

METHODS IN EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE FINNISH CONTEXT

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Tämän gradun aiheena on englannin kielen varhennettu opetus, siinä käytetyt metodit ja opettajien asenteet varhennettua kielenopetusta kohtaan. Kaikissa Suomen kouluissa on vuodesta 2020 pitänyt aloittaa varhainen kielenopetus jo ensimmäiseltä luokalta lähtien. Tämä uudistus lisäsi kaksi vuosiviikkotuntia ensimmäiselle ja toiselle luokka-asteelle. Halusin tutkia opettajien näkemyksiä ja heidän käyttämiään metodeja opetuksessa, sillä uudistuksen tuoreuden vuoksi tutkimusta aiheesta ei juurikaan vielä ole.</p> <p>Tutkimus tehtiin laadullisena tutkimuksena haastattelemalla kolmea opettajaa, jotka ovat eri kaupungeista, mutta opettavat kaikki englannin kieltä ensimmäisellä luokalla. Tutkimuksen kannalta oli tärkeä haastatella opettajia, joilla oli kokemusta myös kolmannella luokalla alkaneesta englannin opetuksesta, jotta ensimmäisen ja kolmannen luokan englannin kielen opetuksen aloitusta pystyttiin kuvailemaan molemmilla luokka-asteilla. Haastattelut toteutettiin etäyhteyden välityksellä tai kasvotusten, jonka jälkeen ne litteroitiin ja anonymisoitiin käyttämällä pseudonyymejä. Haastatteludataa analysoitiin kvalitatiivisen teema-analyysin avulla. Haastatteluja vertailtiin toisiinsa, samankaltaisten ja eroavien teemojen esiin saamiseksi.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittivat, että opettajien metodit olivat yleisesti ottaen aktiivisia, hauskoja ja leikillisiä.</p> <p>Koska tavoitteena on lisätä kieltenoppimismotivaatiota, merkittävänä asiana pidettiin kieliaineen tuontia lapsen tasolle esimerkiksi leikin, pelin tai laulun kautta, jolloin oppiminen on mielekästä ja mukaansatempaavaa. Perinteisiä ”koulumaisia” metodeja, kuten kokeita, testejä ja lukemista pyrittiin käyttämään vähemmän tai ei ollenkaan, sillä varhaisen kielenopetuksen vaatimukset ovat niin vähäiset, ettei niille ole tarvetta, eikä niitä juuri muissakaan aineissa yleensä käytetä ensimmäisillä luokilla. Aineistosta kumpusi myös muita mielenkiintoisia havaintoja. Kaikki haastatellut kertoivat muun muassa kolmasluokkalaisten itesesensuurista tai ”filteristä”, jota ekaluokkalaisilla ei vielä ole havaittavissa, mikä helpottaa heidän oppimistaan.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittavat, että toiminnalliset, leikilliset ja lapselle ominaiset tavat oppia ovat haastateltujen opettajien mielestä toimivimpia. Koska varhennetussa kieltenopetuksessa vasta synnytetään motivaatiota kielenopiskeluun ja kerätään suppeaa sanavarastoa tulevaa kieltenopiskelua varten, nämä metodit vaikuttavat perustelluilta ja sopivilta.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The Finnish National Agency for Education made an addition in 2018 to the 2014 curriculum, which is used in all Finnish primary schools. Before, all schools had to provide first foreign language lessons to students starting from the 3rd grade at the latest. Still, some municipalities offered first foreign language education already in 2nd or 1st grade. Nonetheless, many schools did not offer foreign language classes until 3rd grade. This has now changed. This addition to the elementary level core curriculum is described as historical since the two weekly hours are added to the minimum annual hours in 1st and 2nd grade (Kieliverkosto 2018). Therefore, these hours are not taken out of another subject, but added on top of the existing ones, which does not happen often.

It has become quite well known in the past decades that young learners tend to learn some things much easier than older learners. One of these things is language, as Nikolov (2009: 2) claims, “Children before a certain age seem to pick up a new language with ease and success, whereas older learners often fail to do so.” Although I would not go so far as to say older learners fail to learn new languages, it is clear that the younger the learner, the easier and seemingly effortlessly they learn. This is many times explained through different theories focusing on sensitive or critical periods in the child’s development (Nikolov: 2009: 2). In fact, this is such a supported theory these days, that the Finnish core curriculum change was affected by it, as can be seen from the minister of education’s statement:

Children have an exceptional ability to learn new things. Upon the decision that was made, the sensitivity period of learning languages can

be harnessed better than before, says the minister of education Sanni Grahn-Laasonen. (Kieliverkosto 2018)

Lapsilla on hämmästyttävä kyky oppia uutta. Tehdyn päätöksen myötä kielten oppimisen herkkyykskausi voidaan hyödyntää entistä paremmin, opetusministeri Sanni Grahn-Laasonen sanoo.

Therefore, this addition includes early language learning as mandatory from first grade starting in 2020, unlike earlier, when it started in third grade (at the latest). This change has impacted the way early foreign language teaching in Finnish elementary schools is done these days. Nonetheless, the decision was made not that long ago and so there have not been many studies carried out on the topic, especially on the teachers' attitudes and ideas. The methods have had to go through some changes as younger learners have different needs as well as a different skills. Teachers have no doubt had to create new ways to teach certain topics and ponder on how, why, and when to use different methods. It will be beneficial for new early language teachers to hear from other early language teachers how they have reasoned their methods and learning objectives, especially in the coming years, when this change is still quite new. Therefore, this thesis will focus on early language teaching methods and the teachers ideas and attitudes concerning the start of second language teaching change from 3rd grade to 1st grade.

The research questions are the following:

1. How do teachers feel about language teaching starting already in 1st grade?
2. What methods are preferred in early language teaching in Finland?

To answer these questions, I interviewed three teachers, all from three different Finnish elementary schools. The interview had predetermined questions, but it was flexible and more like a conversation. This was so that the teachers felt comfortable expanding on any topic they would like to but did not necessarily answer specific questions.

In the second chapter I explain the theoretical background of the study. I describe the Finnish core curriculum and what its implications are, as well as introduce some early language teaching methods that I will compare the interview answers against. In the third chapter I give details on the methodology and study process. Then, in the fourth chapter I go through the findings, give direct quotes from the teachers,

and analyze them. And lastly, in the fifth chapter I discuss the results and implications of this study.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The early language learning reform is still very new and therefore under researched in Finnish context. In this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical background of this study. I will first explore the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) as well as the added early language learning section or Perusopetuksen vuosiluokkien 1-2 A1-kielen opetussuunnitelman perusteet (2018). I will then introduce and discuss three methods or theories that fit the curriculum; positive pedagogy, language showering/immersion, and active learning.

2.1 Curriculum

Although some schools have had language teaching from second or first grade before it became mandatory, after 2020 all students have started “A1” or first foreign language in first grade. This added part of the curriculum highlights “creating a positive attitude for learning languages, trusting one’s skills and using one’s low language skills bravely” (Perusopetuksen vuosiluokkien 1-2 A1-kielen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2018: 25) as the main goal. The same document also says the following:

Before starting A1 language studies, children can be introduced to the languages made available by the education provider by having language showering in preschool or in the fall semester of first grade, if A1 language starts in the spring term. (Perusopetuksen vuosiluokkien 1-2 A1-kielen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2018: 7)

Jo ennen kielen A1-oppimäärän opetuksen alkamista lapsia voidaan tutustuttaa alustavasti opetuksen järjestäjän tarjoamiin kieliin

järjestämällä esimerkiksi kielisuihkuja esiopetuksessa tai syksyllä ensimmäisellä vuosiluokalla, jos opetus alkaa kevätlukukaudella.

