the teacher and student are separated in such a way that telecommunication tools must be used for communication between them. This definition highlights several important facts: (1) both teaching and learning must be taking place, and thus there must be both a teacher and a student, (2) the teacher and student must be separated in such a way that normal face-to-face communication is not possible and thus (3) telecommunication tools, meaning tools used for communicating at a distance, are the only method of communication between teacher and student. Telecommunication tools could be anything ranging from letters, to radio communications, to videoconferencing applications or some future inventions yet to be discovered. These tools play a large role in the history of distance education, covered in more detail in the next part of this paper.

2.2. History

To understand how distance education is likely to develop in the years to follow, it is vital to know where it comes from, and for this end I have dedicated a small part of this paper to the history of distance education. Perhaps the most important point to understand from this history is the way in which distance education has always evolved along with the available telecommunications technology and how this has influenced the nature and quality of the education being offered.

Anderson and Dron (2011: 80-81) argue that there are three distinct generations of distance education: (1) letter correspondence, (2) mass media, and (3) interactive technologies. Mass media includes television, radio and film correspondence, while interactive technologies include a myriad of conferencing tools using audio, text and video communication. These three generations run parallel to changes in dominant pedagogical ideologies, meaning that technology has often been implemented according to the needs specified by the pedagogy. Anderson and Dron (2011: 2) argue against a deterministic stance where either technology or pedagogy fundamentally defines the other. They claim that the two are strongly intertwined, likening technology to music and pedagogy to dance, and say that sometimes “technologies

may embody pedagogies” (Anderson and Dron 2011: 2), thus gaining the upper hand by limiting available pedagogies. For example, it would be highly difficult to make use of some communicative language teaching methods when teaching via letters, due to the slow nature of the correspondence.

Holmberg (2005: 13-16) notes that the first instances of distance education took place in the 18th and 19th century. However, the writing of letters for the purpose of teaching is something that has most likely been done since writing was first invented. There are examples of this in the New Testament of cases where St. Paul writes educational letters to his congregation and receives feedback from them. Although there is communication between teacher and student via the use of telecommunication tools here, some definitions of distance education would not accept this as an instance of distance education due to the lack of an institutional element. Holmberg states that the first known instance of organized distance education took place in 1728 when a teacher advertised in the *Boston Gazette* that he would be willing to teach shorthand writing via letters. There is no mention in the advertisement of whether the students would receive feedback, merely that they would receive the same exercises as the students in Boston.

Minimal communication between teacher and student seems to have been symptomatic of these early cases of distance education. Many factors contributed to this, including the available technology and the dominant pedagogical thinking of the day. Due to the time-consuming nature of communicating via letters, it is understandable that teachers could not have the amount of communication with their students as they do today. This would certainly have affected the way distance education was most commonly structured. Holmberg (2005: 14) mentions that the organized correspondence teaching of foreign languages was started in Germany in 1856 by Charles Toussaint and Gustaf Langenscheidt, and that students did not receive corrections or comments to the exercises they were given. They were given the option of asking questions, but were not encouraged to do so since everything was already fully explained in the material they received. This can be explained by constraints inherent in the technology used, but it can also be argued that the pedagogical thinking of that time, mainly the idea that it was the teacher’s responsibility to provide the information and the student’s responsibility to learn it, influenced how the teachers chose to utilize the technology available to them. The use of letters still remained the most used method for distance education, up until the 20th century. Even in the beginning of the 20th century, when many new distance education organizations were

founded, use of the printed word was the most common method of distance education (Holmberg 2005: 19).

The beginning of the 20th century saw the emergence and popularization of radio and later television podcasts, which were soon adopted by the providers of distance education. Motamedi (2001: 4) notes that in the universities of the United States radio began to be used for distance education in the 1920s and television podcasts and tapes in the 1940s and 50s. At this time distance education was still mostly used in institutions of higher education, though the practice would later spread to all levels of education. The use of radio for distance education was especially popular in countries of lower literacy rates and where the postal service was less reliable (Kentnor 2015: 26). Telephones made it possible for the teachers to communicate with their students in real-time but were rarely used as a method of distance education due to practical issues.

Radio podcasts and videos could offer more information and instruction to the learner, but they were still lacking the kind of interactivity between teacher and student which we value today. Anderson & Dron (2011: 83) point out that cognitive-behaviorist pedagogy, in which the teacher is very much in control, gained a foothold when the available technology still made it exceedingly difficult to facilitate many-to-many communication. One-to-many and one-to-one communication was, at the time, the only sensible way to run a distance education course, when one took into account the availability and cost of the technology required. The appearance of interactive telecommunication technologies, such as chat rooms and teleconferencing tools, facilitated huge changes in both distance education pedagogy and the way distance education courses were run. Social-constructivist pedagogy began to take hold during the end of the 20th century, highlighting the importance of the social aspects of learning, made possible by the wider availability of many-to-many communication technologies, such as emails and mobile technologies (Anderson and Dron 2011: 84-85). Later, in the beginning of the 21st century, connectivist pedagogy, concentrating on problem solving via the use of networks of information, contacts and resources, started to receive increasing attention. The use of such pedagogy was facilitated by internet-based technologies and applications, which enabled teachers and students to share increasing amounts of information with each other in real-time.

One noteworthy phenomenon in the history of internet mediated distance education is the failure of several higher education distance education providers in the first years of the 21st century (Palvia et al. 2018: 235-236, Kentnor 2015: 28-29). In the United States, some

universities began using the internet to deliver distance education courses in the early 1990s, perhaps most notably University of Phoenix (Palvia et al. 2018), which began its distance education program in 1989 and still offers distance education in 2020. In the late 90s several traditional universities joined in, such as New York University, which unveiled its NYU online program in 1998. It, along with many other university distance education programs failed and were discontinued in the span of only a couple of years (Palvia et al. 2018: 235). It has been argued that there were a number of factors that caused the failure of these distance education programs, but that one of the most important was “the lack of understanding of online pedagogy and online learning styles” (Kentnor 2015: 29).

From this short look at the history of distance education one can get a rudimentary grasp of the way technology and pedagogy have exerted influence over it. On the one hand, most teaching is always organized along the goals and methods of the most influential pedagogical thinking of the day. On the other hand, technology sets the limits of what can be achieved in terms of teaching methods, and in some ways learning results as well. In short, technology sets the rules, under which teachers are free to exercise whatever pedagogical methodologies they wish.

It is interesting to note, however, that there would seem to be a vast difference between using distance education methods to teach someone something theoretical, like mathematics, than there is to teach them something more practical, like how to build a boat. This applies even more to cases where one teaches something that requires interaction between people, such as a language. It is due to this that researchers like Compton have expressed fears that “the vast research and best practices for teaching online may not translate well for online language teaching.” (Compton 2009: 74). In the following chapters I will examine the ways distance language education differs, in good and in bad, from general distance and face-to-face language education.

2.3. Synchronous and asynchronous distance learning

The terms *synchronous* and *asynchronous* are highlighting important aspects of distance education and thus need further clarification. It is a special aspect of distance education, brought about by the physical separation of teacher and student, that the teacher may not be teaching at the same time as the student is learning. This is most apparent in cases of distance education via mail, where the teacher has created the learning material well before the student interacts with it. The same is true, for example, of lectures that have been recorded and are made available online and online learning environments such as Moodle where a teacher may have

made the content of the entire course available before the course has begun. These are cases of asynchronous distance education, due to the fact that teaching and learning are taking place at different times. Regular education in a classroom, in comparison, is most often synchronous since the teacher and the students are both present at the same time.

Advancements in communication technology have had a huge impact on the way teachers, students, and researchers approach distance education today. Using today's technology it is possible to engage in distance education synchronously from almost anywhere in the world, something that was not possible in the not so distant past. In other words, for a long time limitations in technology necessitated that distance education be asynchronous. Since face-to-face education, which can be considered the point of comparison for distance education achievements, is synchronous in nature, one could argue that distance education has reached the point where asynchronous teaching is no longer needed. After all, by using modern technology one can employ face-to-face pedagogy in distance education cases. There would seem to no longer be a need to do things differently when teaching over a long distance. This would, however, be assuming that asynchronous distance education has no benefits of its own, an assumption that is not shared by researchers and teachers today. In fact, most online learning environments, for example, contain both synchronous and asynchronous elements.

When engaging in synchronous distance education teachers can use largely similar teaching methods and pedagogies as when teaching in a regular classroom setting. However, this interaction between teacher and student is still mediated by technology, which always creates some limitations, as well as possibilities. Bernard et al. (2004: 408) have gone as far as arguing that "synchronous DE is a poorer quality replication of classroom instruction". Bernard et al. performed a comparative meta-analysis of distance education literature between 1985 and 2002, and did not find significant differences between distance education and normal classroom instruction on variables of independent achievement, attitude, and retention. When they divided the cases of distance education into synchronous and asynchronous, however, they found that synchronous education did not compare favourably to classroom education in terms of achievement (Bernard et al. 2004: 406-410). It is important to note that the first studies accepted into this meta-analysis are from 1985 and this creates some questions as to the validity of the results when compared to synchronous distance education when it is carried out with today's educational technology. In a later meta-analysis Means et al. found that "in recent applications, purely online learning has been equivalent to face-to-face instruction in effectiveness" (2013: 35). No difference was found between the effectiveness of courses using purely asynchronous

distance education and those using both synchronous and asynchronous methods of teaching (Means et al. 2013: 32). It is possible that advancements in technology have made synchronous communication easier and this has then been reflected in distance education course outcomes. Regardless, the study by Bernard et al. (2004) does point out the potential problem of trying to replicate classroom pedagogy in a distance education setting, without taking full advantage of the possibilities afforded by this setting. Without proper education, a teacher might be tempted to teach a synchronous distance education class in much the same way they would teach a face-to-face classroom, without due consideration of the relative differences.

Asynchronous distance education, by comparison, is more clearly separate from normal classroom education, a fact that also carries both advantages and disadvantages. Asynchronous distance education offers possibilities for both teacher and learner to schedule their activities more flexibly. The students and teachers can also engage with the teaching material in an environment they feel is most beneficial to their work. Due to the lack of highly structured lessons meant for the class as a whole, the learner can advance in his or her studies at a pace which they feel most comfortable with, without fears that they are holding back the rest of the class or that they are rushing ahead of the teacher. These aspects of studying whenever, wherever, and at whatever pace, make this type of education significantly different from regular classroom education. However, there are also some downsides to consider. Bernard et al (2004: 408) point out that the rate of dropouts was substantially higher in asynchronous distance education, when compared to synchronous and classroom education. They deduce that group affiliation and social pressure, present in synchronous distance education and classroom education, may play a role in this phenomenon. In other words, a student may feel more invested in a course if they are made to interact with a group according to a set timetable.

In instances of distance education, it would seem pertinent to make use of both synchronous and asynchronous communication, so that a student could reap the benefits of both methods. Much research has also gone into what is called blended education (Genís Pedra & Martín de Lama 2013, Keskin & Yurdugül 2020), where both face-to-face and distance education are used in support of each other. Teachers are thus able to take the best aspects of asynchronous distance education and apply them into their classroom teaching. Interesting as it is as a field of study it grants very little to cases where, due to a variety of reasons, face-to-face education simply is not possible. Because of this, research regarding blended learning is partly irrelevant to the current study.

2.4. Theory of transactional distance

Distance education, as a field of research distinct from general education, was not systematically studied until the latter part of the 20th century. One of the pioneers of this field was M. G. Moore, who was one of the first to map out some of the differences between distance education and face-to-face classroom education. In 1972 he first started to formulate a theory that later came to be known as the theory of transactional distance (Moore 2013: 66-67). Moore himself argues that before it, scholarly research into distance education had been non-existent, owing largely to the fact that, when it came to distance education, there had been no theory to argue for or against. Researchers at the time had been making the assumption that proper education only consisted of instruction taking place in the classroom setting, thus disregarding distance education entirely.

The theory of transactional distance is a theory set forth by Moore (2013) concerning the factors in distance education most relevant for research purposes and the way those factors interact with each other. In this theory, Moore describes three factors: structure, dialogue, and autonomy. Of the three, the examination of structure and dialogue can further be used to evaluate the transactional distance of a given distance education course.

By structure Moore means the elements of a course such as learning objectives, presentations of information, exercises and activities etc. and the degree to which those elements are standardized. In other words, the more the content of the course and the actions of the students are controlled by the teacher, the higher the degree of structure. Moore (2013: 69) mentions areas such as military, medical, or technical training as examples where a high degree of structure might be considered beneficial. By comparison, a course with a low degree of structure might have the students interact with the material at their own pace and in their own way, only interacting with the teacher when they feel they need advice or support. Moore points out that, in effect, the degree of structure “describes the extent to which a course can accommodate or be responsive to each learner’s individual needs and preferences” (Moore 2013: 70).

The degree of dialogue in a distance education context, is the degree to which constructive interaction is taking place between teachers and students (Moore 2013: 70-71). The amount of dialogue in a given course is determined by a multitude of factors, including the degree of structure mentioned earlier. A course with a higher degree of structure can easily be organised in a way that limits dialogue. Another significant factor according to Moore is the medium of communication. Mediums that allow fast responses between teacher and student, as well as

mediums that allow for fewer students per one teacher, are more likely to foster dialogue. Moore also argues that, for students, a lower level of autonomy in learning corresponds with a need for a higher level of dialogue and vice versa. In other words, the less autonomous a learner is, the more he needs to be in a constructive interaction with the teacher in order to learn.

Autonomy is the third factor Moore (2013: 72) counts as a part of his theory of transactional distance. He argues that the greater the transactional distance in a distance education course, the more autonomy is required from the learner. This may help explain why some distance education courses, especially in higher education, have low levels of student retention. If a distance education course does not fit the learner in their need for autonomy or support, they may choose to drop out. Furthermore, linking autonomy to structure and dialogue gives the teacher tools with which to adapt a course to fit the learners' needs for them, should this become necessary.

The term transactional distance is considered by Moore (2013: 71) to be a function of structure and distance. On the term *transaction* Moore says "the transaction in distance education is the interplay of teachers and learners in environments that have the special characteristic of their being spatially separate from one another" (2013: 68). In Moore's view, it seems transactional distance is a kind of perceived social or communicative distance between teachers and students. Later researchers have also studied the presence of transactional distance between students and other students and between students and the content material, among others (Moore 2013: 74-77). Falloon (2011), for example, used the theory of transactional distance as a lens to study learner autonomy in an online postgraduate teacher education program. Falloon notes the usefulness of the theory even in current digital age but argues that parts of the theory, such as the effects of synchronous teaching on learner autonomy, may need revising (2011: 206-207).

Moore argues that high structure and low levels of dialogue contribute to higher levels of transactional distance and vice versa. In other words, in a course with a high degree of structure and low levels of dialogue, both the teachers and the students may be more keenly aware of the distance between them. Conversely, a course with high levels of dialogue and less structure necessitates that the students and teachers be in more contact with each other and can thus make both more aware of the others presence. It is important to note that Moore does not argue that having either more or less transactional distance in a distance education course is fundamentally better. The level best suited for any given course should be evaluated when the course is being planned and this evaluation should try to take into account various relevant aspects such as the

teachers, the students, the subject matter being taught, the medium of communication used, and many more.

It could be argued that distance foreign language education is a field in which the level of dialogue, in a literal sense at least, would almost by definition be high, though this has not historically always been the case. The current emphasis on communicative competence has raised the importance of dialogue in the eyes of teachers and researchers. However, foreign language lessons can often also be highly structured and teacher centred. The teaching of grammar and lexicon are often good examples of this, cases where the teacher has planned an exercise and given clear instructions to be followed. Thus, if one were to seek to have a distance foreign language education course with minimal transactional distance, one might be best served by concentrating on those few heavily structured areas and attempting to increase their level of dialogue. This could be done by giving students different ways to influence the lesson and exercises that require student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction. Conversely, if the goal of a course is not communicative competence and the students are motivated enough, a more structured foreign language education course could be created. The ability to control the transactional distance of a lesson according to the needs of the students is important for all distance education teachers. For foreign language teachers it seems even more so, due to the need to limit transactional distance for the purpose of teaching communicative competence.

Though the theory of transactional distance has been influential in distance education research, there have also been those who have viewed it more critically.

Despite the considerable time span over which the theory has been evolving, to date, very few researchers have carried out empirical studies to test the validity of its key constructs and especially, the relationships among them. (Gorsky & Caspi 2005: 3-4)

Gorsky and Caspi looked at six studies that sought to explore the relationships between the key elements of the theory of transactional distance. They found that although the studies do seem to support the theory their validity was severely limited (2005: 4). They also point out that three of those studies found only limited support for the theory. Furthermore, Gorsky and Caspi argue that, when thoroughly analysed, the theory of transactional distance may be distilled into a mere tautology. They support this view by arguing that Moore's use of the term *dialogue* refers to interaction where understanding increases, whereas Moore's use of the term *transactional distance* refers to the likelihood of student misunderstanding. Thus, the theory of transactional distance can be seen to state that by increasing interaction in which student understanding is increased we may decrease the likelihood of misunderstanding among students, or "As

understanding increases, misunderstanding decreases" (2005: 8). In spite of this criticism, later researchers have continued to use the theory as a basis for further research (Fallon 2011, Kara 2020).

