

FINNISH FIFTH-GRADE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES ON
DISTANCE LEARNING OF ENGLISH

Bachelor's thesis
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ENGLISH

MAY 2021

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanistis-yhteiskuntatieteellinen tiedekunta	Laitos – Department Kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitos
Tekijä – Author Eveliina Piironen	
Työn nimi – Title A Case Study: Finnish Fifth-grade Students' Experiences on Distance Learning of English	
Oppiaine – Subject Englanti	Työn laji – Level Kandidaatintutkielma
Aika – Month and year Toukokuu 2021	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 35 + liitteet
Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Etäopiskelu on viimeisten vuosikymmenten aikana muodostunut hyvin yleiseksi opiskelumuodoksi ympäri maailmaa. Myös kielten etäopiskelu on lisääntynyt, etenkin vanhempien oppilaiden keskuudessa. Suomessa kieltenetäopiskelua ei ole kuitenkaan tutkittu erityisen laajasti ja nuorten oppilaiden kohdalla sitä ei ole tutkittu lainkaan. Vaikka opetussuunnitelmassa mainitaankin, että oppilaiden tulisi käyttää tieto- ja viestintäteknologiaa kieltenopiskelussa, ei etäopiskeluun ole aiemmin ollut syytä. Vuoden 2020 keväänä etäopetukseen jouduttiin kuitenkin siirtymään ja siksi tässä tutkimuksessa keskityttiin nuorten oppilaiden kokemuksiin etäopiskelujaksosta englannin osalta.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää kahden eri puolella Suomea sijaitsevan viidennen luokan oppilaiden kokemuksia vuoden 2020 kevään englannin etäopiskelusta. Oppilaiden kokemuksia haluttiin selvittää tiedustelemalla millaista englannin etäopiskelu oli verrattuna tavalliseen englannin luokassa opiskeluun, oliko opettajan tarjoama tuki riittävää, englannin etäopetuksen aikaisista tehtävistä sekä millaisia englannin etäopetuksessa käytetyt oppimisolustat (mm. Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp, YouTube) olivat. Tutkimuksessa pyrittiin nimenomaan kartoittamaan oppilaiden omia kokemuksia aiheesta, sillä vastaavanlaista tutkimusta ei ole Suomessa aiemmin tehty.</p> <p>Tutkimukseen osallistui yhteensä 44 oppilasta kahdesta eri luokasta ja materiaali kerättiin verkkokyselyn avulla. Kyselyssä oli sekä avoimia että suljettuja kysymyksiä suoraan liittyen oppilaiden kokemuksiin sekä opettajan tarjoamaan tukeen, tehtäviin ja oppimisolustoihin. Kysely toteutettiin maaliskuussa 2021.</p> <p>Tuloksissa selvisi, että valtaosa oppilaista koki englannin etäopetuksen joko positiivisena tai neutraalina. Verrattuna tavalliseen englannin luokassa opiskeluun etäopiskelu oli pääsääntöisesti mielenkiintoisempaa tai erilaista oppilaiden mielestä. Englannin etäopetuksen tehtävistä oppilaat selviytyivät myös pääsääntöisesti hyvin ilman suurempaa avun tarvetta. Yksin tehdyt tehtävät olivat suosiossa, koska yksin työskennellessä oppilaat saivat paremman työrauhan kuin esimerkiksi luokassa työskennellessä. Myös opettajan tukeen oltiin hyvin tyytyväisiä etäopetuksen aikana. Oppimisolustoista suosikeiksi nousivat ne, jotka olivat tuttuja, helppoja käyttää ja joista tavoitti opettajan parhaiten.</p> <p>Tulokset antavat tietoa näiden kahden luokan kokemuksista liittyen englannin etäopiskeluun ja vaikka jatkossa nuoret oppilaat tuskin joutuvat pitkäjätkoiseen etäopetukseen, olisi mielenkiintoista tutkia esimerkiksi opettajien kokemuksia siitä, millaista nuorille oppilaille on opettaa kieltä etäyhteyksin.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords distance learning, students' experiences, questionnaire, English as a foreign language	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this day and age, technology is dominating and conquering the world. Most people from children to elders have smartphones and access to a computer. Especially the new generation – the Z-generation or digital natives – are using technology all the time, because their phones carry everything in them (Vaarala, Johansson and Mutta 2014). The increase in technology has caused the need for schools to improve and adapt their learning environments, to update them to match the new environment of learning altogether (Vaarala et al. 2014). Young children are already skilful users of social media and multiple other platforms that can be found on the internet, but it is the school's task to teach them how to learn these new multi-literacy skills that are needed in order to understand which sources are reliable for example (Vaarala et al. 2014). That said, according to Vaarala et al. (2014), teachers are often outperformed by students when it comes to operating new electronic environments. Vaarala et al. continue that this has led to a change in the relationship between students and the teacher as they are somehow depended on each other and the students' role becomes more active.

Because technology has become increasingly common, it is only natural that it has and continues to affect teaching as well through innovations. The idea of teaching people from a distance has not risen from the possibilities that technology has allowed, but it has in fact existed since the 1840s (Schlosser 2006: 6). Back then, distance education was conducted through mail for example, but since then the world has come a long way. From the 1990s onwards, two-way high-quality video and audio have been used in education (Schlosser 2006: 9). After the internet has become accessible to nearly everyone, it has been taken as a useful platform for distance education, and as a source in offering students more personalised and versatile opportunities to connect with other people and share ideas (Lee and McLoughlin 2010: 62). According to Lee and McLoughlin (2010: 62), this kind of advanced technology combined with appropriate pedagogical approaches and strategies create a tremendous opportunity for enhancing, enriching and extending the scope of distance education. Distance learning these days can be defined in multiple different ways, but in the context of my thesis, it is defined as learning while students and the teacher are in separate locations, communicating with each other through various mediums (Keegan 2003, in Çelik and Uzunboylu, 2020: 2).

Distance teaching has never been a part of all forms of teaching. For example, with language teaching, the journey to distance teaching has not been simply straightforward, but it has included various stepping stones. According to Davies, Otto and Rüschoff (2012) computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is something that first emerged from the increased use of technology, as well as from the

evolution of second language acquisition theories and pedagogies. According to the writers, there is no clear information on when the term CALL first appeared, but it has first emerged in the United Kingdom. In its early stages in the 1960s and 1970s, CALL was mostly used to help teachers' workload with their checking of drill tasks and errors (Davies et al. 2012: 21). It was only in the 1990s when ICT had firmly secured its use in language education, because this is when an option for audio recording and playback was introduced (Davies et al. 2012: 30). According to Davies et al. (2012: 32), complete language courses started to appear in the 2000s after The World Wide Web had become popular and offered a platform for the courses. Another contributing factor is language pedagogy, which has evolved during the decades and is nowadays relying on collaborative knowledge construction, authenticity and task orientation. Finally, the internet is now offering suitable platforms – including videoconferencing, audioconferencing and other communicative tools – for this kind of pedagogy (Davies et al. 2012: 33). From CALL, language teaching has in the past 20 years moved towards complete distance education possibilities.

Multiple studies have been conducted on distance learning of foreign languages in the past decades. Many of these have focused on older students, such as upper secondary, high school or college students (e.g. Oliver, Kellogg and Patel, 2012; Genc, Kulusakli and Aydin, 2016). Issues such as anxiety, motivation and attitudes regarding distance learning of foreign languages have been studied as well, as overall differences between distance and traditional in-classroom learning. However, there seems to be a gap in the research regarding younger students' experiences on distance learning of foreign languages. Moreover, the issue has not been studied much in Finland. Factors such as student interest, teacher support and overall differences between distance learning and regular in-classroom learning have not been studied in Finland, which is why I am interested in said areas of distance education of English.

Because there is a gap in the area, I will concentrate on studying the experiences of two fifth-grade classes on distance learning of English in Finland. I am primarily interested in the students' experiences on distance learning of English. This includes, for example, studying how interesting they find distance learning and why. In addition, I am interested to find out how the students experience distance learning of English, in comparison to regular in-classroom learning, how they find the teacher support and the platforms used in distance education. My study focuses on gathering the experiences and analysing them instead of aiming to be widely applicable. In this thesis, I will first explain briefly how second language teaching is perceived today in most parts of the world and after this, take a closer look of how it is perceived and conducted in Finland. I will then proceed to defining distance education in more detail, presenting different methods of distance education as well as

challenges and benefits of distance education and then again taking a more focused look on the situation in Finland. Finally, before moving on to this study, I will present some past studies conducted on the topic of distance education.