The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, hereafter NCC, which was published in 2014 highlights that the elementary education prepares students for life-long learning, which is “an elemental part of building a decent life” (NCC 2014: 23). The goal of producing life-long learners, in other words giving the tools for further learning as well as the interest to do so, is mentioned several times in the document and therefore can be seen as one of the core elements of Finnish elementary education. NCC also brings up culture, cultural identity, learning about other cultures, and respecting other cultures in several sections, as well as in other related documents such as the 2018 addition. And as the world is and is continuously becoming more and more heterogeneous, also culturally, it is an important part of basic education to teach young learners about different kinds of diversities (NCC 2014: 24-25).

The concept of learning defined in NCC (2014: 26) firstly brings up the idea of a student as an active agent – students learn to set goals and resolve problems, both individually and as a part of a group. Additionally, this idea of activity is followed with further mention of the importance of language, corporeality, and the use of different senses in learning. It is also included that “positive emotional experiences, the joy of learning and creative activities promote learning and inspire the pupils to develop their competence” (NCC 2014: 26).

Secondly, learning is seen as a process which happens “in interaction with other pupils, the teachers and other adults, and various communities and learning environments” (NCC 2014: 26). In other words, learning is not just one’s own journey, but rather happens individually as well as together. Learning together, according to the conception is seen as necessary because it “promotes the pupils’ skills in creative and critical thinking and problem-solving and their ability to understand different viewpoints” (NCC 2014: 26).

Thirdly, the section mentions that “the interests, appraisals, working approaches and emotions of the pupils, as well as their experiences and ideas of themselves as learners, influence their learning process and motivation” (NCC 2014: 27). Therefore, it is not surprising that the significance of encouraging guidance is listed as a key element in creating a positive and able self-image, which in turn allow students to believe in their future as well as widen their interests. This guidance, of course,

includes feedback described as “versatile positive and realistic feedback” (NCC 2014: 27).

To summarize, the conception of learning focuses on learners as active agents, active methods and interaction, students’ positive and able self-image, as well as positive attitude towards learning and motivation for life-long learning. Therefore, the most relevant theoretical framework for early language learning method are active learning, language showering/immersion and positive psychology/pedagogy, since learning should be enjoyable and active to keep young learners interested and to create positive experiences that inevitably lead to higher motivation and language learning in the later years.

Additionally, since the majority of children choose English as an A2 Language, Finnish National Agency for Education launched a project on early language teaching (Kielenopetuksen varhentamisen kärkihanke). The project is not only focused on making sure different languages are learned, but also it strives for improving language teaching and adding more languages to the ones provided. In a follow-up report on the project Huhta and Leontjev’s (2019: 18) research found that most teachers (70%+) taught English as early language followed by German (~10%). This percentage difference shows that English is by far the most common language used in early language teaching, which is one of the reasons for this project - to increase interest in languages other than just English. Nonetheless, most teachers (91%) had a positive outlook on the change of moving language learning to earlier grades or even into preschool, which shows that teachers generally support this change (Huhta & Leontjev 2019: 25).

2.2 Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is a relatively recent branch of psychology, which has received some attention also outside the academia. It is most commonly reported as originating from Martin Seligman in 1998 after he became the president of American Psychological Association and as a term, positive psychology was first used by Abraham Maslow (MacIntyre 2016: 4-5). The basic idea is the focus on “positive emotion, positive character traits, and institutions that enable individuals to flourish” (MacIntyre 2016: 7). Often, psychology is seen as a field of studying the abnormal, and how to cure or prevent certain outcomes. Of course there are other sides to psychology as a field, but especially when asking laypeople to describe psychology as a field these aspects are the ones that, in general, tend to get more attention.

In fact, according to Seligman (2005: 3), psychology focused mostly on healing after World War II. He goes on to explain that before the war, there were three missions of psychology “curing mental illness, making the lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent” (Seligman 2005: 4), but that after the war, only one prevailed, curing mental illness. This re-imagining of what psychology can be has been in the works for a longer time, but only in the recent decade has it become more popular and therefore more known and as a result, more often applied in different areas of life. Therefore, it is interesting to look at the traditionally positive side of psychology.

What I mean by traditionally is, in general, the things seen as positive such as comfortability and low stress, which in some cases, may not actually lead to such good results and therefore, they may not be so clearly positive after all. As Lazarus (2003, cited in MacIntyre 2016: 7) pointed out there are possible problems with dividing emotions to either positive or negative emotions, so “there is a positive side to negative emotion and vice versa – they are best viewed as two sides of the same coin”. There is a general understanding that for many people, a little stress keeps one alert and focused. So the line between negative and positive is not as black and white as we may think, but that is why I used the words “traditionally positive” to distance myself from making a harsh generalisation.

Positive psychology then focuses on the positive sides, the sides of humanity that “go right”, or more broadly speaking, it “focuses on wellbeing, happiness, flow, personal strengths, wisdom, creativity, imagination and characteristics of positive groups and institutions” (Hefferon and Boniwell 2011: 2). In other words, in its core it focuses on the positive and good qualities in life that can strengthen us to persevere and develop in our lives instead of only trying to repair the damage that is already done. Seligman explains positive psychology in the following way:

The aim of positive psychology is to catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life. To redress the previous imbalance, we must bring the building of strength to the forefront in the treatment and prevention of mental illness. (Seligman 2005: 3)

At the individual level it is about positive personal traits – the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future-mindedness, high talent,

and wisdom. At the group level it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic (Gillham & Seligman, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, cited in Seligman 2005: 3).

So what is it that motivates people, what makes them successful and happy? How do we help students achieve moments of flow and happiness, and on the longer run, optimism and hope (Hefferon and Boniwell 2011: 3)? This is especially interesting from the perspective of language teachers of young learners, since often they are the first ones to introduce the target language to students in a systematic and purposeful way.

Positive pedagogy or positive education, then, is the application of the ideas and methods of positive psychology into education, and the general idea is to focus on the positive and bring out the best qualities out of each student (Leskisenoja & Sandberg 2019: 11-12). By teaching the students welfare skills, which will help them throughout their lives, students are able to “enforce their active agency in promoting well-being (Leskisenoja & Sandberg 2019: 11-12). According to Leskisenoja and Sandberg, when asked about what parents want their children to learn in school, the answers tend to be related to happiness and well-being – they tend to have an understanding that these skills related to happiness and well-being are meaningful life skills that help the child in the future. Therefore, it is easy to see why positive pedagogy methods tend to be included in all levels of education, also in early education.

In fact, when language acquisition experts were asked to fill in the following sentence: “Attempting to teach a target language without considering learners’ emotional and psychological dimensions is like (...) ” my personal favourites were: “teaching machines. (Ana Barcelos)” “... believing you can get a cardboard cut out to sing opera. (Sarah Mercer)” and “... experiencing a social lobotomy. (Tim Murphey)” (Gregersen 2016: 60). These answers clearly show that many language acquisition experts actually see teaching language without considering the emotional side as practically impossible. It would then make sense that teachers would have similar ideas on the issue. Of course, there are always those, who have different ideas or disagree completely, but I do think that these accounts make a lot of sense on a personal level to many people. When one is emotionally and physically well, it is much easier to learn and participate in class.