3. DISTANCE FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Using distance education methods specifically to teach foreign languages is a tradition with a long history, and its own set of advantages and disadvantages. In many cases of distance education, what is being taught is a set of facts along with methods of applying those facts to solve problems in real life. In the case of foreign languages, however, what is taught seems to be more than the things one has to memorize, like lexical items and rules for their correct application. Language is inherently social, and it is this social element that can pose a problem for distance education where communication between participants is technologically mediated. The practical nature of foreign language education is also reflected in the Finnish national core curriculum, which includes the following statement:

“Koulun kielenopetuksen lähtökohtana on kielen käyttö eri tilanteissa” / *The starting principle of language education at school is the use of language in varying situations.* (Opetushallitus 2014: 124) English translation by the author

The emphasis on the practical use of the language in varying situations could potentially cause problems for distance educators. It can be argued that the ability to communicate using the foreign language being taught is the ultimate measure of the learner’s success. For a long time, communication over vast distances was exceedingly difficult and for this reason it was more difficult to teach the communicative aspects of a language. Many teachers at the time may have believed that the ability to communicate was a first language skill and that it would simply transfer to the second language, but distance language teachers at the time were also coerced into the position of dismissing the importance of communicative competence by the limitations of telecommunication technology. Many of today’s teachers, focusing more on the need to teach communicative competence, would no doubt consider learning a language by letter correspondence to be difficult and the results often somewhat inadequate for real-life application. If the student can only communicate with the teacher and other students via mail, then any exercises involving spoken language and real-time communication and meaning making become almost impossible, all due to technological limitations.

One must note however, that technology has come a long way since those days, and that students and teachers can now often communicate in real-time using text, audio, and video material. Not only have certain disadvantages almost disappeared due to technological progress, it can be argued that some further advantages have also developed. Online learning environments, which are often central to distance learning, are continuously available and can be accessed from almost anywhere, making it much easier to learn outside the classroom.

Modern teleconferencing tools make contact between the teachers and students almost instantaneous, regardless of geographical distance. However, one could still argue that the physical presence of a teacher in a classroom is always preferable to a connection made using, for example, videoconferencing tools. Research, like the one into the theory of transactional distance, could potentially help teachers understand and manage that increased feeling of separateness and isolation that can more easily manifest itself in a distance education environment (Murphy et al. 2011, Walker & Haddon 2011), but in many cases it seems unlikely that the feeling could be completely eliminated. Despite this, it is important to realise that in distance language education, when it comes to teaching less widely used languages in remote locations, it may be highly difficult to find a teacher living at a suitable distance for face-to-face classes to be feasible. In such cases, and others, the choice is not actually between face-to-face and distance education, but between distance education and no education at all.

I will now provide a more in-depth analysis on past research into the positive and negative aspects of distance language education compared to face-to-face education. This will provide a more thorough understanding of the issues distance language teachers are confronted with and create a backdrop against which one can better assess the results of this study. I will also look into the perceived best practices for distance language educators in order to find out what it is that language teachers who are used to face-to-face teaching might find difficult in a distance education setting.

3.1. Benefits

In the beginning, distance education was often a secondary mode of education for institutions that already offered face-to-face education. It was thus meant for people who could not attend regular face-to-face classes and the exercises and course content being used were often primarily geared toward the classroom learners (Kentnor 2015: 23, Holmberg 2005: 13). In some early cases, for example, distance learners were not offered the opportunity to receive corrections and comments to the assignments they sent to their teachers while also being told that asking questions would not be necessary, since everything was already explained in the materials they had originally received by mail (Holmberg 2005: 14). It seemed evident that anything distance educators could do, face-to-face teachers could do better. Thus, as researchers started looking into this area of education, the question of how effective distance education really is, comparative to regular classroom education, must have seemed an obvious first step.

There is much research on the performance of distance learners compared to face-to-face learners, but even based on the most recent studies researchers have not been able to reach a consensus. Xu and Jaggars (2014) studied community colleges in Washington State USA by comparing the distance and face-to-face education performances of over 40,000 students. The researchers also had access to a large amount of supplementary data, such as the subjects being taught and the gender, ethnicity, and age of the students. According to their findings, there was in fact a performance gap between online and face-to-face education, the data showing that “students typically received lower grades in online sections compared to face-to-face sections of the same course” (Xu and Jaggars 2014: 642). Interestingly, the research they bring forth compares some, but not all, of the subject areas being taught, in order to find out which has the highest and lowest levels of performance gap. Literature and foreign languages, listed as a separate subject area (Xu and Jaggars 2014: 643) earlier in the study, is later not listed when a comparison between subject areas and performance is made (Xu and Jaggars 2014: 650). However, English is shown to be one of the subject areas with the highest performance gaps, so one could argue that foreign languages would suffer from similar problems.

However, Cavanaugh (2013) looked at the findings of eight meta-analysis on the effectiveness of distance education on the K-12 and postsecondary level, done between the years 2001 and 2009, and found that the studies suggest “that as distance education is currently practiced, student learning on average in well-designed online elementary and secondary environments appears to be equivalent to learning in a well-designed classroom environment”(Cavanaugh 2013: 172). The data used by Cavanaugh (2013) is older than the one studied by Xu and Jaggars (2014), but it is also wider in scope, encompassing both K-12 and postsecondary education. It would also seem reasonable to assume that older distance education courses, with less advanced technology, could potentially result in lower student performance, but Cavanaugh’s findings do not seem to support this. Blake also argues that research seems to support the conclusion that “online language learning can be effective, at least as a means of improving writing, reading, and listening comprehension abilities.” (Blake 2008: 112-113). According to them achieving speaking proficiency is a slightly more complicated issue, but that at least distance education does not necessarily lead to lower spoken language proficiency for learners (Blake 2008: 115-124). Based on these studies, it is difficult to say whether distance education has an influence on student performance on average, but it would seem reasonable to say that distance education does not necessarily result in lower student performance.

Asynchronous distance education has some self-evident benefits that are unique to it that synchronous education, be it distance or face-to-face, cannot replicate. This is because asynchronous education renders the teacher and learner separate in both space and time. Thus, in cases of asynchronous distance language education it becomes much easier to accommodate both teachers and learners. Firstly, scheduling becomes much easier since the teacher and students do not have to find a specific time for communication. Secondly, since both teaching and learning can take place anywhere where there is a computer, there is less need for infrastructure like classrooms and school buildings. This combination of freedom and disregard for geographical distance and location makes asynchronous distance education ideal for learners who are not studying full time, for teachers who need to teach a large numbers of learners, and for institutions that either do not have the facilities for face-to-face lessons, or do not have the necessary teachers living within a suitable distance for a daily commute. From the position of the language programs of schools, the final point is especially important, since small schools might not have suitable teachers for many minority languages living close enough for classroom interaction to be feasible. This means that many smaller schools are forced to either limit the number of available languages in their curriculum or to offer distance education courses.

Distance education has often been viewed as a cheaper option to face-to-face education, but there does not seem to be much hard data to support this conclusion (Glass 2009, Poulin & Straus 2017). The argument would seem to make sense, since the scheduling of communication between teachers and students becomes more flexible, the need for physical facilities such as classrooms are lessened, and a single teacher can deal with a larger student load than in a regular classroom, especially in cases of asynchronous education. These could potentially lead to distance education being more economically viable than face-to-face education. This is difficult to verify, however, since the cost-effectiveness of distance education depends on a number of different factors, including laws and regulations, whether the teachers are being employed through outsourcing, and where the hardware and software required for distance education is purchased from (Glass 2009, Schwirzke 2011, Ash 2009). Some have argued that in the end the costs for virtual schools remain on similar levels as conventional schools and the findings of Poulin & Straus (2017: 44-45) seem to even support the opposite conclusion.

An accurate evaluation of the true cost of distance education is made even more difficult by the vested interest that for-profit distance education institutions often have in arguing their education is expensive to produce.

Legislatures often embarked on virtual school creation with the expectation that it would substantially reduce costs. However, virtual education providers insist that costs remain at levels near that of expenditures for conventional schools, and they lobby legislators vigorously for what they regard as adequate funding. (Glass 2009: 7)

Glass (2009: 7-8) points out that there is a potential for misinformation here, since these education providers in the USA are often privately owned and receive state funding. Thus, it makes sense that they would request more funds by claiming their expenses are on a similar level as conventional schools, even when this might not be the case. It has been argued, however, that when it comes to small courses, such as minority languages, hiring a third-party provider to teach a distance education course is more cost-effective than hiring a full-time teacher (Schwirzke 2011: 31, Ash 2009: 1).

Use of distance education tools may have positive effects for foreign language learners in blended classrooms. Since geographical distance becomes an irrelevant factor, distance education can be especially useful for offering interaction with native speakers for foreign language education purposes. Canto et al. (2013) had 36 students randomly assigned to three groups: (1) a group that carried out tasks with native peers through videoconferencing, (2) a group carrying out the same tasks with native peers on the virtual environment Second Life and (3) a group that performed the tasks face-to-face with peers in their classroom. They then tested the communicative competence of the students both before and after the study period. After the study the students were asked to fill in an additional survey and take part in interviews. Their findings (Canto et al. 2013: 112-113) show that students who took part in distance education with native speakers, both through videoconferencing and through Second Life, learned more and found the tasks more motivating and rewarding. Moreover, the students who took part in distance education with native peers reported being “more aware of cultural contrasts and similarities, that they had become more confident, were able to talk more fluently, and took more initiative.” (Canto et al. 2013: 113).

The learner’s and the teacher’s autonomy are significant aspects of distance language learning and can have positive effects on learning outcomes. The ability of students to work at a pace that most suits them is a very important feature of asynchronous distance language learning. Students also need to self-regulate their learning in many ways and, when correctly supported, the student may learn to be a more independent learner all together, something that can benefit them in all instances of learning, not just language learning. Thus, it can be argued that distance

language learning has the potential to foster the development of independent and self-regulatory learning skills (Huh & Reigeluth 2018).

Many researchers (Pichette 2009, Hurd & Xiao 2010, Grant et al. 2014, Melchor-Couto 2017, Bollinger 2017, Aydin 2018) have also studied the connection between language learning anxiety and distance language learning, or the use of virtual learning environments. The hypothesis for many of these studies has been that not learning a language in the traditional classroom setting would offset some of the anxiety felt by the students. In other words, the idea that the classroom setting and the face-to-face interaction itself contributes to a large extent to the anxiety felt by the students, and thus by learning the language in a more isolated, less immediate and often more relaxed setting, the students would feel less anxious. However, studies thus far seem to conclude that distance language learning does not reduce language learning anxiety to any significant degree (Pichette 2009, Hurd & Xiao 2010). A study by Bollinger (2017: 91) even found that students taking part in distance education were more anxious than the students taking part in regular face-to-face classes, though the author notes that the results should be interpreted cautiously. A more recent research synthesis by Aydin (2018: 200) found the relation of distance education and language learning anxiety to be “confusing”. Furthermore, it is possible that learners in a distance education course may be less likely to seek help from the teacher in order to overcome said anxiety, due in part to the possibility of support being less easily available than in a face-to-face classroom context (Hurd & Xiao 2010: 195). Based on these findings, it is clear that more research is needed, especially on the relationship of language learning anxiety and the different methods of distance education, including teleconferencing tools.

Considering the state of confusion surrounding the relationship of distance education and language learning in general, it is surprising that there are areas where many researchers seem to agree. Most notably, there are studies done on virtual reality platforms such as Second Life (Grant et al. 2014, Melchor-Couto 2017), where researchers have noticed a decrease in the students’ anxiety levels, compared to students enrolled in face-to-face classes. The anonymity afforded by this virtual environment is seen to play a large part in these instances (Melchor-Couto 2017: 115), as well as not having to perform in front of others, and the lower pace in communication (Grant et al. 2014: 31). Based on this, it can be argued that it is possible to decrease language learning anxiety in certain instances of distance language learning. However, Grant et al. (2014: 31) point out that there seems to be a correlation between the authenticity of the learning environment and the amount of anxiety it induces in the learner. The more authentic

the environment the more anxiety it appears to produce. The researchers also note that a more authentic environment may provide benefits to learner motivation and increase the perceived usefulness of the learning exercises. Thus, a teacher intending to make use of virtual learning environments has to consider how they can balance these factors in a way that best benefits their students.

3.2. Challenges

As the history of distance education shows, technology is strongly linked to distance language learning and this poses some problems for both teachers and students. Firstly, both must learn to utilize whatever distance language learning platform they are using to its fullest extent if they wish to reach the best learning outcomes (Compton 2009, Rehn et al. 2018). This step may be more daunting for some elderly learners and teachers who have failed to keep up with the most recent technological developments (Nummenmaa 2012: 9). Some adult learners may also be unwilling, or unable, to learn in a computer mediated environment, due to biases or physical disabilities such as deteriorated eyesight or hearing. Secondly, since the technology is continuously developing, teachers are seemingly forced to keep up with said development. The teachers must be well versed in the different aspects of the online learning environment they are using so they can pass this knowledge on to their students and so they can make most of the opportunities it offers for teaching. The fact that the hardware, including but not limited to computers, cameras, and microphones, keeps continuously evolving could also pose a problem to the schools in terms of cost. Thirdly, the technology can sometimes be rather unreliable, and prone to breakage. This can be at least partially solved by investing in further education for the teachers and proper IT-support, but it might still create distrust between the teachers and the educational technology they are supposed to be using. This distrust may then manifest in an unwillingness to engage in distance language education, even in cases where it might best serve the students' interests.

The question of preconceptions, misconceptions, and concerns of teachers with regards to distance or online education has been studied by a few researchers. Compton et al. (2010) studied 65 pre-service teachers, meaning teachers still in training, who were taking part in a teaching experience course, to find out what they thought of online education. The data consisted of the e-journals they submitted as a part of the course. The pre-service teachers portrayed a number of concerns, including loss of jobs to automation, viability of online education and an increased possibility of cheating (Compton 2010: 42-49). The study found that many of the misconceptions and concerns of the preservice teachers could be addressed

with further education, thus leading to potentially better job prospects for the teachers (Compton 2010: 49-50). Compton (2010: 50) also argues that misconceptions and concerns about what they call virtual schooling, meaning education using a virtual learning environment, are also likely to naturally change in the future, due to the virtual environments becoming more common and the emergence of people more proficient in the technology used.

Osborne et al. (2009) studied the different perceptions the faculty had with online teaching and compared them with the views held by the students attending said online courses at a Texas university. A survey was administered to 154 students and 24 faculty members. The findings indicate that over all the faculty had a more negative view of online courses than the students. Once both teachers and students had some experience with online courses, some of the initially perceived differences disappeared. Even after having taught distance education courses it was more likely for the teachers to feel that distance education is more time consuming, does not work well for students who are prone to procrastination, and that students tend to take online courses because they perceive them as easier than face-to-face courses. It is important to note however, that Osborne et al. make no mention of the specifics of the course they offered; whether the course contained synchronous teaching elements, for example, or how the faculty generally felt about their readiness to use technology in teaching. As such it is difficult to determine the underlying cause of their findings. Without such knowledge it is possible that any differences between how these teachers and students view online courses may be a result of specific technological issues, or policy choices adopted by the university and thus not generalisable to other instances of distance education. The study does however, point to the general problem of potential differences in how online courses are perceived by students and faculty. These differences may influence, among other things, course creation, student evaluation, and the way students interact during the courses, thus becoming self-fulfilling prophecies.

Teaching foreign languages through the mediating influence of technology does seem to, in some ways, transform not only the teaching and learning methods, but also what is being taught. Kern (2014: 341-344) argues that the medium of education is of great importance and that in computer mediated language learning what students learn is somewhat different than in face-to-face lessons. Kern bases his assertions on an “ongoing research/ pedagogy collaboration among colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley, Université Lumière Lyon II, and the École Normale Supérieure-Lettres et Sciences Sociales de Lyon” (Kern 2014: 344). The data gathered included video and audio recordings of student interactions, journal entries, and

interviews. A number of studies have been based on this data and one of the focuses of the research has been on videoconferencing and its effects on the students as a medium of foreign language learning. Kern reports that the participants, who were students at the aforementioned schools, felt that communication through videoconferencing created a very specific kind of context in which the communication took place, unlike purely audio or text-based communication. He views this as something not only worth studying, but worth teaching as well, and thus notes that teachers should not see technology merely as a means to enhance current teaching methods, but as something worth studying in and of itself.

“...instead of thinking in terms of using technology to make learning more efficient, or more motivating, or more inclusive, or more culturally authentic, we ought to consider ways to use technology to study the very ways it mediates language use, communication, cultural expression, and social meaning.” (Kern 2014: 352)

This outlook on distance education as fundamentally differently mediated, and thus differently experienced, interaction can pose a potential problem for distance educators. If they have been trained to teach face-to-face, they may need further training before they can properly take these factors into account in their teaching. The multiple different ways of communicating, through audio and visual cues as well as chat, offer many opportunities for meaning making in foreign language education. However, to make use of these opportunities, researchers have argued that “users have to acquire appropriate literacy skills, and explicit training in these strategies and coping mechanisms has to be provided” (Hample & Stickler 2012: 135).