2 SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING TODAY

As the world becomes increasingly global, people are expected to know more languages. This is why different foreign languages are taught in schools all around the world. Although many different theories and approaches have been utilized in second language teaching, for the past few decades the leading approach has been the communicative approach (Järvinen 2014: 83). According to Järvinen (2014: 80), the communicative approach considers communicative competence to be a key element of language learning. By communicative competence she refers to the ability to understand what is being said, how to say something in an appropriate manner in particular situations and how to take into consideration the possible roleplayed characters that are taking part in the conversation and their roles. This is opposed to the older approaches according to which grammatical competence – understanding of the rules and how to use them – was important. Järvinen (2014: 80) continues that in the communicative approach, the goal is to create as authentic language situations as possible. Even though the learning of grammatical rules is also a part of the communicative approach, its main focus is on learning natural communication, not only in speech, but also writing and reading. Another widely used approach is task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach used quite widely. It is very similar to the communicative approach, but within it, the “task” is considered as more extensive and independent entity than tasks in the communicative approach (Järvinen 2014: 83). For example, students get instructions to a task and then complete it in pairs or groups before presenting their product either orally or in writing (Järvinen 2014: 83).

Strict and defined methods and approaches to language teaching have been criticized in the past decades for various reasons. A consequence of this criticism has been the rise of the so-called “post-method” time (Järvinen 2014: 87). In this post-method time, only features of different methods and approaches can be found in language teaching as it is rare to anymore follow simply one strictly defined method in teaching. According to Järvinen, in the 1980s, a shift towards more student oriented language teaching happened. Researchers emphasized that every learner is different and hence require different methods to learn. Today, features that describe language teaching include for example authenticity, functionality and contextuality (Järvinen 2014: 87). Järvinen (2014: 88) concludes that the teacher’s support and ability to adapt the teaching according to each situation are in a central position today. Sufficient support and opportunities provide the students with a possibility to learn languages in interaction with others and in a way that suits them best.

When thinking of the Finnish context it is good to know that the features of the communicative teaching approach and task-based language teaching are prominent in language teaching in the

Finnish National Core Curriculum (Nikula 2010; Finnish National Agency of Education 2014). As stated before, according to Järvinen (2014), in communicative language teaching the goal is to enhance the students' communicative competence and to teach them how to use language in natural situations through listening, speaking, reading and writing. An example of a common task in communicative language teaching is a pair task where the students take on different roles and go through a real life situation with each other – such as a tourist asking for directions and a local person giving them. Task-based language teaching, in turn, includes more all-encompassing tasks instead of separate smaller tasks, but the basic idea is still the same: authentic communication and examples of real life situations (Järvinen 2014: 83-84). In addition, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014: 219) states that students in Finland are to be provided with the possibility to interact with other students in multiple different groups and they are to be encouraged to communicate in authentic language situations. The National Core Curriculum (2014: 220) also expects teachers to choose different functions to teach such as saying hello, asking for help and expressing opinions. In addition, oral skills are emphasized: pronunciation, intonation, prosody and sentence accents need to be practiced and observed as well.

In fact, the overall working methods in language classrooms in Finland are listed in the Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic education (2014: 221). These methods include for example working in small groups and using language with other students as well as the teacher as naturally, properly and meaningfully as possible. In addition, students are encouraged and directed to be active agents and take responsibility of their own learning. Technology such as different communication mediums are also expected to be used in language teaching. Specifically, for the grades three through six, the listing includes the recommendation that language teaching should take the form of song, play and drama in order to offer the students a possibility to test their language skills. (The Finnish Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014: 220). Therefore, it can be argued that in Finland second language teaching aims to be functional and communicative, but it also takes into consideration students' individual needs and skills.

3 DISTANCE EDUCATION

Due to the development in technology, schools these days have access to a large number of devices and e-learning environments. It is only natural that educators have taken an interest in the possibilities that technology has for language teaching (Nussbaum-Beach and Hall 2012, as cited in Gonzáles-Lloret and Lourdes 2014: 2). It has been a trend for a number of years that teachers adopt different kinds of online platforms in their teaching: these can include blogs, synthetic immersive environments and chats, for example (Gonzáles-Lloret and Lourdes 2014: 2). These new tools for learning have obviously altered the skills that students and teachers need as well, out of which technological skills must be one of the most important ones (Vaarala et al. 2014). Distance education itself can take a few different forms and those forms will be briefly presented below.

According to Bowman (2010: 1-4), there are a few different types of online learning that can also be combined if need be: independent study, asynchronous and synchronous courses. Independent courses do not contain any actual teaching, but the student receives the course materials and then completes the given coursework or exam. This type of course provides the student with a relatively free schedule, and an opportunity to complete the course at their own pace. However, it can also increase the possibility of procrastination. In an asynchronous course, it is typical to have a weekly schedule, during which students complete the given tasks that may include, for example, independent tasks and posting to a discussion forum. This can give the students more regular deadlines and decrease the possibility of slacking. Lastly, in a synchronous course, students and the teacher are online at the same time, talking via chat, video or audio. Synchronicity makes it possible for the teacher to show graphics and other course material in real time and to teach almost as if it was a face-to-face class situation. According to Bowman (2010: 3-4), asynchronous courses are the most popular ones, but with the advancement of technology, the trend is moving more towards synchronous courses.

All of these types have their advantages and disadvantages. For example, according to Papalas (2013: 107), synchronous teaching offers the teacher and students a chance to talk directly to each other. However, if the group size is too big, the teacher will not have the time to address students individually and connect with them personally. Asynchronous studying, on the other hand, offers more freedom to the students. At the same time, it can leave students feeling isolated, anxious and not confident enough in their speaking, as opportunities to rehearse oral skills are scarce (Hurd 2007: 495-96, in Papalas 2013: 108). The same disadvantage applies to independent study as well, but in

addition to that students usually do not receive any feedback in the middle of the course or assignment (Bowman 2010: 2).

3.1 Benefits in distance education

It is clear already that certain benefits are linked to distance learning. These benefits include for example the opportunities already mentioned above, to work at one's own pace (Bowman 2010). However, it has also been discovered that CALL has similar characteristics as online learning and it is thought that they share mostly the same benefits as well (Oliver et al. 2012: 270). These benefits include for example reduced anxiety (Ushida 2005, as cited in Oliver et al. 2012), improved writing skills (Lee 2005, as cited in Oliver et al. 2012), more equal participation (Warschauer 1996, as cited in Oliver et al. 2012), as well as promoting student-centred learning (Sullivan and Pratt 1996, as cited in Oliver et al. 2012). In the same vein, Hamilton (2011: 172) has concluded that increased motivation and improved communication skills are benefits of e-learning. Improved communication skills stem from the opportunity to share, collaborate and create content with other users all around the world, for example (Lomicka and Lord 2009, cited in Stevenson and Liu 2010: 233).

Kern (1995: 461, as cited in Hampel and Stickler 2005: 314), found in his study on the quantity and characteristics of discourse in a synchronous, written conferencing environment that students took more turns, produced more language, were encouraged to a more collaborative spirit. In addition, their anxiety was reduced and their writing skills and perhaps even oral skills were positively affected. Similarly, Yang and Chen (2007: 868) found in their study that students' motivation in and interest towards the learning remained high due to their incorporated interactive video-conferencing and online chatting.

3.2 Possible challenges in distance education

Although many possibilities lie in teaching languages online, there still are issues. One of the most important factors in distance learning is perhaps the teacher. Several studies have concluded that the teacher's role has a significant effect on all aspects of distance learning (e.g. Oliver et al. 2012: 284; Hampel and Stickler 2005: 312-313). Firstly, when teaching a language – a subject where communication is at heart – it is crucial that the teacher is prepared and sufficiently involved, especially when the students are beginning learners and the form is as important as the content (Hampel and Stickler 2005: 312).

Secondly, face-to-face teaching differs from online teaching and therefore it is crucial for teachers to receive adequate training. Hampel and Stickler (2005: 313-315) point out, for example, that in distance teaching and learning the teacher has to learn how to communicate asynchronously with the

students and how to possibly understand the students – and vice versa – without non-verbal clues when there is necessarily no visual contact. The lack of opportunities to read body language can lead to issues in classroom management and learner anxiety.

Thirdly, according to Hampel and Stickler (2005: 314-315), students – and the teacher – need to be able to use the technology in order to access the teaching in the first place. It is often the teacher's duty to advise the students and support them when dealing with different devices and platforms. If the students are not adequate users of the necessary technology, this can lead to overly vast workload piling on the teacher.