In a study where five participants participated in six different intervention methods – music, gratitude, altruism, pet, exercise, and laughter – the participants mostly had an increased mood to all interventions (Gregersen 2016: 61-71). Only one participant reported having no change in mood with altruism and pet interventions. Interestingly, gratitude and altruism affected the mood least, while exercise and laughter got the highest mood increase. Still, it is important to note that these results are the means of all answers and individual differences were reported in all categories. Gregersen (2016: 72) concludes the report of the study with a summary: “Learners who replace negative-narrowing thoughts and experiences with positive-broadening ones, not only generate more enjoyment in the process, but also generate greater stamina for the long haul.”

Another study conducted in an Australian primary school found out that positive interventions have positive impact on the students’ motivation. The study was carried out in response to the way education is planned and focused on standardized testing asked, “What kinds of pedagogical practices can facilitate a positive experience of learning for students in the classroom?” (O’Brien & Blue 2017: 366). They studied this topic by setting up a project running for over 18 months where teachers and researchers worked in collaboration to improve practices, “it was an iterative and rigorous process of refinement, with practices and resources being shared yet consistently adjusted” (O’Brien & Blue 2017: 380). Results showed that the teachers found “the use of language to scaffold and positively boost their students’ general disposition” was “highly effective” (ibid.). They also described positive reception to the use of posters and reward cards, as well as making “specific learning goals” (ibid.) to encourage the students in their studies.

These studies show that there is a scientific basis for using positive interventions and methods in language classroom. Although there can be differences in which methods work best for different students, there seems not to be any indication that there would be a negative effect. Therefore, one could conclude that at the least, there is no harm done in applying positive pedagogy into schools. In general, though, the studies showed significant improvement in students’ mood and motivation, which are key ingredients in learning, and in the long run, fostering life-long learners.

2.3 Early Language Learning Methods – Language Bath and Language Showering

For this study, it is important to look at some of the methods used with young learners typically outside the school and curriculum. One method that is very popular in Finland these days is language showering. In fact, the city of Jyväskylä made it a part of the curriculum of early education in 2016. Originally, language showering was developed by language teachers who wanted to get children interested in languages (Kielisuihkutus esiopetuksessa), but currently it is used all around Finland, although mostly not to the extent it is in Jyväskylä, where it originates from. HundrED explains the method in their website in the following way:

Language showering is a method of foreign language teaching where preschool teachers, at times, use target languages during the children's everyday activities. The primary aim of the method is to provide positive experiences of languages and language learning. In the city of Jyväskylä, language showering has become a permanent activity, creating positive experiences for all involved! (Language Showering in Jyväskylä)

One of the benefits of the method is its convenience, as it is not tied to time or space and technically anyone can start language showering, since the showerer does not need to be fluent in the language. Basing her estimate on small studies done by language showering teacher students, Bärlund (2012) says that children will learn to recognize 60-80 words in 10 hours of language showering.

Another globally popular method, similar to language showering, is language bath or language immersion, where the young child is placed in an environment that is predominantly in the target language. In comparison to language showering, it is a more extreme version of early language learning and teaching, because the child is *immersed* into the target language environment, in other words, target language is used at all times, if possible. Language showering is still quite a new phenomenon, but language immersion is widely known and used in several different countries in the world (Sjöberg et al. 2018: 15).

In Finland, language immersion is usually called a language bath and there are several different types depending on how much of the foreign or target language is used. According to Sjöberg et al. (2018: 26), the three different types are language bath (50% or more in the target language), extensive bilingual education (25% or

more in the target language), and abridged bilingual education or language rich education (less than 25% in the target language). One could say that language showering belongs to the last type, but there is not a clear-cut line on how much the target language is actually used in language showering, since a big part of it is the natural language showering, where the target language is used when it feels natural to include it. This could mean that, for example English, is used 33% of the time, which then would fall under a different type. Also, when talking about these methods, people tend to use all terms interchangeably, unless they want to specify the extent of the target language use. Therefore, I distance myself from relying on the percentages to define the types, since I believe it is not needed in this thesis. I will instead refer to language showering, bath, or immersion when the methods most coincide with methods used in both language shower and bath. Nonetheless, I expect to find more similarities with language showering than language bath (in the higher percentages) in the methods used in 1st and 2nd grade. This is because, as mentioned earlier, the goal is to create a positive attitude towards learning languages, which means that the help of the mother tongue is important to create a comfortable learning experience.

Although both methods are used and have their advantages, I would suppose the Finnish pedagogy would better line up with language showering, or lower percentage version of immersion as it is less intense. In other words, the method is less stressful than language bath, because while in many cases effective, the immersion to a new language environment fully can be confusing and frustrating to the young learner, as it could be at any age. Also, language learning, such as the immersion, depending on how and where it is done, can also mean immersion to the new culture. As Bärlund et al. (2015: 81) point out “Language showering is also culture showering”. By cultural showering we refer to multicultural education, where in addition to being learning about the language, [the children] also learn the target community’s culture and geography. And diving into a different culture can be confusing or scary at first for the kids, such as in the case of immigrant children. Therefore, learner’s mother tongue and culture are comforting factors in language learning, even though new things are exciting.

2.4 Early Language Learning Methods - Active Learning

Active learning is an idea that is based on the theory of constructivism, so I will first introduce the idea behind constructivism. Constructivism is a theory which states

that “we are active creators of our own knowledge” (Olusegun 2015: 66), in other words, our knowledge is in a constant state of change, where we acquire new knowledge, adjust our previous knowledge, and when needed, abandon knowledge we find dated or incorrect. This process is inevitable in learning, because it is impossible to just transfer knowledge to students (Olusegun 2015: 66), the “receiving” person needs to be active in learning - receiving in quotes because the word itself has a connotation of passiveness. Olusegun explains this in the following way:

Learners will be constantly trying to derive their own personal mental model of the real world from their perceptions of that world. As they perceive each new experience, learners will continually update their own mental models to reflect the new information, and will, therefore, construct their own interpretation of reality. (Olusegun 2015: 66)

Piaget’s theory of constructivist learning, as any theory or model, has had support from research, but also those, who are skeptical. Still the concept of constructivist learning has been impactful in the field of education and the methods are widely in use (Olusegun 2015: 66.)

Therefore, active learning is an idea based on the constructivism theory, such as the name suggests – simply put, learners need to be active to learn. Many other ideas on learning “authentic learning, self-directed learning, self-regulated learning, independent learning, autonomous learning, problem solving and active learning” are quite similar in their goals and methods, but what connects these learning methods is the active role of the learner (Niemi 2002: 764). The learner is expected to be an active agent in their own learning career. This idea goes along well with the Finnish education goal of making life-long learners (NCC 2014; Perusopetuksen vuosiluokkien 1-2 A1-kielen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2018).