The potential need for training is made more pressing if we take into consideration the fact that distance education can often be adopted in cases where face-to-face teaching simply is not possible, such as where a student is ill or otherwise unable to attend school. In such cases, a teacher who usually teaches face-to-face may find themselves having no choice but to teach at a distance, potentially on a short notice, and with minimal training. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 is an extreme example of such a case. As telecommunication tools become cheaper and more advanced, it seems plausible that teaching administrators will be drawn to the flexibility distance education offers both teachers and students, potentially without proper consideration of the special features of distance education, and distance foreign language education specifically.

There is also a question of student retention when talking about distance education. A study by Bernard et al. (2004) did not find differences between retention rates of distance and face-to-face education. However, some studies since that (Patterson & McFadden 2009, Simpson 2013) have provided evidence in support of the idea that distance education courses may have a lower

rate of retention compared to face-to-face courses, at least in higher education. A study by Peck et al (2018) looked at how self-regulation and motivation correlate with student retention of 113 undergraduate students at two U.S. universities. The data consisted of answers to a Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) administered to 91 students attending a distance education course and 22 students who had dropped out. Their findings seem to support a correlation between student retention and student attributes like self-efficacy, effort regulation and peer-learning. In their view, this is relevant for the instructional design of distance education courses, due to the fact that these factors can be taken into account during course creation.

“good instructional design can build courses that are perceived as having a high task value, encourage and motivate the students in their progress, and build learning strategies into the course and study work so that students can improve their performance as they work through the material.” (Peck 2018: 9)

Based on these findings it seems possible that if these factors are not taken sufficiently into account in distance education retention rates may suffer.

It is also important to note that the falling retention rates are a symptom, resulting potentially from students who feel the course is not providing them with what they need. However, if one is teaching at the level of compulsory education, students who feel they are not well served by distance education cannot simply drop out. Seeing as it is highly unlikely that this issue is unique to higher education, though it may be more common there due to a variety of factors, it is important to ask what happens to these students. Being unable to just drop out, they may reach out to the teacher for increased support, or continue to attend lessons as normal, hoping that the situation resolves itself. If the teacher remains unaware of the problems these students are facing the situation may, at worst, result in a group of students who feel left out and unconnected to their fellow students and their teacher, and develop a negative view of their own abilities as learners. In any case, if lower student retention rates at higher education are a symptom of some people being less prepared or suited for distance education then teachers need to be aware of this and take it into account in the way they design distance education courses.

The physical distance between the teacher and their students, and possibly also between the students themselves, creates a very different kind of learning environment in which the student is often more directly responsible for their own learning. Thus, students who are particularly good at taking charge of their own learning may find themselves thriving, whereas students who feel they need more external motivation and guidance from the teacher may feel more isolated and left behind. Even in a regular classroom of over 20 people it is easy for the teacher

to miss a student's silent call for help. Distance education may require the teacher to be even more vigilant in this regard, since the students are not as immediately observable. Murphy (2011) notes that learners in courses using distance education methods are often required to do things like setting personal goals, monitoring their own progress and maintaining their own motivation. Due to this, she argues that truly autonomous learners are by definition motivated learners. Thus, a lack of motivation can be a larger problem in a distance education course than it is in face-to-face education. Murphy further advises teachers to help learners maintain this motivation by increasing opportunities for choice and decision making, with regards to the content and execution of the course.

Murphy et al. (2011) looked at both foreign language tutors and learners in an attempt to determine skills they found important for distance foreign language educators. The study ended up providing some interesting information on challenges perceived by distance educators and learners. The data consisted of a mix of questionnaires and interviews for students and tutors at the Open University of United Kingdom. Murphy et al. received answers to their questionnaire from 49 tutors, four of whom also took part in an interview. A modified questionnaire was then answered by 144 students, 12 of whom also took part in an interview. Murphy et al. (2011: 408-411) point out that both teachers and students seem to agree that distance language education appears to be more isolated and thus requiring greater interpersonal skills from the teacher than face-to-face education. This results in teachers having to pay close attention to their use of non-verbal cues, empathising with students in order to provide more personal support, keeping the students motivated, and providing students with useful strategies for individual work. Overcoming this perceived isolation seems all the more pressing in the context of foreign language education, where communicative skills are also the object of education. This isolation is also not just a factor between the teacher and student but also between the teacher and their colleagues, which may leave the teachers feeling they are cut off from a community of support. It is easy to see how these and other potential challenges and opportunities of distance education could potentially help researchers determine the most important skills and best practices that distance foreign language educators need to master.

3.3. Best practices

Firstly, before any discussion on the best practices of distance language education can begin, one must consider the variety inherent in the field of distance education. There is a myriad of ways in which distance education can be organised, largely due to the part technology plays in its implementation. It would thus be impossible to point to a set number of clear guidelines that

would best serve the distance language teacher in every situation, now or in the past and future. Because of this, some of the older studies on the issue may not reflect the best practices for teachers using more recent technologies. Best practices for distance education organised through e-mail correspondence or in chatrooms using text do say something about the overall field and where points of interest may lie for teachers. However, distance language learners using videoconferencing or game-like virtual environments like Second Life would most likely be best served by guidelines more specifically tailored to their needs. This creates a problem for researchers, since a study on the best practices for teaching through videoconferencing, for example, seems to lose some of its significance once teachers move on to more advanced technologies. This in turn might dissuade researchers from spending time researching the best practices for specific technologies for distance education, even though this knowledge might be extremely useful for distance educators.

Even more worryingly for distance language teachers, the subject matter of distance language education might actually differ from most other distance education subjects to the extent that a separate set of skills and practices may be called for (Hampel & Stickler 2005). In light of this, Compton (2009: 74) fears that “the vast research and best practices for teaching online may not translate well for online language teaching”. If this is true, teachers who have experience teaching face-to-face and even those who have received some general distance education training might still find it difficult to come up with best practices for teaching languages at a distance. This means that it would be very important for foreign language teachers to receive proper training in distance education, geared specifically toward their needs as foreign language teachers.

Hampel & Stickler (2005) suggest a pyramid of important skills for online language teachers, based on their own experiences teaching languages online and training tutors for online language courses. This pyramid (Hampel & Stickler 2005: 317) consists of seven levels: (1) Basic ICT competence, (2) Specific technical competence for the software, (3) dealing with constraints and possibilities of the medium, (4) online socialization, (5) facilitating communicative competence, (6) creativity and choice, and (7) own style. The pyramid structure is meant to illustrate how each level is built on the competences gained on the lower levels, giving a clear chronology for the teaching and learning of said competences.

Compton (2009) agrees with Hampel & Stickler, in that distance language education requires a distinct set of skills from other subjects of distance education but views the skill pyramid as

lacking in several areas. Firstly, the sequential nature of the skills is questioned, since many of them can be learned concurrently, and thus the higher order skills do not necessitate the learning of the lower order skills in the pyramid first. The first three skills in the pyramid, for example, all deal with technology related issues and are thus often learned partially at the same time. The same argument is made for the next two skills, since facilitating socialization and communicative competence are also closely related skills. Secondly, Compton (2009: 80-81) also points out that a distance language educator does not necessarily need to be skilled at socializing online, as long as they know how to properly facilitate language acquisition. Thirdly, the pyramid offers no guidance on when an online tutor is qualified enough to teach a class. Finally, although it is argued that distance language teachers require a different set of skills from other distance educators, the only skill that reflects this difference is the facilitation of communicative competence. Skills that might be very important for distance language teachers, like “application of language learning theories, online language assessment and task evaluation” (Compton 2009: 81) are nowhere to be seen.

Compton (2009: 81) then lays down their own framework for online language teaching skills. The skills are split into three categories: “a) technology in online language teaching; b) pedagogy of online language teaching; and c) evaluation of online language teaching” (Compton 2009: 81-86). Each category is further split into novice teacher, proficient teacher, and expert teacher –levels, each of which contains different knowledge and abilities an online language teacher should possess. Generally speaking, a novice teacher would have knowledge of the relevant aspects of each category, a proficient teacher would have the ability to use this knowledge effectively in their teaching, and an expert teacher would be able to use their knowledge and abilities in a creative way to support their teaching.

DiPietro et al. (2010) collected data from a series of interviews of 16 teachers from the Michigan Virtual School in order to distinguish best practices for online teaching. They argue that “The skills needed for teaching in an online learning environment support a teacher’s function as a point of intersection for pedagogy, technology, and content” (DiPietro et al. 2010: 11). In other words, not only must an online teacher have expertise on all three fields, they must also, and perhaps most importantly, have an understanding of the way these three fields interact with each other. The list of best practices was split roughly into eight parts: (1) general characteristics (2) classroom management strategies (3) assessment (4) engaging students with content (5) making course meaningful for students (6) providing support (7) communication and community and (8) technology. Each part has a number of concrete examples of best

practices within that area. Many of these strategies are also relevant for face-to-face teaching, such as “teachers have extensive knowledge of and appreciation for the content area they teach” (DiPietro et al. 2010: 18). However, there are also strategies that are geared more specifically for distance education, such as “teachers effectively monitor the tone and emotion of their communications with students” (DiPietro et al. 2010: 26).

Moore-Adams et al. (2016) provides a review of the literature on the preparation of K-12 teachers for online teaching. K-12 is a term referring to students from kindergarten to 12th grade, roughly 4-19 years of age. The study used the technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) framework to examine studies dealing with K-12 teacher education, specifically the kind of knowledge distance education teachers are seen to require in their work, as well as the extent to which these skills are addressed in existing teacher education programs. The TPACK framework contains three overarching knowledge domains: technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge, which all partially overlap with each other creating more specific domains. This leaves seven different domains to consider. Moore-Adams et al. (2016:334) argue that for successfully teaching an online course, knowledge from all these domains is necessary. 26 studies were reviewed using the TPACK framework. It was found that programs meant to prepare teachers for K-12 online teaching varied greatly in structure and content. Only six of the 26 studies reviewed gave an account of the types of knowledge and skills required of online teachers, and only two of those six based their findings on empirical research. This supports the fears that too little empirical research surrounding the issues of distance education may result in the use of best practices that are simply adaptations of face-to-face teaching practices, without proper empirical evidence to support their use in a distance education context (Moore-Adams 2016: 345-346). Thus, it is understandable that in a case where there is no proper empirically supported best practices, both Moore-Adams et al. (2016: 345) and Kear et al. (2012: 961) stress the importance of actual practice and field experiences when learning to teach languages at a distance.

Kear et al. (2012) studied web conferencing in a distance learning module in a UK Open University from the perspective of tutors who were new to synchronous web conferencing. Six tutors, with around 15 tutees each, took part in the study where data collection consisted of observation of lessons, a survey, and tutor discussions on an online forum and in specific focus groups. Among other things, and most relevantly to this study, the study attempted to find out “What are useful strategies for teaching via a web conferencing environment?” and “What is required to support teachers, both pedagogically and practically, who are new to web

conferencing?” (Kear et al. 2012: 954). The tutors received training in the use of the *Illuminate!* platform used in the web conferencing, lessening, though not entirely negating, problems related to unfamiliarity with the web conferencing tools. The findings were then split into three categories: preparation and improvisation, interaction and participation, and usability and practical issues (Kear et al. 2012: 958-960). The study “indicated that tutors experienced challenges in creating social presence and in managing cognitive load when dealing with multiple tasks online” (Kear et al. 2012: 953). These findings will be discussed more thoroughly, and the findings compared with similar studies by other authors, later in this paper.

Rehn et al. (2018) studied skills required for distance education from the perspective of eight teachers teaching K-12 students in Alberta. All of the teachers had been teaching by videoconference for at least one year prior to the study. The data consisted of lesson observations and subsequent semi-formal interviews. The study found that “successful teaching by videoconference requires teachers to master a complex and distinctive mix of technical, pedagogical and interpersonal skills” as well as that “teachers felt underprepared and untrained for the role of videoconference teacher” (Rehn et al. 2018: 420). Furthermore, the study found 12 videoconferencing-specific skills the participants wanted to improve, which were then divided into four categories according to Berge’s (Berge 1995, cited in Rehn et al. 2018: 423) classification of roles for online teachers. These roles were pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical.

Rehn et al. (2018: 424) mention that pedagogical skills include things like lesson plans, giving instructions and feedback, and the ability to facilitate discussion. In the context of teaching via videoconferencing the teacher needs to take into account things like “whether it appears that eye contact is made, whether the tone of voice is warm and engaging, and whether they are close enough to the camera for students to see facial expression and emotion” (ibid.). Kear et al (2012: 959) found that the lack of visual cues was also a problem for the tutors in their study. Rehn et al. (2018: 424) also raise up the question of the importance of the teachers acting ability for successful videoconferencing teaching, stating that there might be a need for basic training in acting for videoconferencing teachers. It is also mentioned that videoconferencing tends to lend itself more easily to one sided lectures, as opposed to more interactive lessons, something previous research had also discovered (Hampel & Stickler 2012: 133) . This may be a particularly important point for language teachers, as teaching communicative competence may require more interactive lessons. Thus, language teachers in distance education courses need to

be particularly aware of ways they can create a rich and interactive learning environment for their students.

Rehn et al. (2018: 424) argue that “the managerial role is emphasised in the videoconference when compared with face-to-face teaching”. The participants in the study were of the opinion that it is important to be more organised, structured, and clear, when teaching a videoconferencing course, due to the increased risk of ambiguity and misunderstandings. The study argues that “it is harder to ‘teach on the fly’ in a videoconference” (Rehn et al. 2018: 424) and continues by noting that “balancing structure with flexibility is more challenging”. The use of and communication with teaching assistants also needs to be considered and planned thoroughly beforehand, in order to avoid communication breakdowns and to help teachers address issues privately when necessary.

According to the participants in the study by Rehn et al. (2018: 425) the biggest obstacles for successful teaching in a videoconference environment were social by nature. The study notes that a teacher needs to pay special attention to student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions, as these have been associated with an increased feelings of togetherness and better student-content interaction. The skills required to make this happen include, among others, “attending to emotion on the other side of the screen”, “creating a sense of real presence” and “fostering interaction between students across sites” (Rehn et al. 2018: 425). The study by Kear et al. (2012: 962) also raises the issue of developing social presence, and of integrating different communication tools such as chatting and polling into the lesson in a way that does not hinder spoken interaction. Furthermore, cognitive overload was also considered a significant problem, due to the tutors having to pay attention to multiple communication channels at the same time. The pervasiveness of these issues in distance education would certainly imply that teachers could gain much from training that seeks to overcome these social problems by gaining more experience and fostering the skills listed here.

In terms of the technical aspects of teaching through videoconferencing, the majority of the teachers in the study had received some basic instruction and training in the use of the technology they utilized. However, Rehn et al. point out that “While technical training is necessary, it is not sufficient when preparing teachers for videoconference instruction.” (2018: 425). The study argues that teachers also need to understand the interplay of the technology with the pedagogy, in other words, how to harness the technology to best serve the intended

learning purposes. These skills would also seem to correspond with the first three of the seven levels of the skill pyramid suggested by Hampel & Stickler (2005).

Studies by Rehn et al. (2018) and Kear et al. (2012) have some significant overlap in their findings of skills required by video- and web conferencing teachers and tutors. As mentioned above, Kear et al. divide their findings into three categories of skill, whereas Rehn et al. divide theirs into four roles for distance educators. Preparation and improvisation by Kear et al. can be considered to overlap mostly with Rehn et al.'s managerial category. Both underline the importance of planning beforehand and the ability to diverge from the plan as new situations arise. Interaction and participation overlaps mostly with the social role. This argues for the importance of creating a sense of social presence and positive atmosphere, while also making interaction between participants easier and more fluent. The category of usability and practical issues overlaps mostly with the technical role of distance educators. The teacher must be able to provide support for the students when they struggle with the communication technology, while also being able to make use of the opportunities provided by the technology for language learning purposes. All these three categories also overlap with the pedagogical role of distance language teachers.

The use of the webcam in online videoconferencing is also an important feature of most synchronous distance education courses and something teachers need to become acquainted with in order to make effective use of it. Develotte et al. (2010) studied the ways foreign language teachers used webcams in distance education. They observed the eye movements of five teacher trainees during one teaching session as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with all five participants. Although they note that the results of their study cannot be used to infer best practices for the use of webcams in distance foreign language education their study does provide a variety of ways in which webcams can affect the social environment of a distance education class. For example, the study indicates that looking at the webcam creates the appearance of eye contact for the learner, thus generating a more intimate social environment. However, prolonged eye contact in this way can give the appearance of staring, the intensity potentially having negative effects on the social environment of the class (Develotte 2010: 310). They do point out that the use of the webcam is not always necessary and that sometimes “a webcam image is more important in terms of its availability as a possible resource in case of need than as a favored type of communication” (Develotte 2010: 309). However, mastering when to use it and how can help a teacher create presence at a distance, install connection between the participants and develop the quality of the pedagogical

relationships (Develotte 2010: 309). Thus, it can be an important tool for overcoming the feeling of transactional distance inherent in distance education, potentially making learners more open for the kind of communication, which plays a central role in foreign language education.