Lastly, many studies have shown that the students feel that in distance learning the teacher is not as present as in traditional in-classroom teaching. In past research it has been discovered that students have hoped that the teacher would take a more active role in the teaching, i.e. do more explaining and clarifying the content, but also make corrections and give feedback on their skills (Oliver et al. 2012: 284; Hamilton 2011: 156). According to Lee and McLoughlin (2010: 63), students also need the sense of community around them – created by other students – and a course arranged completely as distance teaching, does not necessarily provide that. Without the sense of community, students often become frustrated and could fail the course (Lee and McLoughlin, 2010: 65). Moreover, the lack of feedback and communication with the teacher can be very challenging for the student. Lee and McLoughlin (2010: 65) mention for example the need to have the materials and topics explained and also having someone to guide with time-management. Obviously, these issues usually arise with independent study courses.

In sum, there are still multiple hindrances that need to be addressed regarding distance education. Partly, this is because actual distance education is still a new phenomenon and is evolving rapidly along technology. Another part of it is most likely the pedagogical side that still needs to evolve alongside the new learning environments (e.g. Hampel and Stickler 2005; Vaarala et al. 2014). Regarding distance education of young students in Finland, it would be of great importance for the teacher to be able to offer adequate support and for the students to have a sense of community.

3.3 Distance Education in Finland

The Finnish version of distance education appeared in the 1980s into Open Universities (Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg 2015: 9). It was called “multi-form education” as the students studied independently but met regularly with the teacher for tutoring. From this early stage distance learning, Finland moved to the use of information and communicative technology (ICT) in open university education in the mid-1990s. It was implemented in the teaching in different ways: sometimes only

some elements were applied, whereas other courses might have been completely online (Owusu-Boampong and Holmberg 2015: 10).

However, due to rapid development of the technology in the past decades, ICT has become increasingly prominent in Finnish secondary schools as well (Niemi, Kynäslahti and Vahtivuori-Hänninen 2013: 58). Since the 1990s, Finland has been aiming to develop as an information society, and national guidelines and strategies have been developed to achieve this (Niemi et al. 2013: 57). For example, the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014: 23) states that ICT skills are important citizen skills and not only means of learning but also a target of learning. The curriculum (2014: 23) also emphasizes four different areas where ICT skills should be developed:

- 1) Students are instructed to understand the principles of using and operating ICT and key concepts, and to develop their practical ICT skills.
- 2) Students are instructed how to use ICT responsibly, safely and ergonomically.
- 3) Students are taught how to use ICT in information management and research and creative work.
- 4) Students gain experiences and practice using ICT in interaction with others and networking.

Hietanen, Kaivo-oja, Lauttamäki and Nurmi (2006: 41-43) list certain goals as well in terms of advancing the ICT in Finnish schools in the years 2007-2011. For example, according to their report, all seventh graders should have a course in information technology, all classrooms should have at least one computer, projector and an internet connection, online learning should be developed and enhanced, free learning materials should be available on the internet, and in teacher education, online teaching pedagogy should be emphasized. Although Finland has invested in teacher training and the ICT infrastructure in schools, it has become clear that it has not been enough (Niemi et al. 2013: 58). According to Niemi et al., all schools are no longer equal as some schools have progressed faster with ICT than others. This is because other schools benefit from having leading educators in both pedagogical and technical fields. A survey project (CICERO Learning 2008) showed similar results, as some Finnish schools have excellent technological infrastructure and innovative teachers whereas other schools are lagging behind in both departments (Kankaanranta and Vahtivuori-Hänninen 2011, as cited in Niemi et al. 2013: 58). This is made possible by the freedom offered by the National Core Curriculum as it only provides the framework and each school has the right to apply ICT into the teaching in their own way (Niemi et al. 2013: 60-61). **LISÄÄ TÄHÄN**

Although technology is prominent in schools in Finland there is very little research on actual distance education in primary and secondary schools. As a Finnish citizen I have knowledge of individual courses or lessons high school and secondary school that have been arranged as independent study, but there is no research conducted on the topic. One cause for this probably is Finland's Basic

Education Act (POL 628/1998, 30 §), as all students have the right to receive teaching throughout the working day. According to Finnish National Agency of Education (2020), students need to receive teaching during the pre-set working hours in a safe environment and they cannot choose the time and place for the teaching themselves. In addition, education is considered both a civil right and duty in Finland, which is why school is taken very seriously here. This is most likely why primary and secondary schools have not arranged distance education prior to spring of 2020, when they had no other choice.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020 in Finland, the ICT infrastructure of Finnish schools was put to test in a short period of time. Many schools had to transfer to distance education, and that is why the Finnish National Agency for Education launched a research project regarding the management of distance education in primary and secondary educations (2020). Over 2000 teachers, students, guardians and principals have taken part in the study. The study continued until the end of 2020, but by the time of writing this, the Finnish National Agency for Education has only published initial observations that show the transition was mostly successful due to competent teachers and good infrastructure. They have discovered that those students who had more contact with the school and took part in synchronous teaching found distance learning more pleasant. In addition, they have found that distance learning has improved both the students' and the teachers' technological skills. However, they found that there was a need for a higher sense of community among the students which was only present during live-teaching sessions. The Finnish National Agency of Education states in the report that in the future distance teaching should be conducted more synchronously and offer more possibilities for interaction. More training, support and instructions are also needed. This study by the Finnish National Agency of Education is focusing partly on the same aspects of distance learning as the present study, and its data is collected from the same target group as the present study, which makes this study especially intriguing and relevant.

4 TEACHER AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education in itself has been studied by multiple people and for decades. However, studies of distance education in foreign languages are much more scarce. There are some notable exceptions, but they often focus on teacher's required skills and the attitudes of students (e.g. Kilgour, Reynaud, Northcote, McLoughlin and Gosselin 2017; Hampel and Stickler 2005). The most common setting in the studies that do focus on the students seems to be the development and aspects of the studies of college and university students. Typically, these studies have been based on relatively uniform sample groups (e.g. White, 2006; Yang and Chen 2007; Oliver et al. 2012). Thus, there seems to be a gap in the field regarding younger, i.e. primary school, students.

Oliver, Kellogg, and Patel (2012) have conducted a study on high school students in a North Carolina Virtual Public school that took part in distance courses of different subjects. The participants in their study are older than my interest group, but their areas of interest are quite similar to what the present study aims to study as well, mainly the students' experiences on distance studying of languages. The main differences between their and the present study is the age of the students and the fact that they attend a virtual school, which means the school used teachers who have extensive virtual teaching experience. In addition, their courses were reviewed by Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) specialists who gave instructions in regard to developing the online courses. At first, Oliver et al. were studying student perceptions on online courses in general, but when they noticed that online language courses ranked significantly lower than other courses, they conducted another survey to find out the reasons behind this. Their survey was taken by as many as 119 students and 19 teachers.

A key finding in the study by Oliver et al. (2012) was related to student support. They found that language students thought they needed more support from the teacher. The students needed the teacher to be available more often, to explain the course topics more explicitly and to motivate them more (2012: 281-282; 278-280). Oliver et al. (2012: 286) also suggested that teachers should learn new ways to embed socialization into online learning by providing innovative group tasks either asynchronously or synchronously.

Similarly to Oliver et al. (2021), Beese (2014) concluded in her study of high school students' perceptions on distance education, that the students did not receive adequate support in the online environment. Hence, both studies suggest that students should have access to regular face-to-face meetings with the teacher. It is important to bear in mind, however, that in both of these studies the students have been reasonably inexperienced with online learning before taking part in the studies

and hence might have been more inclined to teacher's support than more experienced students. In addition, Beese's sample group consisted of students with high GPA's (Grade Point Average) and were older high school students, thus having a lot of other courses on their plates as well.

In contrast to these two studies, Barbour, McLaren and Zhang (2012) discovered in their study – conducted in another virtual school – that students liked the freedom and possibility to be independent when the teacher was not always supervising them. Interestingly, these students still ranked synchronous classes especially enjoyable. Another contrast to Oliver et al. (2012) is that the students in Barbour et al. study did not feel a specific need for a sense of community. This study's biggest weakness, however, is that the sample group included only 7 students.

Another issue that surfaced in both Oliver et al.'s (2012) as well as Yang and Chen's (2007) conclusions was the need to pay more attention to students' self-directedness. Yang and Chen (2007: 876) found that students with a lower proficiency in their target language were less likely to be self-directed – a highly needed skill in distance education. According to the researchers (2007: 877), it would be important to make the students understand the differences between in-class studying and distance studying and to guide them better in how distance studying works. Similarly, Oliver et al. (2012: 279-280) noted that students with weaker abilities would be less self-directed and required more motivation. To fix the issues with self-directedness, Oliver et al. (2012: 288) suggest teachers should prompt the students with some tasks, such as self-monitoring.