According to Olusegun (2015: 67) “In the most general sense, it [constructivism in learning] usually means encouraging students to use active techniques (experiments, real-world problem solving) to create more knowledge and then to reflect on and talk about what they are doing and how their understanding is changing.” In other words, using methods in which the student is encouraged to think, try, and reconstruct by themselves. This would also call for methods where it is difficult to be “passive”, if that is possible, so that the student is gently guided to becoming an active agent in their learning career. Also, if active learning is the way to go, we then need to “expose” the students to the material (Olusegun 2015: 67) - and as authentic material as possible - which is again a prerequisite for teaching according to the

Finnish curriculum (NCC 2014; Perusopetuksen vuosiluokkien 1-2 A1-kielen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2018).

Harmin and Toth (2006: 29-49) introduce five strategies that include the following:

1. "Action Flow Lessons", where the purpose is to keep students active and interested in the lesson by creating classes with active learning methods that "flow" well together.
2. "Teaching in Layers, Not Lumps", which simply means that topics are revisited often enough to learn the content, instead of expecting the students to know and remember the content taught once.
3. "Quick Pace", of which idea is to keep the pace fast enough to not compromise the attention of students, who already understood the content, in other words, keeping it moving.
4. "Efficient Classroom Structures", which includes making routines that students will learn to expect and therefore facilitate efficient teaching and learning.
5. "Personal Inspiring Power", which in its simplicity is the teacher's ability to inspire the students to do well.

Although these strategies are only some in a sea of other strategies, they show the idea of active learning theory utilized in education. I find these especially fall in line with the Finnish curriculum to a large extent. The active flow and efficient classroom structures are clearly encouraged in teaching. While quick pace may sound confusing in education (not everyone learns equally fast), it is similar to differentiating or individualizing the activities, as those who are more advanced should, according to the curriculum, still receive enough stimulating activity, while the slower learner can at the same time receive support in learning. The quick pace, in other words, does not mean rushing, but avoiding those times where the student is thinking what to do next, or listening to the teacher explaining the content again to someone who did not understand. Then, the teaching in layers is already incorporated into the Finnish curriculum, since the same or similar topics repeat throughout the school years, in order to revise and build on the existing knowledge, which is the basic idea of constructivism. Finally, the personal inspiring power is what all teachers should strive for, although this may be one of the harder strategies

to utilize if it is not something the teacher feels is natural. But as it is, motivating students is one of the teachers' tasks, especially in the earlier stages of learning – not to say it is not important in later years – but the building of motivation for learning does officially start from the early education.

To conclude, in this thesis, I will find out whether the teachers are using methods that, at least to some extent, correspond to the methods of language showering/immersion and the ideas of positive psychology and pedagogy as well as active learning ideology. Also, especially because the study is conducted in Finland, I presume that the theories or at least a broad understanding about these theories would be known by most teachers, since teacher autonomy is a significant aspect in Finnish teaching culture, as the following quote from the Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) demonstrates:

The core of teaching consists of four basic values: dignity, truthfulness, fairness and responsibility & freedom. (Kieliverkosto.fi 2018)

Therefore, it could be assumed that Finnish teachers are autonomous and life-long learners, too. Life-long learning then, would indicate that these teachers are up to date with the recent developments in teaching methods and also interested in applying them the way they feel fit for their students.

3 DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, I will discuss the aims of the study, as well as present the research questions. I will also describe the data, participants, and data collection and analyzing methods that are used in this study. Finally, I will justify the decisions made to reveal the thought process behind the choices.

This study focuses on the teachers' perspectives on early second language teaching and the methods used. In most cases this language will be English - although several other languages are offered in most areas - and for the purpose of this study, as it is a master's thesis in English subject, the focus will be on early English language teaching and learning. The research questions are the following:

1. How do teachers feel about language teaching starting already in 1st grade?
2. What methods are preferred in early language teaching in Finland?

To find answers to the research questions, three teachers were interviewed on the mentioned topics. The participating teachers took part in an individual interview that is semi-structured.

One of the pros of having an interview is that through interviewing the participants, it is possible to let them talk about the things they are experts on or know firsthand (Robson 1995: 227, cited in Hirsijärvi et al. 1997: 193). Also, because of the nature of the method, there is flexibility that many other methods may not have since the interviewer can redirect the interviewee to the topic when needed and, of course, ask for clarification (Hirsijärvi et al. 1997: 194). With the use of semi-structured interview, I could get the main questions answered, but also the format allowed for follow-up questions where suitable or needed. Interview was selected as the most effective

method to gain qualitative data on the methods beyond the surface, as the interviewer could ask more questions if the answer stays superficial or unclear, which could not be done in, for example, a questionnaire.

Only three teachers were interviewed due to the time constraint and the scope of the thesis. The interviews were also conducted during the coronavirus pandemic and therefore recruiting participants was more difficult, as teachers were very busy. Still, I believe I could get qualitative results that can give important insight into the topic and in turn, help future and current teachers when choosing teaching methods. The interviews were conducted through Zoom, or if possible, in person. The data gathered was qualitative. This is, of course, one of the cons of interviews, as the data gathered will not be quantitative and therefore also not applicable to any given situation. Nonetheless, I do consider the qualitative data to be more important for this topic, although the ideal situation would be to combine the two types of data.

The participants are all professional teachers, who teach English in Finnish elementary schools. In the findings, I will refer to the teachers by pseudonyms Teacher A, B, and C. This is done to protect the identities and avoid recognition of any of the participants. Two of them, Teachers A and B, are elementary school teachers, while one of them, Teacher C, is a language teacher. Their schools are located in different cities in Finland, so it was interesting to see whether there are differences between cities. Still, this variance, if found, may be individual difference, as the sample size is so small.

The interview questions can be divided into four topics:

1. Teachers' ideas on the change, early language learning and their language teaching ideology
2. Their understanding of students' ideas and attitudes about language learning
3. Methods used in early language learning when starting in 3rd grade and when starting in 1st grade and their differences and similarities.
4. Methods the teachers prefer and suggest other teachers and new teachers use

Before the interview, each teacher received a copy of the study notice and the data protection notice through e-mail, and at the beginning of the interview, they were asked if they had read them, and if they had any questions. They were also

encouraged to communicate any questions or concerns even after the interview. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. After transcription the answers were analyzed to find common themes related to the research questions. The analysis method used was qualitative theme analysis, which is defined as “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton 2002: 453, cited in Zhang & Wildemuth 2017: 318). In this thesis this meant that the answers were analysed and categorized into groups such as: common methods, less common methods, difficulties, attitudes, following the curriculum, materials, instructional language, group dependent, and so on. These were then compared and contrasted between the three interviews to find similarities, differences, and reoccurring themes.

4 FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I will present the main themes and findings of the interviews relative to the research questions. I will also give illustrating extracts from the interviews and then analyze the answers on each topic. The chapter is divided into three sections, which are *Teachers' attitudes*, *Differences between 1st and 3rd grade English*, and *Methods in teaching*.

4.1 Teachers' attitudes

When asked about how interviewees felt about the change in students' starting age of language learning, all three teachers had mostly positive attitudes towards it. They all thought that it is very much an advantage to start early, as young learners, so that the start can be very playful and encouraging. It seems that this was something language teachers had been waiting for and were excited to see finally happening. Especially, as the hours were not taken out from any other subject but instead added into the overall hours allowed in a school year. In the first extract, Teacher A explains, that if the teaching is done well, through playful sessions that are not too long, she finds it a positive change.

Extract 1.