3.4. The future

It is difficult to predict the direction of scientific progress and innovation over any significant length of time. Since these factors largely set the stage for the way distance education will be implemented in the coming years it is almost impossible to give accurate predictions of what distance education will look like in the future. However, some trends can be seen in the current research on distance education, on practices implemented by educational institutions, and in the way the subject of distance education is spoken of in the media. The current Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (Opetushallitus, 2014: 29), for example, mentions that information- and communication technology is an integral part of a versatile learning environment. Furthermore, distance education has been raised as a possible method by some articles in the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE (Heikinmatti 2018, Korhonen 2016) for allowing schools in less densely populated areas to offer a more diverse education, especially in the case of foreign languages. If nothing else, this means that teachers, and language teachers specifically, may in the future find it easier to find employment if they have experience or expertise in distance education.

The Covid-19 pandemic, which began in the spring of 2020 has also made it clear that the need for distance education may arise on a short notice. The sudden change from face-to-face to distance education has also raised widespread interest in the possibility of applying distance education more broadly even after the necessity for it has passed. It is difficult to imagine that after transitioning into distance education for what is, at the time of writing, several months, Finnish schools would simply return to exactly the same teaching methods as before the pandemic. It seems likely that after having been proven effective on such a large scale, the use of distance education in the Finnish education system will continue to increase.

The use of virtual reality environments in distance language education has been an interesting new area of focus for recent research. Things like the 3D multi-user virtual environment *Second Life* have been studied (Chen 2016, Melchor-Couto 2017) to find out how virtual reality environments change the ways in which teaching and learning take place. Chen implemented an English as a foreign language course in *Second Life*, intended for adult language learners. The nine participants in the study were located all around the world and contacted through

Second Life. The data was gathered through questionnaires, interviews, learner journals, and observations of learning situations. The findings (Chen 2016: 159-161) indicated the learners found the experience largely positive, with Chen noting that Second Life is “a more immersive educational tool than other asynchronous or synchronous digital tools” (Chen 2016: 169). The study cannot, however, be considered directly applicable to the Finnish foreign language education context. It consisted of only nine students, all of whom were adults who had prior experience in Second Life and who volunteered to participate in the study. Differing levels of motivation, age, and competence in the use of the communication tools afforded by Second Life may influence learner perceptions and results. Nonetheless, Chen (2016:154) notes that a growing number of private institutes and educational organisations have built virtual classes and islands in Second Life, intended specifically for experimenting with foreign language learning.

Whether virtual reality environments like Second Life will prove useful for language teachers in the future depends on a number of factors. If some of these virtual reality environments were to become widely popular in the future, integrating language teaching into them could prove very productive, even in cases where distance education is not strictly necessary. As technology advances and becomes cheaper and more widely available there are many ways in which these virtual realities may continue to evolve and grow in the future, thus offering even better tools for language learning purposes. It is equally possible that, for whatever reason, they never gain wider popularity. These reasons may be social, political, pedagogical, institutional, or technological, among others. However, whatever happens, future teachers learning about the most recent technological tools and platforms for foreign language teaching could facilitate adoption of new technology, when applicable. Failure to acquaint teachers with these new technologies could, in the future result in political or institutional demands for the adoption of a new technology without due consideration for relevant teacher training.

When considering the future of distance education, blended, or hybrid, teaching and learning is a trend that cannot be overlooked, as it is becoming increasingly common all around the world. In essence, blended learning means teaching with a combination of face-to-face and online methods, a practice that has become much more common in recent years. For example, according to Koskela (2018: 11), two-thirds of Finnish schools are using the online learning environment Pedanet. The use of this environment may involve having students complete and return homework using the online platform, or entire lectures consisting of online exercises and independent work outside the classroom.

In most of these instances blended learning seems to combine asynchronous, rather than synchronous, distance education with face-to-face lessons. For example, a course that only uses online learning environments as a means of communication between teacher and learner and where no specific time is set aside for this communication, would count as an asynchronous distance education course, whereas a course that also included face-to-face classes would count as blended learning. An example of blended learning with synchronous distance education, on the other hand, would be a foreign language course of mostly face-to-face lessons, but also having a few lessons given, for example, by a native speaker using videoconferencing tools.

Due to the use of face-to-face interaction in teaching, blended learning is not a case of pure distance education, but since it always involves some distance education, learning how to best teach languages at a distance would certainly benefit foreign language teachers engaging in it. Comas-Quinn (2011), for example, notes that the transition from face-to-face to online teaching requires a pedagogical understanding of the new medium, and potentially even the adoption of a new role and identity. Gerbic (2011) also mentions the changing of roles and identities as a challenge for teachers engaging in blended learning, while also pointing out the need to address teachers' prior conceptions and beliefs about blended learning. Thus, both argue that the change from a face-to-face teacher to a blended teacher can be difficult, and that adequate supplementary education might ease this transition.

4. CURRENT STUDY

In this chapter I will go over the particular features of this study, including the specific research questions of the study, prior research on the field and the methods used to gather and analyse data. The data for this study has been gathered through a questionnaire and interviews, the justification and content of which will also be given later in the chapter.

4.1. Research questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How ready do the foreign language teacher students feel to teach foreign languages at a distance?
2. What preconceptions do the foreign language teacher students have towards distance education?
3. To what extent do these preconceptions correspond with the experiences of English as a foreign language teachers on the field?

The findings from this study could then be used to assess the need for training in distance education during foreign language teacher training courses at university level. At the time of data collection, it seems most of this training was taking place at the institutions hiring distance educators, though the situation may have changed due to Covid-19. Since each distance education institution may be using a different software to cater to their needs, the teachers do often require some supplementary education to acquaint them with this software and thus this situation is unlikely to change. However, a university level course could offer basic information on distance education. Such a course would not only influence the teachers' perceptions of competence with regards to distance education, it could also include distance education methods like asynchronous teaching that could prove useful even in face-to-face teaching courses. A course on distance education would help teachers pay attention to areas where distance learners' needs may differ from those of face-to-face learners, as well as how best to make use of, for example, videoconferencing tools in the field of education. Currently it seems that more research is also required to form the basis for such a course.

“Within the teacher education literature, many aspects of the online preparation of teachers remain poorly understood. More specifically, there is scant literature on the experiences and beliefs of teacher educators in relation to their readiness and preparation for online teaching as well as their beliefs in relation to the appropriateness of online education for preservice teachers.” (Downing & Dymont 2013: 96)

There has been some research on the subject of successful distance education in Finland. On a global scale, the research seems to more commonly examine success from the point of view of the students, rather than the teachers. These findings can certainly be helpful for aspiring distance language educators, but there is much that goes on in a teaching situation that the student is not able to comment on. Especially when it comes to preparing for a distance education course, it is important to hear the opinions of the teachers. In Finland, the closest study to this subject area seems to be a study by Nummenmaa (2012) where 2493 Finnish teachers answered a questionnaire concerning distance education. According to the study 24% of subject teachers and 9% of elementary school teachers had engaged in distance education over the course of their careers. The study also included questions about, among other things, teacher perceptions of successful distance education, situations in which teachers would be willing to use distance education, and perceived obstacles for the proper implementation of distance education.

In comparison to the studies listed here, the purpose of this study is much more specific in nature. The data for this study was gathered at the start of 2019 and it is worth noting that in 2020 mastering the basics of distance education and distance language learning are not presented as intended learning goals in any of the courses offered for foreign language teacher-trainees at University of Jyväskylä, which is one of the largest teacher-training universities in Finland (University of Jyväskylä 2020). Since, according to the study by Nummenmaa (2012), 24% of Finnish subject teachers had engaged in distance education during their time as a teacher, the fact that distance education has been raised as a potential alternative to closing small schools (Yle Heikinmatti 2018, Yle Korhonen 2016), and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, which forced all Finnish teachers to teach at a distance for several months, it is difficult to justify this lack of education on the subject. This study aims to find out whether foreign language teacher-trainees in a University in Central Finland feel ready to teach distance education language courses based on the training they have received from their university, as well as seeing whether there is a disparity between their preconceptions of distance education and the views of teachers who have taught distance education courses in the past. After all, teacher-trainees may feel ready, yet have a highly inaccurate picture of what teaching at a distance actually entails, or vice versa. In either case, regardless of the teacher-trainees' actual ability, feelings of inadequate training may steer teachers away from what might otherwise be a potential employment opportunity.

4.2. Methods

In the current study two sets of data have been gathered and studied. An online questionnaire was constructed in Finnish using Webropol and then piloted by four foreign language students attending a Finnish university in December of 2018. The online questionnaire was then updated according to feedback and sent to foreign language teacher-trainees in a university in Central Finland via email. It was also made available on a Facebook page for foreign language students attending the aforementioned university in the January of 2019. Ultimately, 42 students participated in this part of the study. The second set of data was gathered between December of 2019 and February of 2020 by interviewing English as a foreign language teachers who were currently working at two different distance education institutions. The institutions were informed of the study and were asked to pass on the request for an interview to their English as a foreign language teachers, five of whom ultimately agreed to the interviews.

These two different data gathering methods, questionnaires and interviews, were used for several reasons. Firstly, since the university from which the first set of data was gathered did not, at the time of data collection, offer courses about distance education it seemed likely that the teacher students would not have much to say on the topic. Thus, a set of interviews would have been both more time consuming and would most likely have ultimately yielded more or less the same amount of data. Secondly, since the research questions refer to the prior knowledge of foreign language teacher students, to increase the validity of the data gathered it was important to gain as large a sample size as possible in order for the data to be properly representative of the group in question. A questionnaire was chosen because it was considered to be a fast and easy way for the teacher students to participate in the study, as well as being structured enough to elicit answers from students who might not have previously had much experience with distance education. Conversely, the research questions concerning language teachers on the field sought expert opinions and experiences rather than an overview of the opinions of a particular group. As such, it was considered that interviews would best serve this purpose. Furthermore, since the language teachers on the field had taught distance education courses, it was assumed that providing the teachers with a less structured environment in which they could express their opinions in greater depth would provide a larger and more diverse amount of data for analysis. It was also intended that the answers and issues raised in the questionnaire could then potentially be discussed and addressed in the interviews, providing feedback from the teachers as to the perceived validity of the preconceptions of foreign language teacher students.

The data thus gathered would then be subjected to qualitative and, when applicable, quantitative content analysis, with the ultimate goal of answering the research questions set forth on page 34. The quantitative data was analysed using the tools of the questionnaire program Webropol. The qualitative data was analysed by dividing answers according to the division of skills required from distance educators laid out by Berge (Berge 1995, according to Rehn et al. 2018: 420), when applicable.

4.2.1. Questionnaire

Dörnyei note that “The main attraction of questionnaires is their unprecedented efficiency in terms of (a) researcher time, (b) researcher effort, and (c) financial resources” (Dörnyei 2010: 6). However, there are also potential downsides to using questionnaires as a method of gathering data. Dörnyei (2010: 7-9) lists nine such downsides. In the case of this study, many of these downsides, such as *Respondent literacy problems* were not considered relevant due to the topic of the questionnaire and it’s intended respondents. The ones that were considered relevant were taken into account during the formation of the questionnaire. Out of the nine listed by Dörnyei, perhaps the most relevant issues for the current study were seen to be (1) *Simplicity and superficiality of answers*, (2) *Little or no opportunity to correct the respondents’ mistakes*, and (3) *Self-deception*.

Simplicity and superficiality of answers in the context of questionnaires is considered by Dörnyei (2010: 7) to mean that since respondents are given the questions in writing and left to answer them on their own, the responses received may end up being short and superficial. For the purposes of this questionnaire, it was assumed that the respondents would have little experience with distance foreign language education. Whether the respondents had prior experience, either as a teacher or a student, was explicitly asked in questions 4, 5, and 6. Thus, even if the assumption were to be unfounded, the study could reveal potential differences in the answers of those who had prior experience with distance education and those who did not. However, it is important to note that if the answers given could be considered superficial, this may be due to the research method rather than the lack of experience of the respondents. To lessen the effect of the research method on the quality of the data, both open and closed questions were added, and at the end the respondents were allowed to give any comments or additions they would like to make to the answers they had already given.

The fact that there would be little or no opportunity to correct the respondents’ mistakes was not considered to be a major problem for this study, as long as adequate steps were taken to

account for it. The questionnaire was targeted at university students, among whom literacy ability could be considered to be quite high. Furthermore, the study was piloted before the final draft in order to make the questions as clear as possible. The responders were also given an opportunity to indicate their perceived trust in their own abilities to teach foreign languages at a distance. Thus, the respondents' lack of knowledge on the subject was itself considered an important type of research data.

Self-deception on the part of the respondents was seen as a potential problem for the validity of the study. If lacking experience in distance foreign language education, the respondents may end up assuming that the education they have received in face-to-face education may be enough to prepare them for the challenges of distance education or vice versa. It is impossible to assess, based on their answers to the questionnaire, which of the respondents could evaluate their own abilities most accurately. Thus, there is always the possibility that the responders are over- or underestimating their own readiness to teach at a distance. However, optimism about the results of, and skills at, distance education may be generally assumed to lead to more positive learning outcomes, or at least a more doubtful attitude would most likely lead to less effective distance education. This is because a teacher who does not believe they can effectively teach at a distance may come to expect less from their students. Thus, if the respondents feel they are not ready to teach at a distance this is itself an important piece of data, regardless of whether their evaluation is accurate or not.

The questionnaire (Appendix 1) consisted of 12 questions. The first six questions were used to establish the background of the students as well as to establish their familiarity with distance education. These included questions about their years of study and the languages they were teaching, as well as whether they had ever attended distance language education courses, as a student or a teacher. The next five questions attempted to determine their thoughts regarding distance foreign language education from a teacher's perspective. The questions dealt with respondents' opinions on the possible points of divergence between distance and face-to-face foreign language education, as well as the readiness of the respondents to teaching at a distance in the future and at time of data collection.

The difficulty at this part of the study was in trying to create a set of questions that would not unduly influence the responses received. For example, listing a set of factors one might need to consider when teaching at a distance and asking the respondents to list them in order of importance would be quick and easy to answer to, even with relatively little experience in

distance education. However, doing so might provide the responder with ideas they might not have come up with on their own. Question 7, *Name three (3) things that you think are most important in order to guarantee successful distance foreign language education, which you can influence as a teacher*, was created with this dilemma in mind, as well as attempting to elicit answers not related to factors outside of the teachers' control, such as failing technology. Later questions then listed aspects of the distance education and asked the teacher students to evaluate their own perceived abilities in the given areas, such as *Maintaining discipline* and *Motivating students*. This question was listed later than question seven precisely because it raised some potential issues with distance education that some respondents may not have thought of before. This seemed the best compromise between being able to gather data concerning specific issues and attempting to assess the respondents' awareness of distance education issues prior to the questionnaire.

In the two final questions the respondents were asked to assess how ready they felt to teaching languages at a distance and how likely they felt it was that they would be doing so in the future. A general feeling of competence in a distance education teaching context is also a potentially important factor in actual distance education competence, as well as influencing the willingness to both teach and learn to teach using distance education tools. The likeliness of the respondents' future distance education careers, on the other hand, could be argued to correlate with how important the respondents would perceive the issues being addressed.

4.2.2. Interviews

Dörnyei (2007: 134-136) lists three different types of one-to-one interviews: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured. Within this classification, the interviews conducted for this study would be classified as semi-structured. This means that a list of guiding questions and prompts was created before the first interview and used in all subsequent interviews as a basis for what issues should be covered and what areas within those issues might need to be further explored. In this way the plan works as a guideline in order to keep the interview on track, while attempting not to impinge on the free expression of the interviewee to address issues they feel to be of importance. This interview plan was piloted on foreign language teacher students prior to being used for the purposes of this study.

Five teachers were interviewed for this study, each between half a year to 11 years of experience teaching English as a foreign language at a distance. They worked at two different institutions, one concentrating on high school level education for all age groups and one on

upper primary school. As such, no teachers were interviewed who had experience teaching young children, roughly 12 or under, by means of distance education. The institutions were contacted via email and the interviews were arranged via videoconferencing tools among the teachers who had volunteered to take part in the study. Each interview was conducted in Finnish and lasted between 15 to 27 minutes and was recorded on an audio file. The data was transcribed and analysed using qualitative content analysis methods.

The interview consisted of five main areas of questions: (1) background information, (2) first distance education experiences, (3) challenges of distance education, (4) opportunities of distance education and (5) potential usefulness of university level training in distance education. A more complete list of questions can be found in the Appendices, but it should be noted that since the interview was semi-structured it did not always strictly follow the structure there laid out. Questions may have, for example, been skipped if the interviewee covered the area of the question in an answer to a previous question. The background information part of the questionnaire consisted of questions relating to the interviewees' amount and nature of teaching experience. First distance education experiences -questions dealt with the kind of training the teachers had received before their first classes as well as how they prepared themselves for them and how they felt before and after the classes. In the challenges of distance education -questions the interviewees were asked to think what they thought were the potential challenges that distance education teachers and learners might commonly have to face. The opportunities of distance education dealt with similar questions from the point of view of opportunities. At the end of the interview the teachers were asked whether they thought teacher students should receive some training in distance education at university level and if so, what they would like those students to learn there. The interviewees were subsequently sent forms via email that explained the purpose and outline of the study they would participate in and were asked to sign the forms if they consented to taking part in the study.