There were other less significant, but still important, issues that the studies discussed. Two noteworthy points that arose in Oliver et al. (2012) study were some students' hope for more communication with the other students, and the heavy workload of the course as well as the feeling that foreign languages are just too difficult to learn without face-to-face direction. Yang and Chen (2007: 868) on the other hand, found that one-fifth of the students did not find their language competency improving during the online course. This was because they felt they could not participate due to their lack of courage to voice their opinions, too short a time for everyone to participate and difficulties in listening or speaking the target language. Both Beese (2014) and Oliver et al. (2012) found in their studies that a significant number of the participants did not think they were succeeding well on the online course. According to a teacher who took part in Oliver et al.'s study, this might be because foreign languages are one of the most difficult subjects already (2012: 276).

Despite all the issues the researchers identified in their studies, all of them – with the exception to Beese (2014) – discovered that mostly and majority of the students enjoyed the distance and technology-enhanced language learning, some even more so than normal in-class learning. The

reasons behind this, according to Yang and Chen (2007: 875), for example, included the innovativeness of the learning approach, interactivity and possibility for the students to control the studying themselves. At the same time, Yang and Chen (2007: 876) found that some students – mainly those with lower competency in the target language – needed more time with the assigned tasks. The researchers suggest that students need time to adapt in the new learning environment.

As stated before, many of these studies have focused on older students and not all of them were solely focusing on the student side of matters (e.g. Oliver et al. 2012; Beese 2014). However, these studies do indicate a certain pattern with students and online learning and hence I am interested in studying similar aspects with younger, Finnish students. The interest in the present study lies in particular in how students have found the distance studying of English – whether it has been pleasant and interesting for them, the possible benefits or challenges and whether the students have found the teacher support to be adequate. In addition, it would be interesting to find out how the students have found distance studying of English in comparison to regular in-classroom English.

5 RESEARCH DESIGN

5.1 Aims and research questions

Distance education has been studied for decades already, with previous studies having focused on multiple different areas of distance education, such as student and teacher experiences, motivation and functionality. Many of these studies have investigated older students in high schools or universities. However, in the Finnish framework studies on the topic are sparse. Especially regarding younger students, there appears to be no studies on their experiences, because prior to the spring of 2020, there has simply not been a need to distance educate such young students. Therefore, the present study aims to gather Finnish 5th graders' experiences on distance education of English. In order to study the students' experiences, the research questions consist of one main questions and four sub-questions. The main questions is as follows:

1. "How did the students perceive distance learning?"

To answer this question, I broke it down to the following, more specific, sub-questions:

2. Compared to regular classroom situation, how interesting did the students find the distance learning?
3. How did the students manage to complete their learning exercises?
4. How did the students find the teacher support during the distance learning period? and
5. How did the students find the learning platforms?

5.2 Data collection and analysis

According to Vehkalahti (2014: 12-13), a survey generally is quantitative in nature, but the content and results can also be analysed and presented qualitatively. A survey is suitable for studying opinions, attitudes, or values. As the present study aims to find out students' experiences, a questionnaire is a good choice as a data collection method. In the present questionnaire, I have included both closed and open-ended questions for the purpose of collecting students' experiences and opinions.

The survey was compiled on the Webropol platform which is provided by the University of Jyväskylä. This is because it has multifaceted options for creating different types of questions and organizing the data.

In order to ensure full comprehension, the questions of the questionnaire were in Finnish. The questionnaire was piloted on one student in January and, based on the pilot study the questions were reformulated to make them more understandable to young students. In February 2021, a link to the questionnaire was sent to a teacher of a middle school in southern Finland, who then distributed it to their students. However, the students' answers showed that they had misunderstood the questionnaire to cover all of the subjects in which they had had distance education. Hence, the questionnaire was reformulated one more time, before it was sent to two different teachers in two schools in a different part of Finland, in March 2021. The students in the two classes in these schools answered to the questionnaire. In the end, altogether 44 students participated in the study. The identity of the students cannot be recognized or singled out from their replies to the questionnaire: this was ensured by the fact that the questionnaire did not collect any personal data.

As the data size of the present study is relatively small and does not allow statistical analysis, or generalization, no statistical analysis was necessary. Hence, in the present study the quantitative data was analysed manually by describing the numerical results of the questionnaire. The qualitative responses by the students were analysed manually as well. From the qualitative data, the present study aimed to find out the most common answers and typical ideas surfacing in the students' answers.

6 THE RESULTS

This section presents the main results and findings based on the answers given in the questionnaire. The results are divided into three individual sections, and each section addresses one or two of the six research questions.

6.1 Students' perceptions of the distance learning of English

This section will cover the first part of the questionnaire (questions 1-9) and the last four open questions (22-25) that inquired about the students' perceptions on distance learning of English and how they perceived distance learning compared to regular classroom studying. These questions relate to the first research question (How did the students perceive distance learning?) and the second research question (Compared to regular classroom situation, how engaging and interesting did the students find the distance learning?).

The first question inquired the students whether they thought that they had learned just as well during the distance learning period as they had in regular classroom situation. The majority of the students ($n \approx 38$) felt that they had learned just as well, but six students indicated having some issues. When inquired about why this was the case, three main reasons emerged. The first one was related to the teacher support during the distance-learning period as well as the quality of teaching. One of the respondents, for example, answered: "koska opettajan apua ei saanut" ('because teacher's help was not available')¹, while another stated that they had not learned as well because in normal teaching they "Saa parempaa opetusta" ('I receive better teaching'). Another reason that emerged was the difficulty of the distance learning. One student wrote: "se oli vaikeampaa" ('it was harder'), while another thought that the reason was that they were not used to distance learning as well as they were to normal in-classroom teaching: "en ollut tottunut etänä siihen yhtää hyvin ku lähinä" ('I was not used to it as well as in distant learning as I was in contact learning'). Overall, however, it seems that the students felt their learning did not suffer from having to distance study.

The second and the third questions were related to the students' interest and ability to study when doing so alone at home. The second question inquired whether the students' interest in the distance studying of English was affected by the need to study alone. Only eight students out of 44 thought that it had affected their interest. In a follow-up question they were asked to elaborate on how it had

¹ I have translated all of the citations from Finnish to English myself.

affected their interest in the distance learning. Four of the eight stated that they either liked the peacefulness offered by studying alone or just in general studying alone: “ei ollut luokasta aiheutuva melua häiritsemässä opiskeluani.” (‘there was no noise caused by the class to disturb my studying’). One of them also added that it was nice to be able to move freely around the house during the day. Three of the students stated that they had either missed studying in a group, found it hard to study alone or found it hard to find the needed motivation. One student could not elaborate.

The third question similar to the second, inquired the students whether studying alone had affected how well they were able to study English. Out of the 44 respondents 75% replied that it had not affected their ability to study. Interestingly, most of the students felt very confident about their ability to study English alone despite their relatively young age. Eleven students replied ‘Yes’ to the question. Their replies varied as some felt they had been able to work better, whereas others felt they lacked motivation or were just too tired for some reason. Five students mentioned the ability to focus better without the other students around, similarly as some mentioned in the previous question as well. One respondent wrote “Jaksoin keskittyä paremmin kun olin omassa rauhassa.” (‘I could focus better when I had my own peace’) as a reply. Two students mentioned that they liked being able to work at their own pace. For example, one of them wrote: “no sain paremmin aikaa tajuta tehtävät” (‘well I got more time to understand the exercises’). In contrast, however, one student felt that they were in fact more distracted when studying alone, but they did not elaborate how exactly they were distracted. Another student felt like they did not make the same kind of an effort when studying alone. One student could not elaborate.

Question (4) surveyed how challenging the students had found the distance learning, compared to regular in-classroom learning. Most of the students (75%) found that there was no difference between distance learning and normal in-classroom learning regarding their challenge level. Only six students (14%) thought distance learning was more challenging, out of whom three stated that the reason was the lack of help from the teacher. Again, teacher support was mentioned: “Olisi ollut helpompaa lähiopetuksessa, koska opettajalta olisi voinut pyytää apua.” (‘It would have been easier in contact teaching because then I could have asked help from the teacher’). In addition, two of the six respondents felt that either the teaching quality was not as good, or that they had no one from whom they could have asked more guidance. The last one out of the six could not state a reason why they felt this way. Five students felt that distance learning was less challenging. Yet again, in their answers, there were two responses that were also seen in connection with the previous questions. The students liked working at their own pace and preferred the peaceful studying environment at home: “koska tehtävät pystyi tekemään nopeammin ja ei ollut tausta melua.” (‘I could finish the exercises faster and

there was no background noise’). In addition, one student felt they had such good skills in English that the language is not challenging to them at all. One student mentioned that it was easy to use Google to find answers to the exercises while one could not state a reason for why they felt that distance learning was more challenging.