Teacher A: "In my opinion, it's a good thing, I don't have any problem with it or anything against it, in fact, I see it as a positive thing -- of course, depending on the way it [teaching] is done. If it is [taught] through play little by little, then I don't see any harm."

Opettaja A: "...musta se on ihan hyvä asia ei mulla ole mitään ongelmaa siinä eikä mulla mitään sitä vastaan ja hyvänä näen sen, -- tietenkin riippuen siitä millä tavalla se aloitetaan, jos se otetaan sillä tavalla leikinomaisesti pieninä annoksina niin ei, en mä nää mitään haittaa."

As can be seen in the extract above, the methodology is important to Teacher A. According to the curriculum, the most important purpose of early language learning is to introduce language to children and help increase their interest in learning languages in the future. Therefore, it makes great sense that the methods chosen are in line with this goal, as the wrong methods could make the children's first introduction to the language uncomfortable and result in negative emotions related to language learning in the future.

The next extract, Extract 2, is from a teacher, who has experience with early language teaching, and therefore finds it positive and believes it is beneficial. She feels it has not been that much of a change, except that she mentions having more structure in the teaching due to it having its own slot in the timetable each week.

Extract 2.

Teacher B: "...I have very positive feelings [about the change] -- actually, it hasn't affected my teaching too radically, because I have been doing this language showering outside of the curriculum to 1st and 2nd graders already before this change. So now the teaching has only gotten more structured because it has its [place] in the timetable. Good, good, I have good [feelings about it]."

Opettaja B: "...minulla on hyvinkin positiiviset fiilikset -- oikeastaan minun opetukseen se ei ole vaikuttanut kauhean radikaalisti, koska olen semmoista kielisuihkutusta OPS:in ulkopuolelta pitänyt ekaluokalle ja tokaluokalle jo ennen tätä muutosta, että nyt siitä oikeastaan vaan ainoastaan siitä opetuksesta tullut niinku strukturoidumpaa, koska sille on ihan oikeasti lukujärjestyksessä [paikka]...hyvä, hyvä, mulla on positiiviset [fiilikset]."

The third teacher had similar thoughts to Teacher B, because her school had already started early language teaching through games, songs and playful activities in the 2nd grade some time before the decision came that early language teaching would be mandatory in 1st grade. As shown in Extract 3, she thinks that children acquire

language on a different level when they are that young, since they have yet to learn any fears related to pronunciation and they learn so much through play, without even noticing.

Extract 3.

Teacher C: "...I, even originally, thought that it is great that it [change] happened, but they [children] acquire [language] in a whole different way when they have no fear connected to pronunciation and such. Instead, the kids like to play with the language, so it is good that it [was] moved there, to 1st and 2nd grade, because they can acquire [the language]."

Opettaja C: "...mustahan se oli alunperinkin ihan älyttömän hyvä, että se tuli, mutta ne omaksuu ihan eri tavalla, niillä ei ole mitään semmoista pelkoa ääntämisen suhteen tai muun vaan ne tykkää leikkiä sillä kielellä ne lapset, elikkä niinku se oli hyvä että se tuli sinne, varhennettu tuli sinne ykköselle ja kakkoselle, koska kyllä ne pystyy omaksumaan."

Therefore, the change has been perceived as a positive one. Some challenges were still raised in all interviews. Firstly, two of the three teachers said that their schools had a relatively short time to prepare and/or they did not have sufficient teaching materials to start early foreign language teaching. It seems that at least in some schools, the teachers felt that the support for them to accommodate the change was lacking and both teachers also mentioned this to be mostly due to government funding, which quite famously is not enough in the education sector. These problems, however, were overcome with support from the other teachers in their schools and nationwide. Both teachers also had earlier experience in early language teaching, so they had some materials from that time, as well. Teachers made their own materials and searched for good and fitting websites and then shared those with other teachers creating a sort of material bank available to all teachers needing ideas and materials. In Extract 4, one of the teachers explains how the collegial support system was managed, especially during some of the worst times of the pandemic, when many schools went online.

Extract 4.

Teacher B: "Freeed, which emerged last spring during distance teaching, became a good tool for teachers -- [it] is a community, where teachers

share tips, their own materials, and so on. -- You have to be creative and keep your eyes and ears open [for good ideas and materials] at all times. And the collegial support is crucial, when someone finds something great, we pass it on in our school. Also, throughout the country teachers have been collecting [material] since last spring, and this help-your-colleague -atmosphere has prevailed, so that I share material in this Freed [website] and also receive a lot from other teachers, when someone finds something great, we share it."

Opettaja B: "Freed, mikä tuli viime keväänä etäopetuksen aikana tuota nousi valtavan hyväksi työkaluksi opettajille -- on siis semmoinen yhteisö, missä tuota opettajat jakavat vinkkejä, itse valmistamaansa hienoa materiaalia ja muuta -- Et sitten täytyy olla luova ja tuntosarvet ylhäällä koko ajan ja kollegoiden tuki on kyllä siinä aika ensiarvoista, että sitten kun joku löytää jonkun hienon niin sitten meidän koululla tuota jaetaan sitä tietoa eteenpäin. Ja myöskin valtakunnallisesti opettajat on kerännyt viime keväästä, se on säilynyt meillä se semmoinen niinku kollegan auttamisen meininki niin, että siellä Freedissä itse jaan materiaalia ja sitä sieltä hirveästi myös muilta opettajilta saan, joku löytää jonkun upean niin sitten laitetaan jakoon."

As the Extract 4 shows, the importance of other teachers has been immense and the ideology of giving and sharing has especially increased in more difficult times. Although it is not exactly a curriculum mandate, all teachers did speak in a way that tells the idea in most elementary schools is that the staff is to work together as a team, which not only helps the teachers, but also the students, since it is indeed mentioned in the curriculum, that teachers and other school professionals need to monitor and ensure that the children are healthy and doing well in school (Peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014, 15).

All three teachers had access to one or more English language books through known Finnish schoolbook publishers, but two of them have the book only in the digital form – only the teacher's textbook, so the students themselves have no books. They mentioned having notebooks in which the students then glue the print-outs the teachers gave out. One teacher also mentioned not having the digital teacher's book next year. Extract 5 from Teacher A shows that the schoolbooks she has do not usually fit her teaching style and that other materials would be appreciated.

Extract 5.

Teacher A: "...I rarely use it [digital book], I have found much better websites and ready-made resources online that somehow fit my teaching style better and that have given me much more to work with. -- I don't necessarily need a textbook, but I would like to have some nice, some activating things, like regular childrens' books in English, or maybe some playing cards."

Opettaja A: "...hirmu vähän käytän sitä, mä olen löytäny netistä paljon enemmän semmosia hyviä sivustoja ja valmiita juttuja, jotka on jotenkin paremmin sopinut siihen mun opetustyyliin ja joista mä oon saanut paljon enemmän irti. -- En mä välttämättä tarvi oppikirjaa, mut mä voisoin haluta jotakin kivoja, muuta toiminnallista tavaraa, vaikka siis kirjoja ihan sellaisia niinku lastenkirjoja enkuksi tai jotain pelikortteja ehkä."

As the teacher says, the internet has become a great source of material, since the book seems to not quite work most times. Still, she mentioned that although other materials could be more necessary than textbooks for students, she also reasoned that there would be no funds for such things, even if they would be beneficial for teaching. It is, indeed, unfortunate that the quality of teaching materials depends on the finances, but it is also no surprise to anyone, and the teachers all mentioned this problem in their interviews.