4.3. Hypothesis

The hypothesis prior to the analysis of the data gathered for this study, was that the teacher students would attempt to transfer the skills they had gained through experience in face-to-face teaching directly into a distance education context. Therefore, it was likely that they would give answers that mirrored those they had found useful in face-to-face classes. A lack of experience might also show in answers that describe what the respondents view good distance education should be like, with no concrete practices that might help them reach those goals. The

questionnaire could also reveal that the respondents consider technology and software, the most seemingly central difference between face-to-face and distance education, to be the most likely sources of problems in distance education. Since distance education providers usually provide education to their teachers concerning the technological aspects of their work, it would seem that this problem would not necessitate university involvement. However, the fixation with technology may blind the teacher students to equally pressing issues, such as the difficulties of maintaining a social presence, balancing structure and flexibility when executing lesson plans, and fostering interaction between students. Based on studies like Rehn et al. (2018) and Kear et al. (2012) the biggest obstacles to learning in a distance education context were social in nature. This would most likely be reflected in the interviews done on teachers who had taught at a distance before. If the social aspects are underrepresented in the answers to the questionnaires, or if they are too vague to lead to any specific pedagogical practices, this could show the need for further distance education training.

It is important to note, however, that even if the teacher students feel ready to teach at a distance and are aware of the most pressing challenges to distance educators and learners, this does not by default mean they would make good distance education teachers. Practice and theory do not necessarily go hand in hand, which is why studies by Kear et al. (2012) and Moore-Adams et al. (2016) both stress the importance of field experience for future distance educators. Thus, further study would be required to analyse how first-time distance educators actually go about teaching using teleconferencing and other multimedia tools, as well as the experiences of the students of these teachers.

5. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The data for this study came from two different sources: questionnaire data from language teacher students and interview data from teachers who have done English language education at a distance. The following will be an analysis of the results, both individually and, when relevant, as a comparison in cases where possible views and experiences are seen to overlap or diverge.

When quoting samples from the questionnaire data in the following analysis the terms *e* for *example* and *Q* for *questionnaire* have been used. In the analysis of the questionnaire data, it was not considered important to differentiate between the individual responses since the intent was to analyse the group as a whole, rather than as a collection of individual respondents. It would have been beyond the scope of this study to analyse the individual responses by comparing each individual's answers on the basis of their background information etc. For this reason, the examples raised from the questionnaire data have not been differentiated based on the individual responder in question. In the interview data, however, an individual differentiation was seen to serve an analytic purpose. In the analysis of the interview data the term *e* is again used for *example* and the interviewees have also each been randomly assigned a label between I1 and I5, meaning *interviewee one* to *interviewee five*.

5.1. The questionnaire responses

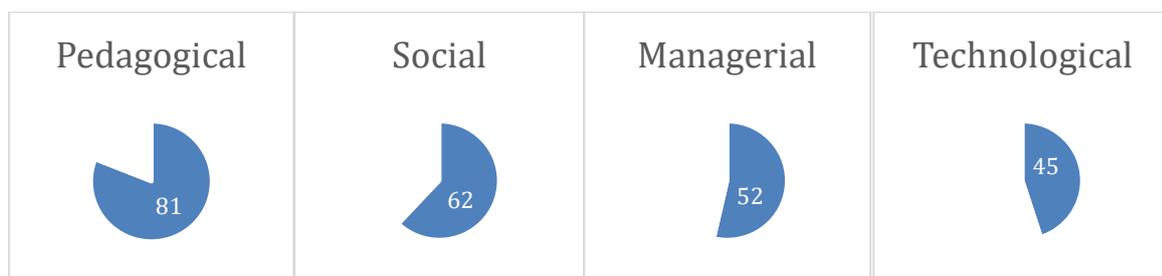
In the current study 42 language teacher students answered a distance education questionnaire, which consisted of 12 questions, with three of these being open ended and one a Likert-scale evaluation. The respondents varied greatly in their background. They had been studying between 1 to 8 years at university level. 74% of them studied English as a major or minor language, with 26% studying Swedish, and smaller percentages studying German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Latin, Finnish as a second language, and other unnamed languages. The teacher training in the university where the study was conducted has been split into two phases, consisting of basic and advanced training. Half of the respondents had concluded their advanced teacher training, with the rest being split between being in the middle of their advanced studies, having finished their basic studies and not yet having done any teacher training. 95% of the respondents had not received any training in distance education and only 17% had been a student in a distance education foreign language course. Only one person among the 42 had taught foreign languages at a distance before the study.

In Question 7 the teacher students were asked to *name three (3) things that you can influence as a teacher, which you think are most important in order to guarantee successful distance foreign language education*. In order to analyse the results, the answers were split into the four categories originally used by Berge (Berge 1995, as cited in Rehn et al. 2018: 420) to differentiate aspects of online teaching, which are: pedagogical, managerial, social, and technological. A more detailed explanation of these terms has already been given on pages 32-34 of this paper, where the results of the study by Rehn et al (2018) are discussed.

All aspects were represented in the answers given by the respondents, though some were clearly more commonly found. The distinction between some categories was notably easier to make than others. For example, mentions of lesson plans and preparation prior to lessons was, in this study, considered to be a managerial issue, though some such choices could be argued to have pedagogical justifications. If pedagogical issues were directly brought up as justifications for possible changes in lesson plans and preparations this was considered to fall under both managerial and pedagogical aspects. In Table 1 one can see the percentage of respondents out of the 42 that mentioned something relating to that aspect of distance education: 81% of the answers mentioned some kind of pedagogical aspect as important, 62% mentioned social aspects, 52% mentioned managerial aspects, and 45% mentioned technological aspects.

Table 1

Answers to Question 7 of the questionnaire split between aspects of online teaching



Respondents listed a wide variety of factors as things to concentrate on when teaching at a distance. For example, *clarity in instructions, course content and structure* was the most common answer, mentioned by 36% of respondents while *maintaining contact and interaction with students* was mentioned by 29% of respondents. Other notable mentions were *keeping students motivated* (17%), *the use of suitable teaching materials for distance education* (14%), *use of varied teaching materials* (14%) and *teachers' technological skills* (14%).

The answers given by the respondents were often vague. They rarely had ideas as to how these issues might be addressed in practice or gave reasons as to why they might be particularly

important when teaching at a distance. The creation of a clear course structure is an example of something that may transfer quite well from face-to-face teaching. However, most of the other issues raised would require elaboration in order to be practically useful. If these issues are indeed important then the teachers need to know, for example, what kind of teaching materials are suitable for distance education, how to keep their output clear when teaching at a distance and how to ensure sufficient interaction between teachers and students. One example of this vagueness is a responder who, when answering Question 7, listed simply knowing how distance education works, before admitting that they had not heard much about the topic themselves.

(e1) Q: Ammattitaitoisuus/perillä siitä miten etäopetus toimii
Kaikkien osapuolten sitoutuneisuus
Reiluus? Oon ihan pihalla tästä aiheesta kun en oo paljoa ennen kuullut /
Professionalism/knowledge of how distance education works
The investedness of all participants
Fairness? I'm completely lost about the topic since I haven't heard much about it before

Others felt that apart from communication problems, which may result in loss of clarity, there was not enough of a difference between face-to-face and distance education to warrant going into specifics, as shown in the example below.

(e2) Q: - Saavuttaa etäopetuksesta huolimatta aito kontakti oppilaaseen (oppilaan tuntemus)
- Mahdollisimman selkeä opetusmateriaali ja tuntirakenne
...aikalailla samoja asioita mitä vaaditaan ihan normaalinkin opetuksen onnistumiseen / -*To make a genuine contact with a student in spite of distance education (knowing the student)*
- *Making the teaching material and lesson plan as clear as possible*
... *pretty much the same things that are required for the success of just normal teaching*

Some respondents seemed to assume that distance education would negatively affect the variety a teacher could offer in terms of foreign language education.

(e3) Q: Opetuksen monipuolisuus etäopetuksesta huolimatta / *The variety in teaching in spite of distance education*

However, some respondents also listed more precise issues, such as the communication between the teacher and other school staff, a clear visual and audible connection in order to see mouth movements when learning pronunciation, the chance for students to receive supplementary lessons, and continuous assessment throughout the course. Some also attempted to give a justification for their answer, which seems to show that they do have the ability to reason from a given educational premise to the potentially best practices for that context. Two examples of this are shown below.

(e4) Q: Innostava sisältö. Kun opettaja ei ole tilassa läsnä, oppilaiden taipumus keskittyä epäolennaisuuksiin lisääntyy. Siksi mielenkiintoisen sisällön merkitys on tavallista suurempi. /
Exciting content. When the teacher is not present in the space, the students' tendency to

concentrate on irrelevant things increases. For this reason the need for interesting content is greater than usual.

(e5) Q: Hyvä näkö- ja kuuloyhteys opettajan ja opiskelijan välillä (jotta suun liikkeet erottuvat selkeästi, korostuu etenkin kielen opiskelun alkuvaiheessa kun harjoitellaan vieraita äänteitä), tiivis vastavuoroisuus (jotta opiskelija tuntee olevansa aktiivinen ja voivansa vaikuttaa opiskelun kulkuun) sekä monipuoliset tehtävät. / *Good visual and audible connection between teacher and student (so that mouth movements can be clearly seen, especially important at the beginning of language learning when practicing foreign pronunciation) close interaction (so the students feel active and able to influence course content) and varied exercises.*

Based on this it could be argued that the current foreign language teacher training has given at least some of these students sufficient grounds on which to approach distance education as a field and thus even a simple discussion of the relevant topics may yield some positive results.

In Question 8, the respondents were also asked to answer the following question: *What opportunities (if any) does distance education offer for the teaching of foreign languages? (pedagogically, societally etc.).* The answers showed that the teacher students saw both opportunities and threats in distance language education, though the answers were mostly positive. The most commonly seen opportunity among the respondents was the possibility to expand the list of foreign languages available in smaller schools, an issue that was mentioned in 48% of the given answers. Other common answers were the flexibility offered by distance education for both teachers and students, the ability to record lectures for later use, and the belief that distance education may be cheaper than face-to-face education as shown by the example below.

(e6) Q: Mahdollisuus osallistua opetukseen melkein mistä vain, kustannustehokkuus ja yleisesti antaa mahdollisuuden opiskella enemmän kieliä. Säästää aikaa ja rahaa. / *The possibility to take part in education from almost anywhere, cost effectiveness and generally gives the opportunity to study more languages. Saves time and money.*

A few respondents also mentioned the importance of being able to reach students who cannot, for whatever reason, be physically present in the classroom, as well as learning to better interact via the internet, which was seen as an important skill for working life. It was also pointed out in the examples listed below, that teachers could increase authentic language use in the classroom via connections to native speakers, that students that are shy about talking in class may find it less anxiety inducing to use the language, and that there may be more interactive or student centered learning during distance education.

(e7) Q: - hyödyllinen taito työelämää varten työskennellä netin välityksellä - opettajan ja oppilaiden yhteistyö --> opettaja ei varmaan niin paljon yksin äänessä / *-useful skill for working life to work via the internet – the co-operation of teacher and students --> the teacher probably not talking as much by themselves*

(e8) Q: Ujot/aremmat oppilaat hyötyvät (helpompi ja rennompi puhua etäältä). Ehkä myös motivaatio saattaa kasvaa, koska vaihtelua luokkahuoneoppimiseen. / *Shy/more anxious students benefit (easier and more relaxing to talk at a distance). Perhaps motivation may also grow, due to change of pace compared to classroom teaching.*

However, some of the respondents also feared that distance education may require increased motivation compared to face-to-face classes and thus student retention rates may be lowered. Some respondents were noticeably more negative, as evidenced by answers such as:

(e9) Q: Pedagogisesta näkökulmasta en ainakaan vielä pysty näkemään muuta kuin hankaluuksia ja haasteita. / *From a pedagogical standpoint I cannot at least yet see other than difficulties and challenges*

(e10) Q: Lähes kaikki ne samat mahdollisuudet kuin live-opetus, mutta heikommin. Vuorovaikutus jää heikommaksi / kevyemmäksi. / *Almost all the same opportunities as live-teaching but to a lesser degree. Interaction is left weaker/lighter*

If such views that cast doubt on the effectiveness of distance foreign language education are allowed to remain uncontested, they may result in foreign language teachers who view the very idea of distance education in a purely negative light. Whether these perceived threats are credible or not, it would be important to address them and thus either dispel them or help teachers overcome them.

In Question 9, the results of which are shown in Table 2 and Table 3, the respondents were asked to rate their perceived pedagogical abilities as they relate to 13 distance language education skills on a scale from one to five (1-5). Since it was hypothesized that many respondents would have little to no experience in distance education, it was deemed that an *cannot evaluate* -option might be both necessary and revealing. The number three (3) was chosen for this purpose, and thus, in Table 2 this number has been removed from the results when calculating averages, leaving only answers where the respondents have felt some confidence in their evaluation. The weight given to answers when calculating averages has thus been shifted from 1-5 to 1-4 with one (1) being *very bad* and four (4) being *very good*. In three instances the students have evaluated their skills significantly lower than others: *Supporting student-to-student interaction* with an average of 2.2, *Dividing your attention among the students* with 2.3 and *Maintaining discipline* with 2.3. All other skills were on average evaluated as being slightly under or over 3. This discrepancy seems to reflect a shared worry about their ability to handle these specific aspects of distance education.

Before interpreting these results, one must consider the following issues. On the one hand it is important to note that based on this study it is impossible to say whether these worries are

unique to distance education. To make this claim one would have to compare their answers with a similar group of language teacher students, who would answer similar questions regarding face-to-face teaching. Thus, these results may reflect a shared worry about teaching skills in general, rather than distance education specifically. On the other hand, one could argue that all of the skills that the respondents seem most worried about relate to situations where one could reasonably see how the lack of physical presence and the need to rely on telecommunication tools might have a significant effect on teaching and learning.

Table 2.

Answers to Question 9 of the questionnaire with *cannot evaluate* (3) answers removed

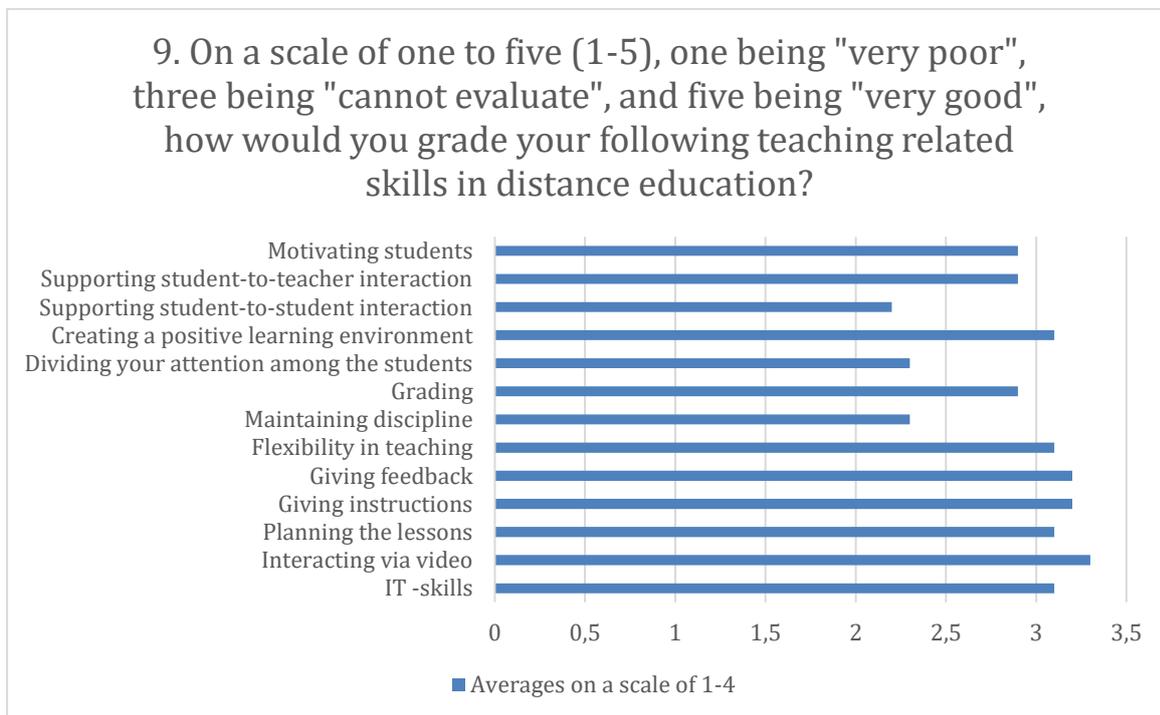
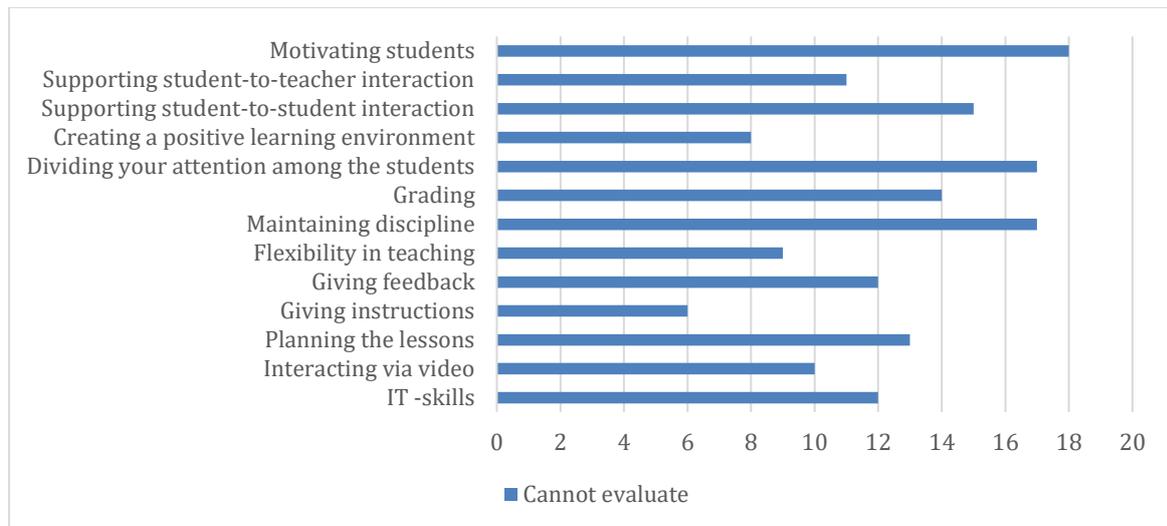


Table 3.