Question (5) inquired whether the students had had any live video teaching in English during the distance-learning period, for example through Zoom or Teams. One of the schools had not had any live video teaching in English, but the other one had done so. Out of 44 students, 18 had participated in live video teaching in English. These 18 students answered to additional questions related to live video classes. These questions include questions (6), (7) and (14). These questions were not shown to the students who had not participated in live video teaching.

Question (6) inquired whether these live video classes had been useful. Out of the 18 students 89% found the classes useful. They were asked to elaborate why that was the case. Again, their answers varied. The two most common answers were that during those classes the teacher was actually teaching the subject, and that the students could ask for help. Many also stated that they understood the assignments and topics taught better, when the teacher was explaining the subject and they knew what to do and when to do it better: “Koska niissä opettaja selitti sen asian ja silloin ymmärsi sen paremmin.” (‘Because during them the teacher explained the subject and then I understood it better’). One of the students stated that without these video classes they would not have known how to do the exercises at all. Three students could not explain why. Only two students replied that the video classes were not useful, out of whom only one stated the reason, which was that they felt they did not need any help.

Question (7) inquired whether the students considered concentrating during the live video classes easier, the same or harder than focusing during regular in-classroom English class. They were also asked to elaborate why. Out of the 18 students, seven thought it was easier to focus during the live video classes. Again, three students mentioned that the reason for this was that there were no other students talking at the same time, and that the environment was calmer. Otherwise the reasons varied quite a bit, as one student mentioned that it was fun to talk to their friends, while being able to concentrate as well; another one felt their thoughts did not wander as much and still another focused better because they were less social and hence did not like to talk. One student could not elaborate. Four out of the remaining eleven students found it harder to focus during live video classes. Two mentioned the reason to be the distractions they had at home, such as their phone. One felt they did not get enough help during the classes and one could not elaborate. The remaining students (7) found there to be no difference in their ability to focus.

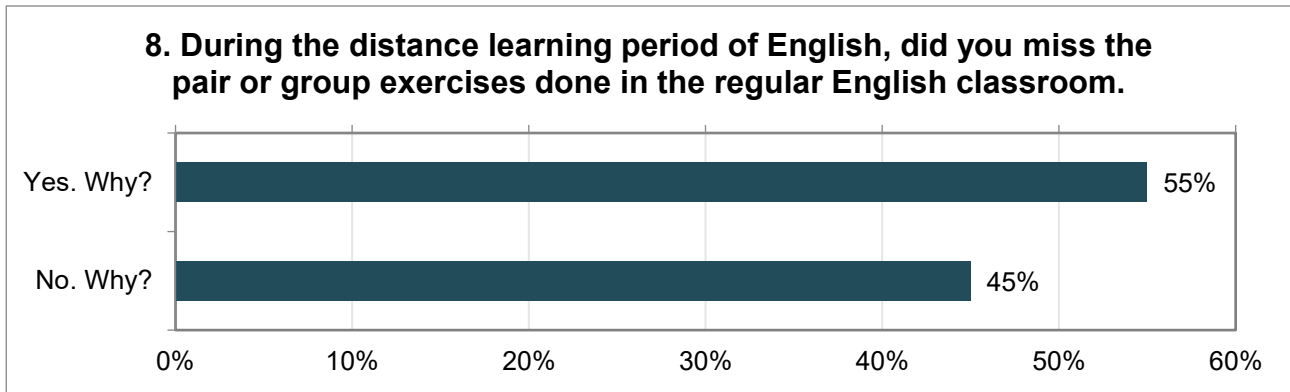


Figure 1. Pair and group exercises during distance learning of English

In question (8) (Figure 1), all of the 44 students were asked whether they missed doing group or pair exercises with their peers. A little over a half of the students (55%) stated that they did miss it. When asked why, the two most common answers were either that ‘they found it more interesting’ or ‘more fun’ than working alone and that it was ‘easier to work with someone else than working alone’. Other interesting reasons mentioned included that someone enjoyed speaking English with their friends and another stated that they learn better through working with someone than working alone. One could not elaborate and one had misunderstood the question.

Still, 20 students out of the 44 replied ‘No’ to this question and when they were asked to explain why this was the case, they also gave varying reasons. The most common reason was that the students did not enjoy doing pair or group exercises. Not everyone specified why exactly they thought so, but some reasons that they mentioned were shyness and the ability to focus better when working alone: “tykkään enemmän tehdä yksin koska keskityn silloin paremmin.” (‘I like working alone more because I focus better then.’) Quite a few also stated that they did not miss the pair or group work because it is not anything especially fun in their opinion. Other reasons that the students mentioned were that working alone means getting to work on the computer, that pair and group work is boring, that a parent’s help replaced the need for pair or group work, and that they preferred to stay home over working with classmates.

In question (9) the students were inquired whether they felt they could show their skills during the distance learning period as well as they can in normal in-classroom learning. The aim of this question was to see whether the students’ interest was kept up during the distance learning of English. This question was inspired by an argument by Keller (1983, as cited in Mills and Sorensen 2004: 14) who states that, when a student feels like they can show their skills in the classroom they are often more interested and motivated. Out of the 44 students, 38 felt that they could show their skills just as well. The answers of the six students who replied ‘No’ varied a lot. One of them wrote that they did not

learn well enough and therefore did not feel they could show their skills. Another stated that their overall skills are not good enough and one said that even though they can understand English well, they cannot write that well and thus felt they could not show their skills. One student just stated that it was weird during the distance learning period and one had issues with their microphone. One could not elaborate.

Question (22) was the following statement: ‘The distance learning of English was interesting’. Out of the 44 students 61% found the distance learning of English interesting. When asked why, the most common reply was that it was ‘different’ and ‘new’. Another common reason, related to the first one, was that the students liked working alone and figuring out the learning process by themselves. The peaceful surroundings were also brought up again by a few students. One student answered, for example: “koska se oli uutta tavallaan opiskella ite” (‘because it was kind of new to study by yourself’). Some students mentioned the reason to be that they liked English and learning other languages. Other reasons mentioned were the opportunity to do something else while studying, being able to sleep longer, having no other option and being able to work on a computer.

Out of the 44 students, 17 answered ‘No’ to question (22). Seven out of them thought that there was no significant difference between distance learning of English and in-classroom learning of English. Four students stated that they would just rather be in a normal in-class lesson, but only one specified why, stating that ‘it was too complicated and contact teaching is better’ (“se oli monimutkaista ja lähikoulu on parempi”). Two students had replied ‘No’ because they did not like English in general. Another two students had written that it was not something they liked, out of whom one elaborated that they found both to be boring. Two students did not or could not elaborate.

Question (23) was an open-ended question. The students were asked what they thought was best about the distance learning of English. The answers to this question varied quite a bit. The most common answers were that they got to be alone, that the surroundings were more peaceful without the noisy classroom or that they got to work at their own pace. For example, one student wrote: “sai olla yksin ja pystyi keskittymään paremmin” (‘I got to be alone and I was able to focus better’), while another answered “sai tehdä tehtävät ilman meluavaa luokaa” (‘I got to do the exercises without the noisy class’). All of these answers came up in multiple other questions as well, which makes them particularly important and interesting. Many of the students mentioned being able to stay home and not having to go to the school as well. Seven students mentioned exercises, and how they felt easier and how they were able to complete them faster. Other things that were mentioned included being able to do the exercises on a computer instead of the book, being able to work with friends and being

able to ask help from a parent. In addition to these, one student replied that everything was nice and another did not like anything at all.

Question (24), in contrast, inquired what was most challenging during the distance learning of English. Ten students mentioned the exercises they had had to do during the distance learning period. They were either too hard or they had not understood the exercise altogether.