One teacher felt that there are good materials out there and personally she uses textbooks and workbooks which she has contributed to making. She is also the only subject teacher of the three - which usually indicates that the school has enough resources to hire a language teacher - and found the change overall positive and needed, but somewhat unfit for her personally. She explained that although she likes teaching kids, she has found the early language teaching to take away from actually teaching the language which was still more prevalent when teaching 3rd grade.

In Extract 6, she explains how the teaching is always well planned and the methods well thought out, but that she also wonders whether such young learners are who she wishes to teach, since the focus is even less on the subject and more on teaching simple things such as how to behave in school than it was before.

Extract 6.

Teacher C: "...of course it [teaching] has its purpose, of course I plan the classes, of course I always think about how to teach this topic, nonetheless, there is the element of educating and this kindergarten teacher mentality is always present when you are teaching a 1st grader..."

Opettaja C: "... tottakai se on tavoitteellista, totta kai mä aina teen tuntisuunnitelman, totta kai mä aina mietin, että miten mä lähden opettaan tän asian, mutta siitä huolimatta siinä on se kasvatuksellinen elementti ja semmoinen päiväkotitäti mentaliteetti koko ajan siinä läsnä, kun sinulla on ekaluokkalainen..."

She recognizes that as an early language teacher, one cannot expect to get as much actual content teaching done in each session and that one of the main areas of learning for 1st and 2nd graders are how to behave in different situations and just generally learning how to learn. This is one of the reoccurring themes of the curriculum, so it is no wonder that the primary goal is growing as a person and after that learning the content of the subject.

4.2 Differences between 1st grade and 3rd grade English

One thing that stays the same in both 1st and 3rd grade English is the themes, which the teachers told will repeat throughout the years. Of course, now that the foreign language starts already in the 1st grade, each "repetition" will go a little further in the topic from the previous time. For example, if in the 1st grade the students learn colors, the 2nd grade they learn a few more colors and a few more ways to make questions and statements with them. The teachers told that learning basic vocabulary already in the earlier school years gives more time in the 3rd grade, when the more traditionally "school-like" learning starts. When it came to the differences between starting English in the 1st grade to starting English in the 3rd grade, however, all three teachers agreed on the fact that there seems to be a "filter" that the 3rd graders have developed, and the 1st graders have yet to develop. They explain that 1st grade students tend not to think too much about using the language and instead just repeat, imitate, and play with the language, whereas 3rd grade students tend to already be hesitant. The teachers suggest the filter is due to possible embarrassment, fear, or shame and it becomes a hinderance to learning and therefore supports the idea that foreign language learning should start in the 1st grade, if not earlier. In

Extract 7, Teacher A tells that she has observed less of an instinct to protect oneself of embarrassment or making mistakes.

Extract 7.

Teacher A: "Sometimes, I have noticed that for 3rd graders, who have not studied English before, the threshold for speaking in English is very high. -- 1st graders don't really have a filter, they dare to [speak] -- I would argue that they have less of that kind of filter and instinct of self-preservation in this [speaking English]."

Opettaja A: "Joskus on huomannut kolmosten kanssa, kun aloitetaan ja jos ei ole aikaisemmin englantia opiskeltu, että se on tosi korkealla se kynnyks alkua lausumaan englantia ja uskaltaa sanoa yhtään mitään. -- Ekaluokkalaisilla ei ole paljonkaan siinä filttiä, että ne uskaltaa ja kehtaa -- kyllä mä väittäisin, että niillä on vähemmän semmoista filttiä ja itsesuojeluvaihtoa tässä."

She says that the 3rd graders usually already have this filter telling them that there is a possibility of embarrassment if they make a mistake. Therefore, they think whether or not it is a risk before answering or participating. If there is a risk of making a mistake that could result in the others laughing, they often choose not to speak out.

In Extract 8, Teacher B describes this phenomenon as censoring oneself. According to her, a 1st grader imitates the pronunciation guide based on how it sounded to them without thinking about it much further.

Extract 8.

Teacher B: "...a 1st grader doesn't censor themselves yet as harshly. A 3rd grader is already thinking of what it sounds like, did it go like this, was this pronounced this way, [while] a 1st grader just says it how it sounded like to them and that's a great thing."

Opettaja B: "...ekaluokkalainen ei vielä sensuroi itseään yhtä rajusti kun kolmosluokkalainen jo niinku mieltii sitä, että miltä se kuulostaa ja menikö se näin ja lausuttiinko se näin, ekaluokkalainen sanoo suurin piirtein sinne suuntaan ko se nyt hänen mielestä oli ja se on hieno juttu."

She believes this lack of a filter is a great thing and it seems like this is one of the benefits of starting language learning early. It is interesting, however, to think about whether this filter is adopted in the school environment or with age. I suggest it is a mix of both, a social construct, but I would also theorize that the school environment expedites the adaptation of the “filter”.

Another clear difference is the inability to use writing and reading in the early language teaching, as 1st graders are not expected to be able to read at that point. One of the teachers mentioned, as Extract 9 shows, that some letters of the alphabet are not often used in the Finnish language and therefore are usually very unfamiliar to even those students who can already read a little.

Extract 9.

Teacher C: “In 1st grade, I don’t have [the kids] write the word forms, that comes in 2nd grade – we don’t make the kid write words from memory, because they still have the foreign letters BDGZF [to familiarize], so we kind of practice how to write those letters...”

Opettaja C: ”ykkösellä en ota esimerkiksi sitä, että niitten pitäisi kirjoittaa se sanahahmo, että sen otan vasta kakkosella -- emme pistä lasta kirjoittamaan sanoja ulkomuistista, vaan koska niillä on vielä kuitenkin kaikki ne vieraat kirjaimet BDGZF -- niin tavallaan niinku harjoitellaan sitä, että osataan niitä kirjaimia kirjoittaa...”

This is not a problem, though, as she later mentioned that this obstacle of not using written words, the teacher can always use pictures and movements and so on.

The third difference mentioned in the interviews was the general knowledge about school and its different rules and practices. First graders, unsurprisingly, tend not to know how to behave in school and what to expect in different situations. Even those with older siblings, although they may have heard many stories about school, will most likely experience some level of information overload at times. We know that children are quick to learn new things, but it does still take some time and effort to learn to abide by the school rules, such as sitting down and staying silent in class, when it is demanded by the teacher. Teacher B explained that just the basic routines and meanings of those routines take some time to get used to and so these things need a lot of practice in the first year.

Extract 10.

Teacher B: "...in 1st grade we practice on being a student, what does it mean that I go to school every day, what is included in a school day, and what do we do at school..."

Opettaja B: "...ekaluokalla harjoitellaan koululaiseksi kasvamista ja tuota harjoitellaan sitä, että mitä se tarkoittaa, kun minä sinne kouluun joka päivä tuleen ja minkälaisia ne päivät on ja mitä kaikkea täällä tehdään..."

It is important to remember that students come to the school from different backgrounds, and some may know more about school, reading, behaving, and so on, but the 1st grade is when all students learn these things together. Therefore, it is not surprising it takes some time to familiarize them to the school-life, as Teacher C explains:

Extract 11.