Cannot evaluate -answers given to Question 9 of the questionnaire



The number of “cannot evaluate” -answers given by the respondents is listed as a separate graph in Table 3 and varies from 6 in *Giving instructions* to 18 in *Motivating students*. Ultimately, 30% of all answers given to Question 9 of the questionnaire were *cannot evaluate*, which seems to show that many of the respondents considered distance education as an unknown and unfamiliar field. *Motivating students*, *Dividing your attention among the students*, and *Maintaining discipline* all had between 17 to 18 *cannot evaluate* -answers. Thus, a large portion of language teacher students seem to be uncertain of their ability, in a distance education setting, to motivate their students, to split their attention between their students and to maintain discipline in class, but seem more certain in their ability to give clear instructions.

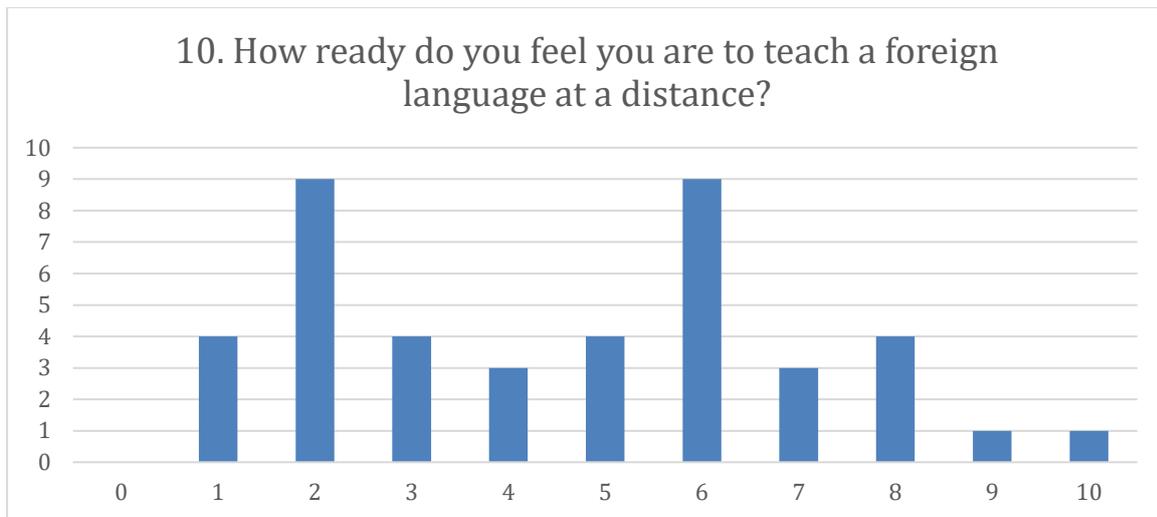
Interestingly, though motivating students was one of the answers that received the most “cannot evaluate” responses, when the respondents did attempt to evaluate this skill, they generally gave it a fairly good grade, with an average of 2.9. It could be that since the answer was first on the list of skills it may have made the respondents less willing to attempt an evaluation of their skills, whereas in later cases they may have felt an obligation towards the researcher to attempt to do so. Another possible explanation would be that some respondents feel that their ability to motivate their students is connected to their physical presence and related social skills, and they thus feel they are unable to evaluate how the lack of physical presence may affect their ability to motivate their students in a distance education setting. Conversely *Supporting student-to-student interaction* received 15 *cannot evaluate* answers and also received the lowest score of 2.2 when evaluation was given. Thus, the ability to enable and support communication between students seems to be the skill the respondents are most worried about when it comes to distance education.

Of the 42 respondents, 50% had gone through both the basic and advanced pedagogical studies offered by their university, while 17% had not yet finished the basic pedagogical studies. When comparing the answers of these two groups in Question 9, one can see that the average grade they have reported differs by 0.2 points. The students who went through basic and advanced pedagogical studies had reported an average grade of 2.9, while the students who had yet to finish their basic pedagogical studies reported an average grade of 3.1. The students who had finished basic pedagogical studies and those currently finishing their advanced pedagogical studies also reported an average grade of 2.9. The difference is not large enough to argue that the pedagogical studies negatively affected the students' perception of their distance education skills, but it seems to support the conclusion that the students felt that said studies did not sufficiently prepare them for distance education, seeing as how their perception of their own skill levels did not increase during their pedagogical training.

Question 10 was *How ready do you feel you are to teach foreign language at a distance?*. The respondents were asked to give the answer on a slider from zero (0) to ten (10). The results for this question can be seen in Table 4. The average was 4.57, meaning the respondents did not feel very prepared for distance education. Scores of two (2) and six (6) were most commonly given, both receiving 21% of the answers. Also noticeable is that none of the respondents gave a zero (0), so all respondents felt at least slightly prepared for teaching foreign languages at a distance. The division apparent in the results shows how confused the respondents are with regards to the topic of distance education, something that may reflect poorly on their willingness to engage in distance language teaching in the future.

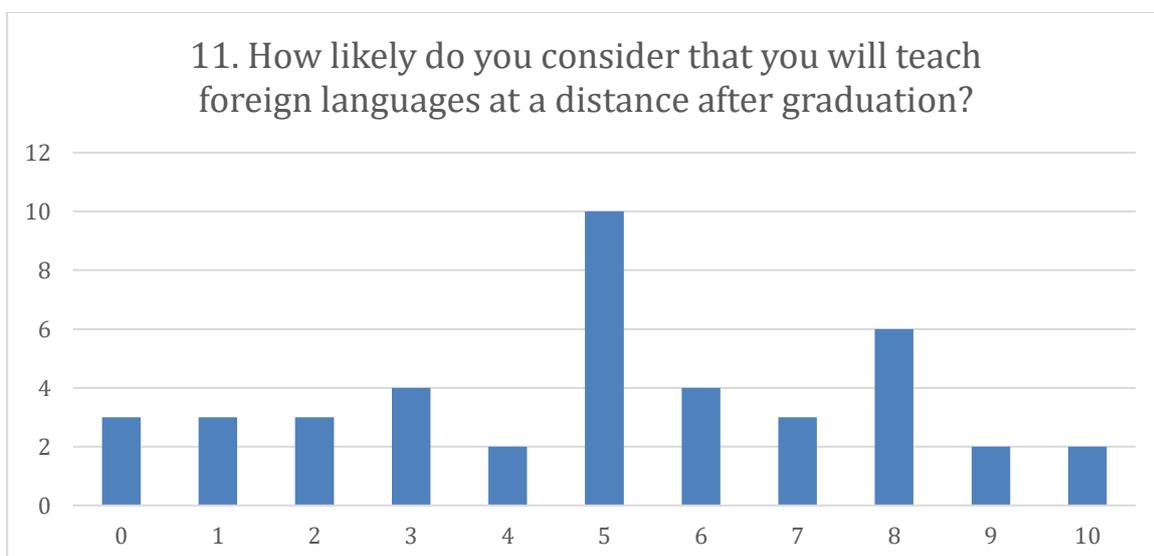
Interestingly, the average score given by respondents who had finished their pedagogical studies was 4.67, and thus slightly higher than the overall average, though this difference is small enough to be statistically close to meaningless. Thus, it can be argued that finishing one's pedagogical studies did not seem to result in greater feeling of preparedness for distance education.

Table 4.
Answers to Question 10 of the questionnaire



Question 11 was *How likely do you think it is that after graduation you will teach languages at a distance?*. The respondents were asked to rate the likelihood they felt they would end up teaching foreign languages at a distance after graduation on a slider from zero (0) to ten (10). The results can be seen in Table 5 below. The average for all the scores was five (5), which was also the most common answer with 24% of respondents, while 14% gave a likelihood of 8. However, 7% of the respondents gave the likelihood of zero (0), while 5% of respondents gave the likelihood of ten (10). This seems to show that there is some division between the respondents' willingness to teach at a distance, though most do not seem to have given the opportunity much thought.

Table 5.
Answers to Question 11 of the questionnaire



Lastly in Question 12 the respondents were given the chance to give feedback concerning the questionnaire and to explain some of their answers more clearly if they felt that necessary. Four respondents brought up their lack of experience with distance education, writing for example:

(e11) Q: Kun ei ole kokemusta eikä koulutusta etäopetuksesta, oli aika hankala sanoa mitään Likert-kysymyksiin. / *When you don't have experience with or training in distance education, it was pretty difficult to say anything to the Likert-scale questions*

This difficulty is understandable and most likely resulted in the large number of *cannot evaluate* -answers in Question 9. There were also some additions to the answers of previous questions and one responder remarking that even though they had no prior experience with distance education they felt that if necessary they could reach a sufficient level of competence with it fairly quickly.

(e12) Q: Uskoisin kuitenkin, että pystyisin kouluttautumaan tai itse opettelemaan etäopetuksen antamista varsin nopeasti, ja että suhteellisen hyvät valmiudet sen oppimiseen olisi. / *I do believe, however, that I could have myself trained, or learn by myself, to teach at a distance fairly quickly and that there are fairly good foundations for learning it*

This, along with the findings from Question 10, seems to further indicate that there is belief among at least some of the respondents that the teacher training they have received would make it quite easy to learn to teach at a distance as well. If only minimal training is required, this could potentially support the idea of leaving distance education training to institutions responsible for distance education. This is because those institutions would need to give supplementary training to their teachers anyway in order to get them acquainted with the technology they are using. Thus, there might be no need to teach distance education at university if those who need to know of it are already receiving the necessary training from their employers.

However, there are several potential arguments against the view that university level distance education for foreign language teachers is unnecessary that should also be taken into account. The level of training offered by these distance education institutions may differ and providing foreign language teacher trainees with distance education training may provide them with increased employment opportunities in the future. Furthermore, relying solely on the training offered by distance education institutions leaves teachers without training in instances where they may need to teach at a distance due to unforeseen circumstances, such as the Covid 19

pandemic of 2020. Due to these reasons, some level of distance education training during teacher training would seem reasonable.

5.2. The interviews

The interviewees in this study are here differentiated by the monikers from I1 to I5, each representing a separate interviewee. They were English as a foreign language teachers who had between half a year to 11 years of distance education experience. As such their memories of their first distance education experiences varied immensely, with the earliest experiences showing a lack of proper distance education training.

(e1) I3: se alko lähinnä sillai että mulla oli niinku paperille kirjoitettu ohjeet että miten mä saan ne vehkeet käyntiin [naurua] ja siitä se sitte lähti / *it began basically so that I had like instructions written on a piece of paper about how I can turn everyting on [laughter] and that's how I got started*

Teachers who have started doing distance education more recently recount much more training from their employers prior to their first distance education class.

(e2) I1: me tavattiin kerran kuukaudessa ... sitä ryhmää veti semmonen, semmonen ope joka kans on ollu [työnantajan nimi] yli kymmenen vuotta ja tietää kaiken hyvin niin hän oli aina miettiny jonkun aiheen äähm ja sit me käytiin sitä aihetta / *we met once a month ... the group was lead by, by a teacher who has also been a teacher at [name of employer]for over ten years and knows everything well so they had always thought of some topic, um and then we went through that topic*

None of the teachers interviewed had received any distance education training prior to starting at the distance education institutions they worked at. When asked about their first experiences with distance education the teachers seemed to have prepared in roughly similar ways. Only one teacher said they did not feel ready for their first distance education class, while the others felt more or less well prepared. All teachers seemed to think their first classes went rather well.

There did seem to be some differences between the level of supplementary training received by teachers working under different institutions. All had received training before the start of their first classes, but some also mentioned further supplementary training being made available twice a year. This same event was also used as training for teachers who wanted to teach distance education courses at the institution.

(e3) I2: meil on puolivuositain niinku kerran lukukaudessa on semmoset [koulutuspäivien nimi] ja sitte sinne niinku mukaan menemällä ja olemalla siinä niinku muutaman kerran mukana sitte pystyy saada itelleeki kursseja opetettavaksi / *We have biyearly, like once a semester these [name of training event] and then like by going there and being there like a few times, then you can get some courses for yourself to teach as well*

Some teachers said they had also learned much on their own and from discussions with other distance educators, pointing out the importance of peer support and networking as means of learning how to effectively teach at a distance.

(e4) I5: paljon tulee sitte myös niinku ähm niinku keskustelua muitten opettajien kanssa siitä mitä siellä voi tehdä että ne perusasiat tuli niinku sieltä mutta sitte että semmoset ekstras ni ne on sit vähän niinku itse kyllä oppinu tai sitte ollu puhetta jonku toisen kanssa joka on sitte kertonu että mä teen tällasta ja mä käytän tällasta. / *a lot comes also from like um like discussions with other teachers about what you can do there, so the basics like came from there but then the like extras well they I've like learned myself or then I've talked with someone else who has then said I do this and I use that*

(e5) I2: tää e-lukio tai etäopettaja verkosto mikä meillä tässä e-lukiassa on ni on tarjonnu myös sitte myös niinku vertaistukea mikä auttaa myös siellä päivälukion puolella / *this e- high school or distance teacher network that we have at this e- high school has offered also like peer support which helps also on the regular high school side*

When asked whether universities should offer some training with regards to distance language education, the teachers being interviewed gave somewhat differing answers. Most of the teachers interviewed seemed to agree that some training would be useful at university level, some arguing for the need to give at least the basic information about it while one thinking that practical training could prove to be very useful.

(e6) I1: No kyl mun mielestä siitä ois hyvä ees mainita ... loppujen lopuks ei tää nyt kuitenkaan oo niin maatumullistavan erilaista verrattuna päiväkouluun / *Well I do think it would be good to at least mention it ... at the end of the day however, this isn't that earth shatteringly different compared to dayschool*

(e7) I2: No kyllä mä uskon että semmonen ainaki jonkunlainen niinku perustietous tai perehdytys niin vois olla hyvä. / *Well I do believe that at least some kind of basic knowledge or training could be good*

(e8) I5: Tottakai se ois hyödyllistä ja jos esimerkiksi opetusharjoittelussa pystyis pitämään vaikka jonkun, niinku elukio kurssin tai olemaan siis osa sitä jos o joku ryhmää joka sitä pitää niin oishan se tosi hyödyllistä. / *Of course it would be useful and if, for example, at teacher training one could teach like some e-highschool course or be a part of it, if there is some group that teaches it, then it would be very useful*

Some of the teachers argued that distance education would not need to be taught at university level, citing three reasons for this: (1) distance education is such a small field, (2) teachers nowadays have all used teleconferencing tools at some point and (3) distance education institutions already have their own internal training for incoming teachers.

(e9) I3: Emmmää tiiä, en mä oikeestaan nää siinä niinku hirveetä pointtia koska meillä kuitenkin tosi vähän niinku loppupeleissä etäopetuslukioita tai taikka oppilaitoksia niin mun mielestä se ois niinku ajan tuhlausta ... meillä on sisä, sisäinen koulutus että ei, ei sun periaatteessa tarvi mitään muuta osata ku olla opettaja vaan / *I dont know, I dont really see big point in doing that, because we have, at the end of the day, really few distance education high schools or I mean teaching institutions, so I think it would be like a waste of time ... we have*

in, internal training so you don't, you don't basically have to know how to do anything other than just how to be a teacher

(e10) I4: No ei oikeastaan. En mie usko et se on, tää on vaan yksi, jos oot joskus konetta käyttäny nii tuota et ei tässä niinku minusta ole semmosta, ja ne on varmaan käyttäneet jotain Skypeä tai näin. / *Well not really. I don't believe it is, this is just one, if you have ever used a computer then I don't think there's anything here that, and they have probably used some Skype or so on*

One teachers also pointed out that any technology related training needs to be ultimately addressed at the institution offering the education. Since there are numerous different programs that can be used for distance education purposes and new ones are constantly being developed, a university level education could never offer training in all of them.