“välillä jos oli joitaki vaikeita tehtäviä”

‘sometimes when there were some difficult exercises’

“no tehtävät kun ei jotain ymmärtänyt”

‘well the exercises when I didn’t understand something’

Some students mentioned that the teacher was not there to help or that it was hard to reach the teacher to ask for help. For example, a student replied: “jos joku asia oli epäselvä niin siihen oli vaikea saada vastausta” (‘if something was unclear it was difficult to get an answer to that’). In relation to this, some mentioned that studying alone was the most challenging part either because it was difficult or because it was lonely. In addition, not liking to translate chapters through a microphone, being around the family too much, and not knowing always how to upload the exercises onto the learning platform were mentioned. However, many students did not find anything particularly challenging during the distance learning of English.

Question (25) was an open-ended one and the students could respond to it, by writing freely how they had experienced the distance learning of English. The vast majority of the students (n=34) either liked the distance learning, or thought that it was quite similar to in-class study. The main reasons mentioned for liking the experience included the ability to work at one’s own pace and getting to work in a peaceful environment. A few regarded distance learning as more boring, but did not specify why that is. Some also mentioned that it was a little challenging, either because they could not ask for help as easily as in a normal in-classroom situation, or because they had a lot of other distance classes to attend to as well.

6.2 Exercises and teacher support during the distance learning period of English

This section will report on the answers given to the second part of the questionnaire (questions 10-18) which inquired about the exercises that the students had during the distance learning period of English and the teacher support they had received. These questions are related to the third research question “How did the students manage to complete their learning exercises?” and the fourth research question (How did the students find the teacher support during the distance learning period?).

Questions (10) and (11) were connected as the 10th question compared the number of exercises in distance learning and regular in-classroom learning, and the 11th inquired the students whether they managed to complete all of their exercises. Thirty of the students (68%) felt they had the same number of exercises during the distance-learning period as they do normally. Nine (21%) felt that there were more and five (11%) felt there were less than regular in-classroom situation. Almost all of the students (42) replied ‘Yes’ to question 11, stating that they could complete all of their exercises. Only two replied ‘No’ and out of them one could not elaborate why and the other one’s reason was unrelated to English or the exercises themselves.

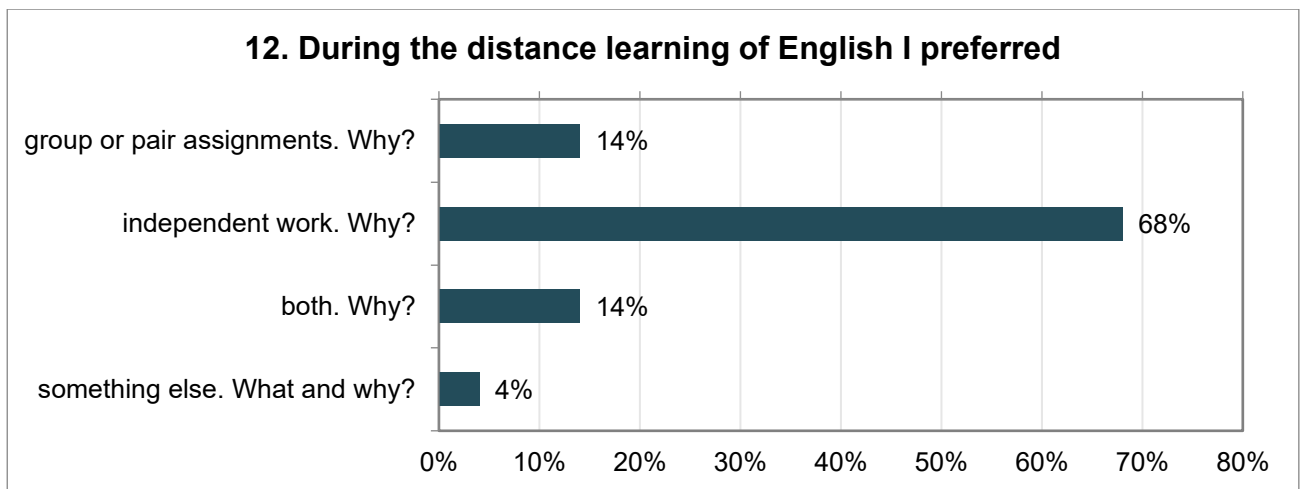


Figure 2. Preferred exercise types during the distance learning of English

In question (12) the students were asked whether they preferred group and pair exercises, independent study, both of them or some other form of study during the distance learning of English. As can be seen in Figure 2, almost 70 percent (30) of the students preferred studying alone. The most common reasons for this were, again, the ability to work in peace and to focus better as the students felt they learned better alone. One student also mentioned that they liked not having to talk and another stated that they are not as social and thus like to work alone. Two stated that they had no pair or groupwork during the distance-studying period and hence chose independent study. Another two could not elaborate why they preferred working alone.

Six students (14%) replied that they preferred working in pairs or groups. The most common reason for this was that the students liked to work with their friends, as opposed to doing the exercises alone, and one student also mentioned that they think that in a group they get more done. For example, one student replied: “Koska sai tehdä kavereitten kans yhdessä tehtäviä” (‘Because I got to do the exercises together with my friends’).

Six students (14%) also answered that they like working both alone and with someone else. These students enjoyed the variation, although they did prefer groupwork a little more over working alone. Two students (4%) replied ‘something else’, but they had not elaborated what or why.

In question (13) the students were asked whether they were capable of doing most of their homework on their own during the distance learning period of English. Out of the 44 students 95% replied ‘Yes’. The two that said ‘No’ stated the reason to be that English is difficult for them.

Questions (14) and (15) focused on teacher support. Question (14) was a statement where the students were asked whether they felt like the teacher had helped them sufficiently during the live video classes. Only 18 students had participated live video classes and out of these students, 94% felt the teacher had helped enough. Only one student answered ‘No’, but could not elaborate why.

Question (15) was the following statement: ‘I felt like I needed more help and support from the teacher during the distance learning period of English (e.g. With exercises and new subjects to be learned)’. Five students replied ‘Yes’, which is in line with the other questions’ replies as well. These five students were asked a follow-up question where they had to elaborate on why and what kind of help they felt they would have needed more of. According to them, they needed more help, because they did not know what to do, how to do something and because it was challenging to learn the new subjects or topics immediately without additional help from the teacher. Almost 90% of the students, however, answered ‘No’. They, too, were asked to explain why they felt like they did not need more help. The majority stated that English or the exercises were easy for them, or that they did get enough help from the teacher. Some mentioned that they had got help from their parents as well. Five of the students could not elaborate or had answered clearly in a joking manner.

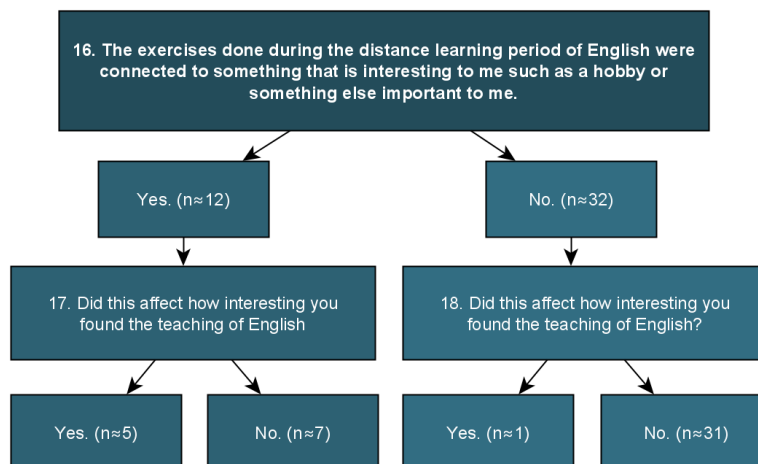


Figure 3. Summary of answers given to questions 16-18

Questions 16-18 (illustrated in Figure 3) aimed to chart the students' interest and whether it was kept up during the distance learning period through exercises. In question (16), the students replied 'Yes' or 'No' to the following statement: 'The exercises done during the distance learning period of English were connected to something that is interesting to me such as a hobby or something else important to me.' Twelve students (27%) out of 44 replied 'Yes'. On the follow-up question (question 17) of whether this affected their interest in the teaching, seven out of the 12 students (58%) answered 'No', whereas five (42%) answered 'Yes'. They elaborated on their answer by stating that when the subject is interesting to them on a personal level they enjoy studying more, the exercises are easier, it helps them with their hobby (or the object of interest) and that it makes it easier to focus on the topic: "Jos aihe on mieleinen sitä on kiva opiskella." ('If the subject is pleasant it is nice to study it').

Thirty-two students (73%) replied 'No' to the 16th question and were further directed to question (18) that was the same question as question (17). Out of these students thirty-one (97%) replied 'No' to the follow-up question (question 18) about whether their interest in the topic at hand affected their overall interest in the exercises. Only one replied 'Yes' but did not elaborate how or why it affected their interest.