Teacher C: "There is a big difference in whether you start [foreign language learning] in 1st or 3rd grade. So, in 3rd grade they are already students, they have been practicing going to school for two years. That is the reason why [in our school] the early foreign language starts after Christmas, so they [1st graders] get to just [learn how to] be students for a while."

Opettaja C: "On ihan siis eri asia alotatko ykkösellä tai alotatko kolmosella, eli kolmosella ne on jo koululaisia, on kaks vuotta harjoitellut sitä koulunkäyntiä, että se on esimerkiksi meillä se syy, minkä takia se ensimmäisen vuosiluokan enkku aloitetaan vastaan joululta, että kerkee puoli vuotta niinku hetken olla koululaisia."

Teacher C explains that in the school she works at, the second language start after Christmas, in other words, the students are given the spring term to learn how to be in school before starting the second language. This makes sense, as they start formally learning their first language in the spring term, learning about language learning, letters and so on, which helps in foreign language learning as well.

4.3 Methods in Teaching

When it comes to the teaching methods preferred in early language teaching, the focus seems to be on active and play-like methods. Previously, when first foreign language started in the 3rd grade, the learning started like any other school subject, with a textbook. As Teacher A reports, the school-like learning started very quickly before, when the second language started in the 3rd grade.

Extract 12.

Teacher A: "And when English started in the 3rd grade, textbooks are given [to students] immediately and pretty quickly we start to work with them. - so the writing starts quite quickly"

Opettaja A: "Ja kolmoselta jos aloitetaan enkku niin aika pian siinä on, no hetihän siinä saadaan oppikirja ja pian aletaan niitten kanssa jo toimimaan. -- kyllä siinä ne kynälliset jutut tulee hyvin pian mukaan."

In Extract 13 Teacher C tells about a similar experience, but also explains it as a logical thing, since the students are already more advanced and have the skills to study more intensively.

Extract 13.

Teacher C: "...based on their skills, they are more like students, the 3rd graders, and so we start writing, reading, and listening simultaneously, whereas 1st and 2nd grade is more just listening and speaking. - In that [teacher points at 3rd grade textbook] we start to learn through the texts."

Opettaja C: "...ne on enemmän niinku koululaisia taidoiltaan kolmasluokkalaiset ja silloin lähdetään heti yhtä aikaa kirjoittamaan ja lukemaan ja kuuntelemaan, kun taas tämä ykköskakkonen on sitä enemmän sitä kuuntelemista ja puhumista. - tuossa [kolmosten oppikirjassa] mennään niinku jo lähetään niinku tekstin kautta oppimaan asioita"

Both Extract 12 and 13 show that the start in the 3rd grade was quicker and stricter than it is now with 1st graders. The teachers remind that although the learning in the 3rd grade is still playful and active where possible, the time allotted for learning a

certain number of words, topics, and grammar points is still pressing. The time used on playing and activities needs to be efficient and actually result in efficient learning, whereas these days there is more time to take the first years easier and let the students explore the language and get excited about the language. Before the change in curriculum, even more vocabulary used to be fitted into the 3rd grade than is today.

As mentioned above, early language learning tends to be very active and fun, as Extracts 14-16 demonstrate:

Extract 14.

Teacher A: "We use a lot of pictures, and as I said [earlier] we play a lot, we have memory games, "flyswatter", videos, YouTube is full of them - the fun videos, we sing, play fruit salad game, different games - you can use any vocabulary in different games - so many games, songs, and pictures."

Opettaja A: "Paljon käytetään kuvia ja sitten niinku sanoin leikitään, on muistipeliä, on kärpäslätkää, videoita, niitä on tosi paljon Youtube täynnä, sellaisia kivoja videoita, lauletaan, ollaan hedelmäsalaattia, jotakin leikkejä siihen semmoiseen leikkiin voi ottaa mitä tahansa sanastoa, hyvin paljon leikkejä, pelejä, lauluja, kuvia."

Teacher A brings up a lot of different methods of language learning, which incorporate using different senses and are activating to the young students. She also reminds us that most games can be modified to fit a language class.

Teacher B accounts similar methods, but especially underlines the musicality, which she says to be very popular with her 1st graders.

Extract 15.

Teacher B: "We do a lot of active things in my class - We use songs a lot, music, from SanomaPro materials and free online and Super Simple Songs things and such, musicality is something, where the pronunciation especially works well. Playing, singing, doing..."

Opettaja B: "Minun tunnilla tehdään tosi paljon kaikkia toiminnallista -- Lauluja käytetään ihan hirveästi, musiikkia, sekä tuota sanomapron materiaalista löytyviä, että sitten tuota ihan netistä ilmaiseksi ja Super Simple Songs juttuja ja muita, musiikillisuus on semmoinen, missä se lausuminen etenkin onnistuu tosi hyvin. Leikitään, lauletaan, toimitaan..."

She also points out that through music, it is easy to include pronunciation into the lesson and that the students do very well in these musical activities. She also mentioned some platforms, where she finds the songs, such as Super Simple Songs, which the other teachers mentioned as well in their interviews.

In Extract 16 the teacher lists different methods she uses in class, which especially focus on movement.

Extract 16.

Teacher C: "movements, kinesthetics, almost every word is made into a movement if possible, adjectives, verbs, colors even. So, "find the color and go and touch it", playing "color" outside or something else, songs - pantomime, pronunciation like "close your eyes and I will tell you a word" and they listen and use pantomime to show the movement for the word..."

Opettaja C: "liikkeet kinestesia, melkein kaikki sanat kehollistetaan jos vaan mahdollista, adjektiivit, verbit, värit jopa. Niin, että "etsi väri luokasta ja liiku sen värin luokse ja kosketa", pelataan väriä tuolla ulkona tai jotakin muuta, laulut -- pantomiimi, ääntäminen esimerkiksi sillä tavalla, että "silmät kiinni ja mä sanon sen sanan" ja ne kuuntelee sen äänteen ja sitten ne esittää mulle sen pantomiimina sen liikkeet..."

It is an interesting method, that the other two teachers did not mention as clearly. It sounds beneficial to be using movement in early language learning, as the students can use their body to learn and make a kinesthetic association to the words, as well as getting to move, instead of sitting at their desks.

One teacher, as described in Extract 17, especially mentioned methods and tasks that guide the student to use the language, in other words, ways in which it is impossible not to use the language, as she thinks it is the most efficient way of learning. She also

explained that she did not always teach with this idea in mind. She said that one day she looked at the students and thought “these kids will die of boredom out here” (“näa kuolee näa lapset pystyy tänne, että niillä on tylsää”) and the reason was that she had been using a teacher-directed method, as it felt necessary at first – it was the way things were done when she was in school. This moment had made her realize that the data she got from asking one student at a time did, in fact, not give her the data on how the class was doing, as mostly it was the more confident students answering. So, she decided to change her way of teaching:

Extract 17.

Teacher C: “...when I make them work in pairs or in a group, I get the data [on how the students are doing] and they are not as nervous to speak and I can then bring up “hey, this, let’s go through this together again” That’s the biggest reason why, nowadays, I do it this way, but I wasn’t always like this, at first I wasn’t.”