(e11) I4: tekniikka muuttuu koko aika et jos ne opintojen aikana jotaki käy niin joku toinen koulu käyttää semmosta tai tämmöstä etäopetukseen / *technology changes all the time, so if during their studies they go through some things then some other school uses this or that for distance education*

When discussing possible challenges to distance education potential technological issues were often mentioned. Some teachers felt that the technological issues were the main challenge, at least for distance education students.

(e12) I3: en mä oikeastaan näe että se oppilaalle on oikeestaan muuta ku niitä teknisiä haasteita siinä / *I don't really see that for students there's really anything other than technical difficulties there*

The feelings teachers had towards technology also show in how, before their first classes, some of the teachers concentrated on double checking the technology and making sure it works properly.

(e13) I5: harjottelin sitä öö käyttöä, miehen kanssa kotona, se oli toisessa huoneessa ja mä huusin että kuuletko sä mua ja näetkö sä nää mun jutut täällä / *I practiced the use of, I was with my husband at home, they were in the other room and I shouted can you hear me and can you see these things of mine over here*

(e14) I1: mulla oli siis toinen läppäri itellä vieressä että missä mä oli ite niinku muka opiskelijana että mä näin koko ajan että mille se näyttää mitä mä teen, ja sitte mä pakotin perheenjäseneni etukäteen myös testaamaan että, nyt mä laitan tähän tämmösen et kato mille tää näyttää / *so I had another laptop next to me where I was logged in as a student so that I saw all the time what it looked like, what I was doing, and then I forced a family member to test it beforehand so now I'm putting this thing here so have a look and see what it looks like*

Potential technological failures were also seen as issues that distance education teachers need to be prepared for. Power outages, bad internet connections, issues with microphones and cameras and even censorship in cases where there are students who reside in other countries, were all mentioned as potential threats to successful distance education. Some of the teachers pointed out that these aspects can be very important in distance education, as the teacher needs to be able to help students with technological issues if they become a problem.

(e15) I4: jollakin vanhemmilla ihmisillä on ainaki huomannu sen että tosi paljon menee aikaa siihen et me saahaan se mikki, mikrofoni toimimaan, joskus ei saada, että, että täältä ku etänä yrittää opettaa sitä että kokeileppa sitä ja tätä ja tuota kun ei näe sitä opiskelijan tekniikkaa siinä / *at least with some older people I've noticed that a lot of time goes into us getting the mike, microphone working, sometimes we don't, so, so when you try to teach from a distance to try that and this and that when you can't see the students tech there*

Some pedagogical aspects were also mentioned as potential threats to successful distance education. This was true in spite of the fact that many teachers felt foreign language distance education was not much different from face-to-face education. Examples include teachers arguing that certain types of exercises were not as good for distance education classes, that they had had difficulties maintaining order in a distance education classroom and that they had had problems with making sure all students understand and follow instructions. Teacher I2 also mentioned that they do not have the same tools available to them when teaching at a distance as they do when teaching face-to-face and that making sure the students are paying attention can thus be difficult in distance education. The lack of bodily presence is indeed something that may have a large impact on some teachers, especially if they are used to drawing student attention with physical movement and activity rather than purely through verbal cues.

(e16) I1: ehkä pitää miettiä myös sit et ihan kaikki asiat toki vaikka jotkut toiminnalliset jotkut pelit ja tämmöset ni niitä ei tietenkää voi käyttää et toki sit pitää miettiä vähän erilaisia tehtäviä osittain / *maybe one has to also think about the fact that not all things, like some action oriented games and things like that, you can't really use them so certainly then you have to think about some different kinds of exercises, partly*

(e17) I3: se on haasteellista myös yrittää saada pitää niit hiljasena ja sillai et ne pyssyy siellä sillai et mä nään ne kaikki / *it is also challenging to try and keep them quiet and so they stay there so that I can see them all*

(e18) I4: Tai he eivät osaa keskittyä tarpeeksi ja lukea ... eli se tavallaan se ohjeistuksen ymmärtäminen tai ohjeistuksen ees lukeminen / *or that they can't concentrate enough and read ... so in a way the understanding or even reading of instructions*

(e19) I2: siellä päivälukiassa ku mä opetan ni mä voin sanoo niille että, että hei kaverit nyt niinku täälläpäin pitäis olla huomio ja nyt kuuntele ja näin mä voin varmistaa sen koko ajan siitä et se menee perille, mutta sitte tässä ei ole niitä samanlaisia, samanlaisia keinoja / *there in the day high school [face-to-face teaching] when I teach I can tell them, hey guys now the attention needs to be in this direction and now listen and like that I can continually check that it's getting through to them, but then here you don't have similar, similar methods*

Managerial issues were also mentioned quite often by teachers. Firstly, the foreign language courses for some institutions only had 200 minutes of contact teaching for each course, something that a few of the interviewees felt was too little. In these cases most of the course was done via asynchronous distance education, using online environments like Moodle in order for the learners to have continuous access to the learning materials and exercises. This may work well for most subjects, but if one considers the ability to communicate effectively as the

goal of foreign language education then the lack of synchronous contact with the teacher and with fellow learners may result in, for example, diminished spoken language skills. Secondly, class sizes may be larger than average and since most of the material students produce in distance education seems to be written one teacher mentioned the large amount of work to be evaluated as a challenge for distance educators.

(e19) I3: kun on kuitenkin vaan niinku, meillä on esimerkiksi kakssataa minuuttia vaan lähiovetusta kurssia kohti, lukio kurssia kohti, joka on aivan mielettömän vähän / *when there is only like, we have for example only 200 minutes of contact teaching per course, per high school course, which is insanely little*

e(20) I4: meillä on niin järkyttävän isot lähes kaikki ryhmät et rajoitettiin kolmeen kymmeneen kuuteen se opiskelijamäärä ... jos aattelee että kun ne tekee sen kurssin siellä niin kuinka paljon opettajalle tulee tuossa koneella korjattavaa / *almost all our groups are so staggeringly big that we limited the number of participants to 36 ... when you think that, when they do the course there, how much work the teacher has to evaluate on their computer*

Thirdly, there was mention of how teachers could make sure that the students attend the synchronous lectures, since they had, in many institutions, been deemed a non-compulsory part of the course. Many teachers shared their worry that students often choose not to attend the synchronous lectures while on a distance education course. One teacher also felt that some students may view distance education as an easier alternative to face-to-face courses and be surprised by the amount of work involved. When proven false, these expectations may end up diminishing student motivation.

(e21) I3: no ensinnäki että saa houkuteltua niitä oppilaita sinne tunnille ... et miten sä kirjoitat sen ku: voi että meil tulee olemaan niin mukavaa ku me käydään kielioppia läpi ja kaikkea hauskaa / *well first off that you can entice those students to the lecture ... so how do you write: oh we will have such a good time when we go through grammar and all these fun things*

(e22) I4: moni ehkä aattelee sillai että etäopetus tää nyt on helppo että ilmottaudun ja meen loppukokeeseen mutta ku se ei toimi niin ni monelle tulee yllätyksellä ja sitten tulee sitä että täällähän, että on niin työlästä / *many perhaps think that distance education, this is easy, I just sign up and go to the exam at the end, but when it does not work like that many are caught by surprise and then you hear things like surprisingly here, it takes a lot of hard work*

Some teachers also argued that distance education demands more independence from students, which further raises the importance of motivation. Interestingly, the need for more independent learning was seen mostly as an inherent quality of distance education and a potential challenge for distance learners to overcome. The interviewees did not seem to consider it as something that educators should actively take into account in their work, though it was argued that teachers should take care to make themselves more available via email and other communication methods.

(e23) I1: se on itsenäisempää ja vaatii ehkä enemmän semmosta oma-aloitteisuutta / *it is more independent and demands perhaps more, like, initiative*

(e24) I2: itseohjautuvuus on semmonen mitä tarvitaan että sen huomaa aika selvästi että jotku on valmiimpia tämmöseen aika itsenäiseen opiskeluun / *self-directedness is a thing that's needed, you can notice it pretty clearly that some are more ready for this kind of fairly independent studying*

The social aspect of distance education was mentioned by most of the interviewees as a constant problem. The most commonly raised challenge for foreign language distance education was the potential for a lack of active participation on the part of the learners. Almost all teachers interviewed expressed a worry about the issue. The teachers listed some ways they had attempted to increase student participation, but they seemed to generally feel that there was very little they could do about it. They appeared to view it as an inherent part of distance education stemming from things like the technology being used and the type of students that end up choosing distance education as a mode of learning. The lack of social contact also meant that the teachers felt they could not know their students as intimately as in a face-to-face setting and the students may end up feeling that they have to learn everything on their own. Examples of the issues relating to the social aspects of distance education are shown below.

(e25) I3: kun ne sitte kerranki tullee että ne sais puhumaan jotaki, se on aina myös haaste koska sekään ei oo pakollista. Sitte yritän, yritän niinku vähä keppeä ja porkkanaa että te saatte osallistua tunnin kulkuun jos teillä on mikrofoni käytössä / *when they do arrive, that one could get them to say something, it is always a challenge as well since it's not mandatory. Then I try, I try like a little stick and carrot, that you can have a say in how the lesson goes if you have the microphone on*

(e26) I2: se vuorovaikutus on se, se mihin, minkä kanssa itse ainakin tuskailen, koska. No kielen oppimiseen se kuuluis aika oleellisena osana / *the interaction is the thing, the thing for which, with which I struggle, because. Well for language learning it is a pretty relevant part*

(e27) I4: Et tosiaan se haaste, et jos yks pitää tai joku semmonen hankala on että kun ne sais osallistumaan varsinkin kielissä ni se suullisesti, mutta toisaalta ni me ymmärretään että, että on sitä arkuutta tai voi olla jotaki muutaki terveydellistä syytä tai tällasta / *So really the challenge, if I have to think of one, or something difficult is that if you could only get them to participate especially in languages orally, but on the other hand we understand that, there's the timidness or there might be some other medical reason or something like that*

(e28) I5: no siis kyllähän se haaste on se että ei ole sitä vuorovaikutusta sillä tavalla opiskelijoiden kanssa ja sitte ku ne tunnit ei ole myöskään pakollisia niin onhan se varmaan opiskelijan näkökulmasta monesti niinku tavallaan vähän sama ku tenttis kurssin mutta siihen saa niinku ekstra materiaalia / *well I do think the challenge is that there's no interaction in that way with the learners, and then when the lectures also aren't compulsory, so it is probably from the learners point of view often as if you were learning by yourself but you get like extra materials*

The interviewees were also asked what they considered to be the benefits of distance education for teachers, students, or the society at large. All teachers interviewed listed the ability to teach students who otherwise would have been unable to take part in the Finnish education system,

such as athletes practicing abroad or students who, for medical or other reasons, might be unable to attend face-to-face classes. Many also listed the potential for an increase in the number of foreign languages that smaller schools can offer their students. Distance education was also listed as an opportunity for adult learners who might not be able to attend regular classes due to work or other time constraints. The ability to attend distance education courses using a smartphone was also mentioned as having freed the students from any location related constraints. Based on these interviews the benefits of distance education were more commonly considered to support the learners and institutions more than the teachers. One of the interviewees did, however, mention that they felt that in a distance education setting they could more freely talk about issues they enjoyed, since there were not as many interruptions due to having to maintain order and student attention in class.

(e29) I5: onhan se mukavaa että saa puhua sillä tavalla ilman että pitää, pitää semmosta luokkahuone kuria ni onhan se mukava puhua niistä, niistä tota itselle niinku tärkeistä asioista ilman että kukaan häiritsee vaan siellä tunnilla on sitte ne jotka oikeesti ehkä haluaa kuunnella sitä, kuunnella sitä tuota kielioppiselostusta / *it is nice when you can talk like without having to maintain, to maintain the kind of class discipline so it is nice to talk about the, about the like things that are important to you without someone interrupting so that the ones attending class are the ones who maybe want to listen to, listen to the grammar talk*

This seems to support the finding of Rehn et al. (2018: 424), where they note that distance education tends to lend itself more readily to one sided lectures instead of interactive teaching. If this is the case then this may show a potential blind spot for the interviewees of this study.

6. DISCUSSION

When looking at the data from the questionnaire and the interviews some similarities and differences do seem to emerge. It can be assumed that the interviewees, having more experience with distance foreign language education, would be able to more accurately define the potential issues that could impede or advance learning in a distance education context. Thus, similarities between the two sources of data could be evidence that the foreign language teacher trainees have the capacity to develop best practices for distance education on their own based on the current education they have received. A divergence could imply possibilities or threats to learning that the teacher trainees are not able to adequately predict. However, it is important to note that even in cases where the majority of respondents agree with the more experienced teachers, this still leaves some teacher trainees who may have failed to recognise some common opportunities and threats facing distance educators. Thus, many teacher trainees may benefit from further training, even in areas that do not show major divergence in this data.

The difficulties in communication between teachers and students seems to be the most common fear that foreign language teacher students have when it comes to distance education, shown especially in answers to Question 9. However, only 62% of respondents mentioned some aspect relating to social presence in Question 7. Conversely, all but one of the distance educators being interviewed mentioned problems with things like maintaining social presence and getting students to actively participate during class. This result is made more reliable by the fact that many previous studies have revealed similar findings (Develotte 2010, Murphy et al. 2011, Kear et al. 2012,). In their study, Rehn et al. (2018) found that:

The biggest barriers to successful teaching in a videoconference course, according to the participants, were social ones – building relationships, creating classroom culture, getting community buy-in, developing presence and facilitating student–student interactions. (Rehn et al. 2018: 425)

Based on the fact that the experienced teachers were aware of the communication related issues and the fact that the same issues also appear in the relevant research, it can be assumed that this is not a simple problem with an easy fix, but rather something that needs to be continually discussed and addressed. Sharing experiences and thoughts, as well as potential solutions, when it comes to facilitating fruitful communication in distance education may also reveal answers that could prove helpful in a face-to-face or blended setting.

Furthermore, at least some school managers do not seem to be sufficiently aware of the communicative nature of foreign language distance education. This may result in schools

treating every distance education class with the same division of asynchronic and synchronic teaching, something that may result in foreign language teachers having less time to teach skills that require real-time communication. Thus, principals could potentially also benefit from learning the fundamentals of foreign language distance education, though the data of this study does not directly support such claims. Further study would be required on the way principals view distance education and foreign language distance education specifically.

The two groups being studied also seem to somewhat agree on distance education and face-to-face education not being pedagogically very different, and thus not requiring radically different approaches to teaching. 81% of the respondents to the questionnaire felt it was important to focus on some pedagogical aspect when doing distance foreign language education. Some of the of the respondents seemed to be of the mind that things that work for face-to-face education work equally well with distance education and that similar things are thus equally important to concentrate on when teaching both at a distance and face-to-face, a view that some researchers have questioned (Hampel & Stickler 2005, Compton 2009, Rehn et al. 2018). There were also potential challenges that were commonly seen by both teacher students and teachers, such as the need for clear instructions and increased motivation, which are supported by previous studies (Murphy et al. 2011, Rehn et al. 2018, Peck et al 2018). It is likely that some of the responses arguing for the similarities of distance and face-to-face education from the teacher students result from their lack of knowledge about the field, seeing as how some of them explicitly mentioned having problems answering the questionnaire due to having little experience with distance education.

In the case of teachers, some of them seemed to argue that the two are not that different, only to then list some differences they have observed. This slight contradiction may be a result of the interviewees wanting to answer the question in a helpful way, and thus exaggerating rare issues. It may also be that the interviewees fear that others may assume that the two are massively different and they thus wish to make it especially clear that the two have much more in common. Whatever the reason, the teachers did list some unique challenges that were not nearly as common in the teacher student answers, such as the lack of bodily presence and the fact that some exercises and teaching methods may not work as well in a distance education setting. The fact that these challenges rarely came up in the questionnaire data shows that they may come as a surprise to most foreign language teacher students. This seems to lend credibility to the argument, made by other researchers (Moore-Adams et al. 2016: 345, Kear et al. 2012:

961), that foreign language teachers expanding to distance education may benefit greatly from practical distance education learning experiences.

There were also issues where the views of the two groups seem to diverge. The interviewees mentioned many managerial issues, such as getting the students to attend contact teaching parts of the course, managing student expectations about the difficulty of the course and limited contact teaching hours coupled with large class sizes. These were not mentioned by anyone in the questionnaire, possibly because they are not the results of direct physical differences between face-to-face and distance education. Because of this, these issues may be considered to fall mostly on the institution organizing the distance education and the respondents to the questionnaire may not have considered these problems as something they would or should be able to solve on their own.

Issues related to preparation, which were considered of particular import by Rehn et al. (2018), such as lesson plans and clearly thought out lesson structure, were not seen as similarly important by either the interviewees or the respondents to the questionnaire. Though clarity of instruction was quite often mentioned in the questionnaire data, there were very few real suggestions as to how such clarity might be achieved. This may, however, be a result of the method of study rather than a lack of knowledge or ideas on the part of the respondents. Had the respondents been asked to elaborate on their answers, they may have been able to come up with several concrete solutions.