6.3 Students perceptions of the platforms used during the distance learning period of English

In the last section of the questionnaire (questions 19-21), students were asked about the platforms they used during the distance learning period of English. In question 19 (Figure 4) they were asked to indicate all of the platforms they had used from a list of platforms. In addition, they were asked to add other platforms that they had used, but that were not listed. The listed platforms were WhatsApp, Teams, Zoom, YouTube, Arttu and Quizlet. Two platforms that the students named themselves were Vuolearning and Google Classroom. Vuolearning is very similar to any other internet based course platform such as Moodle, Peda.net or Google Classroom. The teacher can add files (e.g. Word, PowerPoint, PDF) on the platform and it will convert them to a more visually pleasing page. The teacher can also add pictures, multiple choice tests or videos on the platform. Arttu – the other maybe less-known platform – in turn, is a mobile app used in Finland. It can be used together with many of the English textbook series used in Finnish schools. Through Arttu students can for example listen to the texts and songs found in the textbooks.

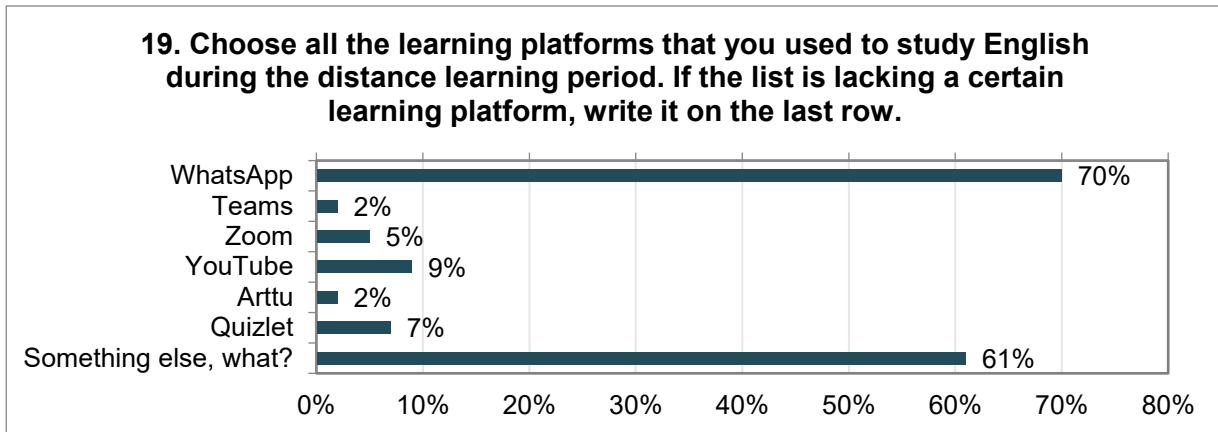


Figure 4. Platforms used during the distance learning period

All of the above platforms were used in distance learning. As seen in Figure 4, the most used ones named in the list were WhatsApp and YouTube, although WhatsApp was overwhelmingly most commonly used. In addition, students had named Vuolearning, Google Classroom and Google Meet several times under the “Something else, what?” option. One student had mentioned Office365.

In question (20) the students were asked which of the platforms supported their learning best and why. Eleven of the students (25%) named Google Classroom and/or Google Meet. Their reasons for these two choices varied between them being easy to use or familiar to the students. In addition, one student mentioned that through Google Meet they could get help from the teacher.

Vuolearning was mentioned by six students (14%). The reasons for this choice varied quite a bit. Some felt that it was easy to use, others thought it was easy to share videos and texts there, and yet others said that it was the only platform they really used and that they could get the needed information from there, such as the day’s homework and the teaching material. One of the students wrote: “Vuolearning, koska siellä voitiin jakaa videoita, ja tekstejä joissa selitettiin opetus materiaali hyvin.” (‘Vuolearning because there one could share videos and texts in which the teaching material was explained well’).

WhatsApp was also chosen by 18 students (41%). Again, the reasons for choosing this platform varied. The most common reason was that it was easy to send pictures of the exercises they had completed to the teacher, and then the teacher could help them and tell if something was not correct. Some even mentioned that through WhatsApp they could call the teacher and ask for help. A couple of students also felt that WhatsApp supported them the most as through the app they could ask help from friends. In addition to these platforms, one student mentioned Office365 and elaborated by saying that it was simply better than WhatsApp. One student chose Zoom because through Zoom it was easy to talk to the teacher and ask for help. One student chose Teams based on the same criteria.

In question (21), on the other hand, the students were asked to name the platforms they felt supported their learning the least, and why that was the case. The majority of the students (25 students) thought no platform was significantly worse than the others were. Five (11%) students mentioned some platform, because they had not used it all and had no experience of it. Six students (14%) wrote that they only used one of the platforms so they could not compare. Four students (9%) thought WhatsApp supported their learning the least. Three of them thought it was not very useful as it only stated the homework and nothing else. One of them said that it supported their learning the least but was still very useful. Two students mentioned Arttu, but did not or could not specify why.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main research question in this study was *How did the students perceive distance learning?*. The questionnaire was designed to find an answer to this question through the following four sub-questions

Compared to regular classroom situation how engaging and interesting did the students find the distance learning?,

How did the students manage to complete their learning exercises?,

How did the students find the teacher support during the distance learning period?, and

How did the students find the learning platforms?.

According to the results of the present study, the students in the two 5th grade classes who responded to the questionnaire experienced the distance learning mostly positively. Compared to regular classroom learning, they considered distance learning either as quite similar or positively different. Only a few students missed normal in-classroom learning, and out of them, only one stated a proper reason why that is the case. The vast majority of the respondents were able to complete their exercises fairly well on their own, and had help from the teacher when they needed it. Most of the learning platforms were also appreciated by the students, as only a couple of them had negative comments related to the limitations or unfamiliarity of the platforms.

Nowadays nearly everything in teaching can be conducted remotely as the internet offers us a useful tool to connect with people all around the world. As Lee and McLoughlin (2010: 62) have stated, the internet functions as a good platform for distance education as well. According to them, when advanced technology is combined with appropriate pedagogical approaches and strategies, it is possible to create excellent opportunities to enrich and enhance the scope of distance education (2010: 62). Distance education has been studied quite widely in the upper grades, such as high schools and universities (e.g. White 2006; Oliver, Kellogg and Patel 2012; Genc, Kulusakli, and Aydin 2016). However, there are no studies in the lower secondary school, which is why the present study's aim was to find out how the students of two randomly chosen 5th grade classes perceived the distance learning of English during the distance learning period of March-April of 2020. The chosen research method was a questionnaire: with it, the aim was to collect students' experiences and thoughts on the matter.

The results show that mostly the students considered the distance studying of English pleasant and even interesting. As mentioned before, the students had mostly either positive or neutral feelings towards distance learning of English. The reason for the neutral feelings were that the students thought that there was no significant difference between distance learning and normal in-classroom learning. Positive feelings, on the other hand, rose from the fact that distance learning offered something new and interesting to the students. As a finding, this was different from those in, for example, Oliver, Kellogg and Patel's (2012) study, or Beese's (2014) study. Both studies found that the upper secondary school students whom they studied had more negative, than positive, feelings towards their online language learning experience. On the other hand, Yang and Chen (2007) found in their study that the respondents had preferred technology-enhanced study more, because it required more self-control in their studies and the learning was more diverse.

However, in line with the studies by Kellogg, Oliver and Patel (2012) and Beese (2014), the younger students who participated in the present study had many similar experiences. For example, many students in these previous studies brought up the need for more teacher support. Similarly, in the present study some students felt like they would have needed more help and support from the teacher. However, in the present study only a minority of the students stated that they needed more help and support (in Question 15). Both in the present study and in that by Kellogg, Oliver and Patel (2012) some of the students were of the opinion that one of the issues they had with distance learning was that they could not get help from the teacher as fast as in a normal in-classroom situation, which made their learning harder. In fact, in both studies a portion of the students thought that they did not learn as well in distance education as they did under regular face-to-face teaching circumstances. Interestingly, however, when the older students in the study by Kellogg, Oliver and Patel (2012) were asked about how they felt the teachers had succeeded, many thought they had done well. Similarly, most of the students in the present study did not have any complaints about the teacher's performance.