Another point of divergence can be seen on the side of technology. Many of the distance educators listed technological knowledge as highly important, some pointing out that when teaching they often face situations where technology somehow fails or poses unforeseen problems. For example, the teachers mentioned they often have to give advice to students who are having technical difficulties, showing that in practice they cannot fall back solely on tech support, but have to be ready to attempt to solve at least some technical problems on their own. Rehn et al. (2018) also notes the difficulty in distance education of balancing flexibility of teaching with the kind of structure that is beneficial for clarity of instruction. However, their study does not explicitly consider how failing technology may contribute to the need for flexible teaching practices. The teacher students considered their IT-skills and flexibility in teaching situations to be at a fairly high level. This may reflect actual preparedness for teaching in an e-learning environment, but it may also prove to be a potential blind spot. In fact, seeing as how only 45% of the teacher students viewed technological issues as especially important to

concentrate on when doing distance education, one could argue that these students may not be as prepared as they believe.

It is also interesting to note that the point of view of the teachers and teacher students differ slightly when it comes to distance education. When asked to mention potential challenges to successful distance education, the teachers being interviewed were looking at things from the point of view of someone who has received some distance education training and has on their own made the decision to teach at a distance. Thus, the problems they saw in distance education were things that would seem problematic to that group of people. They saw challenges that they felt they had not been able to overcome and that may thus consequently constitute inherent problems for which there is no satisfactory resolution. They failed to see problems that might arise for someone who, for example, usually does not commonly engage in distance education but is forced to do so through circumstances outside their control. In comparison, some of the teacher students did not view distance education through this lens and thus brought up issues such as negative attitudes towards the use of technology and distance education.

(e13) Q: Opettajan tulee suhtautua myönteisesti etäopetuksen järjestämiseen. Hommasta ei varmaan tule mitään, jos opettaja on hyvin teknologiavastainen ja pelkää hommaan ryhtymistä. / *The teacher should have a positive attitude towards teaching at a distance. The thing probably won't work if the teacher is very anti-technology or is afraid of getting started.*

The same point of view is also revealed when discussing the need for distance education training at university level. As mentioned earlier, some interviewees argued that since distance education institutions were already offering distance education training there would be no need for such training at university level. This does not take into account teachers who do not work for distance education institutions but may still be asked to do distance education under special conditions. This illustrates how there may be challenges for teachers who move from face-to-face education to distance education that the teachers taking part in this study are not well equipped to notice, due to already having received experience and training in the field.

7. CONCLUSION

The first thing to note here is that the purpose of this study is not to advance or support any current theory in foreign language education. The state of distance education in Finland has not been extensively researched and thus the purpose of this study is more exploratory in nature. The intent is to point out possibilities based on the data gathered for this study and international research. There are many possible reasons for the similarities and differences in the views of the foreign language teacher students and English as a foreign language teachers listed in this study. It is up to future researchers to ascertain the credibility of any potential threats to the quality of Finnish distance foreign language education posed by the lack of distance education training at university level.

It is for this reason that the findings of this paper seem to leave many questions unanswered. It is clear that there are many possible areas of study that remain unexplored and that much more research data needs to be gathered. The recent Covid-19 crisis forced teachers worldwide to adopt distance education tools and methods at great speed and often without proper training. This has no doubt provided much relevant data for international distance education research. However, even if there is a large body of work being done on distance education globally, the context of the Finnish education system and teacher training program may make it difficult to apply these findings for practical purposes in Finnish schools and teacher training courses. As long as distance education remains an area of research that is rarely, if at all, addressed at universities as a part of teacher training courses, it may also remain an issue with only little interest for national researchers.

When examining the findings of this study and applying them elsewhere it must also be taken into account that the study has several factors that reduce its applicability and reliability. Firstly, the teacher students that answered the questionnaire came from only one university in Finland. Other universities may have slightly different course content and thus their students may be more or less prepared for distance education than these results may indicate. Secondly, the sample sizes for this study are not large enough to reach anything more than tentative conclusions. Thirdly, most of the teachers interviewed for this study taught at an institution that offered high school level education. Thus, their experiences may not be representative of distance foreign language educators at all levels of education. When teaching younger students other issues may become more pressing, or other teaching methods more fruitful, while some of the issues and methods mentioned here may prove less relevant. Fourthly, the research

subjects for this study were all volunteers. This may skew the results, especially in the case of the questionnaire, seeing as people who consider themselves to have little experience on the topic may have chosen not to participate, due to feeling they would have little to say. In the emails and Facebook posts through which the participants were found, it was made clear that lack of experience would not be an impediment to participation, but it is difficult to assess to what extent this was effective.

As an overview of the study, it can be noted that the study sought to answer three research questions: (1) how ready do foreign language teacher students feel to teaching foreign languages at a distance, (2) what preconceptions about distance foreign language education do teacher students have, (3) how these preconceptions correspond with the experiences of English as a foreign language teachers in the field. Though the findings do not provide decisive evidence they do point towards certain conclusions, which should be taken seriously, if not by teachers and school administrators then at least by other researchers.

Firstly, the feelings the foreign language teacher students had towards distance education varied greatly. Only a small minority felt they were actually ready to teach foreign languages at a distance. Some mentioned never having thought about the subject before taking the questionnaire. The majority of respondents gave an answer that was clearly between ready and not ready, showing that they felt they did not know enough about the subject to be certain. As a consequence, teacher students' willingness to teach foreign languages at a distance in the future also showed wide variations, as shown by Table 5. This clear unwillingness to teach at a distance, as shown by some respondents, may prove troublesome for them if distance education continues to become more widely used.

Secondly, the teacher students saw a lot of potential challenges and opportunities with foreign language distance education. The wide array of different answers indicates that the teacher students were confused about what the most pressing issues for distance educators generally are. The teacher students also raised some issues, such as the lower cost of distance education and less anxiety inducing environment, which seem logically valid at first glance, but for which no clear evidence has been found (Pichette 2009, Bollinger 2017, Aydin 2018, Glass 2009, Schwirzke 2011, Ash 2009). These potentially false assumptions may lead to adopting attitudes and teaching methods that are counterproductive for learning.

Thirdly, the teachers interviewed raised some similar points to the teacher students, showing that distance and face-to-face education do not necessarily differ significantly from each other.

However, there were some points that were rarely, if at all raised by teacher students, yet were common in the interview answers. Especially technological and managerial issues were largely missing from the teacher student answers. Maintaining sufficient contact and interaction in distance education classes was also mentioned as an important issue to concentrate on by only 29% of teacher students, whereas four out of five of the teachers being interviewed mentioned it as one of the most pressing issues they consistently struggle with. These findings indicate that teacher students that have not received distance education training may find it difficult to adapt to the new teaching environment and fail to notice their own shortcomings as distance educators, especially if they do not receive enough feedback from learners. The Covid-19 pandemic has provided a unique opportunity for researchers to assess how well Finnish teacher training, and the educational system as a whole, serves the needs of distance educators and learners. It would also be interesting to see whether foreign language educators have faced similar issues and to similar extents as teachers in other fields.

Exercises and materials for distance foreign language teaching were raised repeatedly by the teacher students who answered the questionnaire. These students seemed to see a potential problem with using similar exercises and materials for both distance and face-to-face education. The teachers also mentioned that some exercises, such as those demanding physical activity, were more difficult to implement in a distance education setting. It could thus reasonably be asked whether materials originally made for face-to-face teaching should be somehow adapted when using them in a distance education setting. This is further supported by the issue raised by the teachers who mentioned struggling with how to make sure students read and understand the tasks and materials given to them. In a classroom setting confusion and misunderstandings can be easier to spot by relying on visual cues, but in distance education settings such methods are not necessarily available. The requirements for well-functioning distance foreign language education materials and exercises may thus be a promising field of potential future study.

Based on the supplementary training they offer to incoming teachers, institutions that specialize in teaching at a distance seem to consider it important that their employees gain a better understanding of distance education before taking on their first classes. This training does not seem to be simply about learning to use the technology involved, though that does seem to play a large part. It should be questioned, however, whether this supplementary training is enough, and whether both teachers and the quality and potential of distance education itself were better served by teacher students receiving some rudimentary distance education training at university level. This would serve to both dispel some of the potentially mistaken beliefs among teachers

that are not supported by current research and to help said teachers come up with and implement best practices that they and others have found useful. This could result in the better quality of both practical and theoretical knowledge about Finnish distance language education. Furthermore, it would expand the skill sets of Finnish foreign language teachers, potentially resulting in increased employability as well as a more positive attitude towards the use of distance education tools. It is also important to note that though distance education institutions offer some supplementary training it is difficult to say whether this training is based on the findings of researchers or on discussions between fellow distance educators. Though discussions can be very helpful for practical purposes they can also potentially solidify widely held but false beliefs about distance education. University level training could offer a more critical look at what does or does not work in a distance education context.

The ability to make use of distance education methods and tools can be useful as schools become more accustomed to using asynchronic learning environments and blended learning. Based on Nummenmaa (2012: 4), in 2012 24% of subject teachers in Finland had, at some point in their career, used distance education tools in their teaching. Seeing as this percentage is more likely to go up rather than down in the coming years as the pressure to utilise the latest technology in the classroom grows, many of these teacher students will most likely have to teach using telecommunication tools during their future careers. The recent Covid-19 crisis of 2020 is proof enough that teachers may end up having to resort to distance education without much time or training. The fact that it seems their university studies thus far have not prepared many of them for this challenge is troubling. In the worst case the result may be a generation of teachers in need of supplementary training, and a leadership that believes that distance education and face-to-face education are similar enough for distance education training not to be a priority. The possibility of a disconnect between the teachers and the administration of their educational institution may also result in the practice of setting up common rules for the teaching of every distance education course, thus disregarding that foreign language education may suffer disproportionately from the limited interaction and propensity to lecturing that distance education seems to so often result in.

Foreign language teaching specifically may also suffer disproportionately from the feelings of isolation mentioned both in previous research (Murphy et al. 2011, Walker & Haddon 2011) and in the findings of this study. The potential problem of having insufficient time for synchronous communication practice is a problem that foreign language teachers need to be aware of in order to make most of the time they are given. It becomes extremely important to

be able to, on the one hand, generate the kind material that students can grapple with on their own with minimal support and on the other to determine what needs to be covered during synchronous teaching sessions. Isolation can also be problematic if the teachers begin to have difficulties asking for support from their colleagues. Suitable English language materials, for example, are generally quite easy to find on the internet, but teachers teaching less common languages may have difficulties finding suitable materials. This may be especially true if certain exercises and materials should be considered less suited for distance education settings. Thus, teacher students, especially foreign language teacher students, need to discuss the way distance education may change learner needs and best teaching practices.

The most pressing issue for future distance education research that has become apparent during this study is the lack of research on young distance education students. Most research into distance education is, as is generally often the case, done on higher education students. If it is true that distance education requires the learner to take more responsibility for their own learning, then it may not be as suited for younger learners and learners going through compulsory education. The lack of intrinsic motivation and learning strategy and management skills among some learners could significantly increase the difficulty of teaching at a distance. This is especially true for foreign language teachers who may need to develop new strategies for motivating their students to talk and actively participate during synchronous lessons. The lack of research on this issue, however, means it becomes nearly impossible to evaluate how younger students may react to distance foreign language education. Adopting distance education in such situations may thus result in issues that cannot be accurately foreseen based on this study or the state of current research. If the use of distance education is to be continued in some shape or form after the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, schools will require empirical research on the effects of the distance education environment on the learning of students undergoing compulsory education. Only such research can provide a solid foundation for best practices for current and future distance educators.

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9. APPENDICES

9.1. Kyselylomake kieltenopettajaopiskelijoille

Toteutettu Webropolilla

1. Monennettako vuotta opiskelet Jyväskylän yliopistolla?

Vaihtoehdot: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, yli 8

2. Mitä kieliä opiskelet?

Vaihtoehdot: Englanti, Saksa, Ranska, Italia, Espanja, Venäjä, Ruotsi, Latina, Suomi toisena kielenä, Muut kielet

3. Missä vaiheessa olet opettajan pedagogisten opintojen kanssa?

Vaihtoehdot: En ole suorittanut kaikkia perusopintoja, Olen suorittanut kaikki perusopinnot, Suoritan parhaillaan aineopintoja, Olen suorittanut aineopinnot

4. Oletko saanut koulutusta etäopetuksen pitämisestä?

Vaihtoehdot: Kyllä, En

5. Oletko ollut oppilaana etäopetuksena järjestettävällä kielikurssilla?

Vaihtoehdot: Kyllä, En

6. Oletko toiminut opettajana etäopetuksena järjestettävällä kielikurssilla?

Vaihtoehdot: Kyllä, En

7. Nimeä kolme (3) asiaa, jotka ovat mielestäsi tärkeimpiä onnistuneen vieraan kielen etäopetuksen takaamiseksi, ja joihin sinä pystyt opettajana vaikuttamaan.

Avoin kysymys

8. Mitä mahdollisuuksia (jos mitään) etäopetus mielestäsi tarjoaa vieraiden kielten opetukselle? (pedagogisesti, yhteiskunnallisesti yms.)

Avoin kysymys

9. Asteikolla yhdestä viiteen (1-5), yhden ollessa "erittäin huono", kolmen "en osaa sanoa", ja viiden "erittäin hyvä", kuinka arvioisit seuraavat opettamiseen liittyvät taitosi etäopetustilanteessa?

- Oppilaiden motivoiminen
- Opettajan ja oppilaan välisen kommunikaation tukeminen
- Oppilaiden keskinäisen kommunikaation tukeminen
- Positiivisen opiskeluilmapiirin luominen
- Oman keskittymisen jakaminen eri oppilaiden välillä
- Suoritusten arviointi
- Kurinpito
- Joustavuus opetustilanteissa
- Palautteen antaminen

- Tehtävien ohjeistaminen
- Tuntien suunnittelu
- Videon välityksellä esiintyminen
- Tietotekniset taidot

10. Kuinka valmis tunnet tällä hetkellä olevasi opettamaan vierasta kieltä etäopetuksena?

Asteikko: 1-10

11. Kuinka todennäköisenä pidät sitä että tulet valmistuttuasi opettamaan vieraita kieliä etäopetuksena?

Asteikko: 1-10

9.2. The questionnaire for foreign language teacher students

Done using Webropol

1. How many years have you been studying at the University of Jyväskylä?

Options: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, yli 8

2. What languages are you studying?

Options: English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Swedish, Latin, Finnish as a second language, Other languages

3. At what stage of the pedagogical studies are you?

Options: Have not finished the basic studies, Have finished the basic studies, Currently doing the advanced studies, Have finished advanced studies

4. Have you received training in distance education?

Options: Yes, No

5. Have you been a student at a distance foreign language course?

Options: Yes, No

6. Have you been a teacher at a distance foreign language course?

Options: Yes, No

7. Name three (3) things that you can influence as a teacher, which you think are most important in order to guarantee successful distance foreign language education.

Open question

8. What opportunities (if any) does distance education offer for the teaching of foreign languages? (pedagogically, societally etc.)

Open question

9. On a scale of one to five (1-5), one being "very bad" and three being "cannot evaluate" and five being "very good", how would you evaluate your following teaching related skills in a distance education setting.

- Motivating students
- Supporting student-to-teacher interaction
- Supporting student-to-student interaction
- Creating a positive learning environment
- Dividing your attention among the students
- Grading
- Maintaining discipline
- Flexibility in teaching
- Giving feedback
- Giving instructions
- Planning lessons
- Interacting via video
- IT skills

10. How ready do you feel you are to teach foreign language at a distance?

Scale: 1-10

11. How likely do you consider that you will teach foreign languages at a distance after graduation?

Scale: 1-10

9.3. Structure of the interview

1. **What kind of teaching experience do you have?**
 - a) How long have you been teaching? ("face-to-face" and "at a distance")
 - b) Age/level of students?
 - c) Different subjects taught?
2. **What is your history in distance education like?**
 - a) Have you received any education in distance language teaching?
=> What did this education consist of?
 - b) How many years have you been teaching languages at a distance?
 - c) How did you get into the field and why?
 - d) How have you taught languages at a distance? (teacher in classroom, students not or vice versa, tools used, age of students, length of course)
3. **How did your first distance education lessons go?**
 - a) How did you prepare for these lessons?
=> How satisfied were you with these preparations after the lesson?
 - b) Did you feel you were ready to teach languages at a distance before your first lessons? Why/ Why not?
 - c) Over all, how well did your first distance education classes go?
=> technology? => pedagogy? => social aspects?

4. **What would you say are the greatest challenges in distance language education?**
 - a) for teachers? => technology? pedagogy? preparation?
=> division of attention? Social distance? teaching materials? Maintaining order and motivation? evaluation of students' abilities? etc.
 - b) for students? => Do students need to be taught how to work at a distance? Need for motivation? Is there an optimal age range? (Why/Why not?)
5. **What would you say are the greatest opportunities in distance language education?**
 - a) for teachers? => Wider range of teaching tools? Flexibility for time and location?
 - b) for students? => Flexibility? Qualified teachers even at remote locations?
6. **Do you think future foreign language teachers should receive training in distance language education? Why/ Why not?**
 - a) If you were to teach future teachers about distance language education, what would you want them to learn?
 - b) Would you teach through practical exercises? Discussion? Lecturing?
7. **Do you have anything to add?**

Any questions you would like to ask me?