Another interesting observation about the results of the present study is that, even though the students are relatively young and inexperienced in English, they felt that they succeeded well in their exercises. Only a minority of them stated that they had had issues with completing their homework or other exercises during the distance-learning period. This is different from the findings in the study by Kellogg, Oliver and Patel (2012) according to which many of the students felt that they would have needed more assistance from the teacher with their exercises, such as more precise instructions. Related to this, another interesting finding in the present study is that most of the students enjoyed working alone. This is something Barbour, McLaren and Zhang (2012) found in their study as well. It seems that the students liked the freedom of working on their own and of being able to display their

ability to succeed on their own. Similarly, in the present study some of the students had explained in their open answers that it was quite interesting to try to do the exercises on their own. Because of their young age and limited knowledge of English, this task could have posed a problem, but with the students in these two classes it did not.

Regarding the platforms used during the distance-learning period of English, the students had mostly positive experiences. Many students liked using Google Meet and Google Classroom in general, as those were familiar to them and they felt they could get help easily from the teacher on these platforms. WhatsApp was also preferred for the same reasons. As a finding, this is in line with previous studies, according to which the students have often preferred synchronous platforms and teaching methods because this way they can easily ask questions in the moment and receive actual live teaching from the teacher (e.g. Kellogg, Oliver and Patel 2012).

An important issue that should be taken into account when looking at the results of the present study is that one of the two classes under investigation had had no live video teaching, and therefore almost no opportunities for oral communication either. This contradicts the Finnish National Core Curriculum For Basic Education in which it is clearly stated that the students should be given ample opportunities to use the language through play and song, for example, in order to learn experiment with their growing language skills (2014: 221). In addition, according to the Core Curriculum, the teaching of English should “emphasize pair and groupwork as well as learning together in different kind of learning environments” (2014: 221). It is an interesting point to consider, whether the arrangements for these students’ learning has reached the learning goals stated in the National Core Curriculum during the distance learning period.

It is also worth noting that the respondents’ answers highlighted the importance of the peaceful environment that the students had when working from home. This was a surprising aspect of distance study that the students themselves brought up. Many of them felt that the best part of studying alone and away from the classroom was the peace and quiet the home environment provided. Some mentioned that they could concentrate better on learning, because there was no noisy classroom around them. It is impossible to say whether these answers came from only one classroom or from both classrooms, but it seems like many students appreciated the calm atmosphere was appreciated by many of the students.

In addition, it was interesting that so many of the students actually preferred working alone, instead of in pairs or groups. In previous studies on distance language learning it has been discovered that many students have missed the sense of community and working together with their peers (e.g.

Kellogg, Oliver and Patel 2012; Barbour, McLaren and Zhang 2012). In the present study, however, only a few students mentioned that they missed doing pair or groupwork, and only a few brought up that during the synchronous teaching (live video classes) the best part was that they got to talk to their peers.

There were some limitations to this study. Firstly, the number of students who answered the questionnaire was only 44, which is far too few to draw any conclusions on how all the 5th grade students in Finland experienced the distance learning of English. Secondly, the questionnaire did not cover the students' opinions on how or what they would have wanted to be different in order for the experience to have been better. This is something that could be studied in the future, as no one can tell whether young students will have to study remotely at some point again, and if that happens it will be important to know what should be done in order for the students to learn best. Lastly, the students who took part in the study are indeed very young and therefore the reliability of their answers can be questionable. After all, with younger students the chance of misunderstanding a question is higher. Perhaps in the future studies on this topic with young students, it would be useful to collect the data not only through a questionnaire, but also through interviews. This way it would be possible to get more in-depth answers and to clarify that the students actually have understood the questions correctly. In addition, it is important to remember that the data were collected from students who had been placed in distance education quite suddenly. Neither the students or the teachers had any time to prepare for this, and therefore the results could be different if the same situation happened now that everyone is more or less used to distance studying and teaching.

Although there were some limitations to this study, the study nevertheless managed to provide useful information on young students' experiences on distance language learning. The main question in this study was *How did the students experience the distance learning period?*, which was investigated more through a series of sub-questions. Despite the respondents' young age, the students' answers to the questionnaire were quite detailed and reflective. This also goes to show that the questions in the questionnaire were well formulated, despite the initial issues with them. Even though the results are not generalizable due to the small sample size, the study succeeds in shedding light on young students' experiences on the matter of distance learning of English and indicates that there could be more to research on this topic.

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8 APPENDICES

8.1 Questionnaire

OSA I

1. Opin englannin etäopetuksessa yhtä hyvin kuin normaalissa englannin luokkaopetuksessa. *

- Kyllä.
- En. Miksi et?

2. Vaikuttiko yksin opiskelu siihen, miten mielenkiintoisena koit englannin etäopiskelun? *

- Kyllä. Miten?
- Ei.

3. Vaikuttiko yksin opiskelu siihen, miten hyvin jaksot opiskella englantia etäopiskelujakson aikana? *

- Kyllä. Miten?
- Ei.

4. Koin että englannin etäopiskelu oli *

- Haastavampaa kuin normaali englannin opiskelu. Miksi?
- Yhtä haastavaa kuin normaali englannin opiskelu.
- Vähemmän haastavaa kuin normaali englannin opiskelu. Miksi?

5. Oliko teillä englannin etäopetuksen aikana live video-oppitunteja (esim. Zoomin tai Teamsin kautta)? *

- Kyllä.
- Ei.

6. Olivatko englannin live video-oppitunnit hyödyllisiä? *

- Kyllä. Miksi?
- Ei. Miksi?

7. Verrattuna normaaliin englannin luokahuoneopetukseen, englannin live video-oppitunneilla keskittyminen oli *

- Helpompaa. Miksi?
- Samanlaista
- Vaikeampaa. Miksi?

8. Kaipaitko englannin etäopetusjakson aikana normaalissa englannin luokkahuoneopetuksessa tehtyjä pari- tai ryhmätehtäviä? *

- Kyllä. Miksi?
- En. Miksi?

9. Pystyin näyttämään taitoni englannin kielen etäopetuksessa yhtä hyvin kuin normaalissa englannin luokkahuoneopetuksessa. *

- Kyllä
- En. Miksi et?

OSA II

10. Verrattuna normaaliin englannin luokkahuoneopetukseen, tehtäviä englannin etäopetuksen aikana oli *

- Enemmän
- Saman verran
- Vähemmän

11. Jaksoin tehdä kaikki englannin tehtävät. *

- Kyllä.
- En. Miksi et?

12. Englannin etäopiskelussa pidin eniten *

- ryhmä- tai paritehtävistä. Miksi?
- itsenäisestä opiskelusta. Miksi?
- molemmista. Miksi?
- Joku muu, mikä ja miksi?

13. Pystyin tekemään suurimman osan englannin kotitehtävistä etäopetusjakson aikana ilman muiden apua. *

- Kyllä.
- En. Miksi et?

14. Opettaja auttoi englannin live video-oppitunnilla tehdyissä tehtävissä riittävästi. *

- Kyllä.
- Ei. Miksi ei?

15. Olisin kaivannut lisää apua ja tukea opettajalta englannin etäopetusjakson aikana (esim. tehtävien ja uusien opeteltavien asioiden kanssa). *

- Kyllä. Miksi ja millaista apua?
- Ei. Miksi ei?

16. Etäopetusjakson englannin tehtävät liittyivät johonkin minulle mieleiseen asiaan kuten harrastukseen tai muuhun minulle tärkeään asiaan. *

- Kyllä.
- Ei.

17. Vaikuttiko tämä siihen miten mielenkiintoista englannin opetus oli? *

- Kyllä. Miten?
- Ei.

18. Vaikuttiko tämä siihen miten mielenkiintoista englannin opetus oli? *

- Kyllä. Miten?
- Ei.

OSA III

19. Valitse seuraavista oppimisalustoista ne, joita käytitte englannin etäopiskeluun. Jos listasta puuttuu joku alusta, lisää se viimeiseen kohtaan.

*

- WhatsApp
- Teams
- Zoom
- YouTube
- Arttu
- Quizlet
- Joku muu, mikä?

20. Mitkä yllä mainituista alustoista tukivat englannin oppimistasi mielestäsi parhaiten ja miksi? *

21. Mitkä yllä mainituista oppimisalustoista tukivat englannin oppimistasi huonoiten ja miksi? *

OSA IV

22. Englannin etäopiskelu oli mielenkiintoista *

- Kyllä. Miksi?
- Ei. Miksi ei?

23. Mikä oli englannin etäopiskelussa parasta? *

24. Entäpä haastavinta? *

25. Kerro tähän vapaasti millaisena olet kokenut englannin etäopiskelun? *