Opettaja C: “...siloin kun mä pistän ne tekemään parin kanssa tai ryhmässä, niin mä saan dataa, eikä ne jännitä niinku sitä ääneen puhumista niin paljon ja sitten mä pystyn niinku nostaa sen et “hei tämmöisiäkin, otetaan vielä yhdessä”. Se on se isoin syy, miksi mä teen nykyisin niin, mutta en ollut aina, alussa en ollu semmonen.”

It is then to be noted that experience in teaching, and observing the students is beneficial for the development of teachers’ teaching ideology. It is important to monitor oneself as a teacher and the way the students seem to react to teaching, because it can be easy to do the same things over and over throughout the years, but if it does not fit the students, then it seems counterproductive not to develop the methods.

The teachers also talked about which methods are most popular among their students, and while the exact answers differed, the common theme was the same: methods that are fun, active, and interesting. Some preferred digital gadgets and the activities on them, such as Kahoot! or Quizzlet, but some that already had iPads in everyday use at school, found using finger puppets in learning especially exciting.

When asked about any methods that they would not use in early language learning, the answers were mostly uniform, no testing, no writing for the most part and focus on making languages fun and motivating. All teachers agreed that the most

important goal of early foreign language learning is to get positive experiences with the language. Therefore, as one of the teachers mentioned, games and learning methods in which one person is put in a vulnerable situation in front of the whole class, and possibly get laughed at if they “messed up” should be avoided if possible.

Extract 18.

Teacher C: “...I try to avoid putting focus on one student, kind of, like, one person being in the hot seat, putting the child in a situation where if they make a mistake, they get embarrassed or corrected by others..”

Opettaja C: “...vältän sitä semmoista niinku yhden oppilaan nostamista, semmoista vähän siis semmoista niinku, että yks on framilla, joka saattaa asettaa sen lapsen siihen tilanteeseen, että jos se tekee virheen niin sitä alkaa nolottaa tai muut huomauttaa siitä...”

It may seem obvious that negative emotions in learning languages should be avoided, but too often the memory that most current teachers have from their own school years is teacher asking a question and the students answering when called by name. This may be the way it was done in the past, but it has left many with bad memories from their school years and attached to the idea of language learning.

All teachers mentioned techniques similar to those in language showering and language bath, although only one brought them up with the term.

Extract 19.

Teacher B: “So the language bath idea is there as a strong basis. And when students get over the fact that they don’t understand everything, but that it is enough to just get the idea [behind those words]...”

Opettaja B: “Eli se kielikylypy periaate on minulla hyvin vahvasti siellä mukana. Ja sitten kun oppilaat pääsee yli siitä, että he ei nyt ymmärrä ihan jokaikistä sanaa, minkä ope sanoo, mutta se riittää, että ymmärrän sen idean...”

This idea of the meaning before the literal translation is important in learning because no one starts understanding everything, no matter what the subject is, and therefore it is necessary to learn to deal with the uncertainty.

Both class teachers said similar things about language showering or exposure to the language. They mention having the timetable in English, the weekdays, and months in English, starting the days with greetings in English, saying simple things in English here and there, weather phrases, and so on. And since all teachers agree on the fact that 1st graders will participate in almost any school activity, as they are still so excited about school, these “extra” materials and activities will most likely be absorbed into their minds just like everything else:

Extract 20.

Teacher A: "...I try to bring it to the everyday school [routine], English, so that it wouldn't just be one hour a week and then nothing, that there is a little bit of it all the time. Then, without even noticing, you learn the vocabulary, you learn to say things in English. – [it] encourages [them] to say things back to me, greet me and answer in English – so they dare to make mistakes or say something in a funny way..."

Opettaja A: "...mä yritän tuoda sitä siihen koulun arkeen muuallekin sitä enkkua, että jos se on se yks enkun tunti viikossa ja sitten nothing, vaan että sitä olisi koko ajan vähän jotakin semmoista pientä juttua siellä. Niin ja sitten huomaamatta sitten opitaan sitä sanastoa ja sanomaan jotakin juttuja englanniksi. -- [se] rohkaisee silleen niinku sanomaan itsekin, tervehtimään minua ja vastaamaan juttuja englanniksi -- Että ne rohkeammin uskaltaa niinku mokata tai sanoa vaikka vähän hassun kuuloisesti..."

This *bringing the language to the everyday routine* idea is very much in line with the language showering principal of providing “natural” language showering, in other words, sprinkling the language in any situation it naturally can be added to, such as going over the daily schedule.

Lastly, all teachers agree that an important part of the teacher's profession, is to observe and get to know the individual students as well as the group as a whole. This way they will be able to find the best ways to teach them in the way that motivates and interests them, while still making sure they feel comfortable in their environment. Teacher B describes this in Extract 21:

Extract 21.

Teacher B: "It's pretty much getting to know the students and the group when you are choosing the ways to do things in different situations and you need to make time, if you have a new group, to learn through trial and error which ways work best."

Opettaja B: "Se on oikeastaan sitä oppilaan tuntemusta ja ryhmän tuntemista kun valitsee sen tavan toimia milloinkin ja sille tutustumiselle täytyy aina syksyllä jättää aikaa, jos tulee uusi porukka, että sitten yrityksen ja erehdyksen kautta oppii, että mihin mikäkin porukka lähtee parhaiten."

As the excerpt shows, there is no other way to know what will work in each group other than through trying out different things and observing which ones seem to work. Therefore, it is crucial that the teacher gets to know the group they are teaching.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study was conducted to find out what kinds of methods are used in early language teaching, and additionally, how the teachers themselves thought about early language learning. As the theoretical background I first introduced the Finnish core curriculum of primary school, and then brought up three different methods or theories related to the topic of the thesis: positive pedagogy, language shower/immersion, and active learning. The topic was studied through interviewing three teachers from different cities through Zoom or in person. All teachers taught English in the first grade and therefore had the perfect insight into the topic. The data collection method then produced qualitative data and cannot be generalized, which is one disadvantage of this study. Still, I believe a quantitative method would have not given such specific and elaborate results. The interview recordings were then transcribed and through quantitative theme analysis, the main themes were deduced and reported on in the fourth chapter.

The main results of this study were the following. Firstly, the attitudes of both teachers and students were overall very positive. The teachers had slight differences in their wording and explanations as to why they felt early language learning was positive. However, generally they all thought younger learners had the ability and interest to learn, so there was no reason to postpone the start. In fact, they had all noticed that the 1st graders did not yet have a specific filter that would hinder their learning. The 3rd graders, on the other hand, would have this filter, which would make them more hesitant to participate, speak up, or try different things in fear of embarrassment. Nonetheless, the teachers said there was no major difference in excitement but that both 1st and 3rd graders tend to be very thrilled to finally start learning English.

Still, two out of three teachers felt the material they had received for early language teaching was inadequate and they had to spend a lot of time and effort into modifying it and finding external materials. Especially during the pandemic, the support of other teachers and educators was highlighted, since the whole country's educational professionals seemed to come together to provide and exchange materials for use in all areas of Finland in platforms, such as Freed, which was mentioned by one of the teachers. All teachers also reported feeling it is a pity that the financial support for education is so low, and that the resources are therefore going to be inadequate in the near future as well.

Mostly the themes are similar irrespective of the starting grade, there were some clear differences as well. Firstly, the most obvious difference was the ability to read and write, since 1st graders are still learning the letters at that time. Still, this was not necessarily seen as a problem, but more as a challenge that was quite easily overcome by using other ways of identifying things, such as pictures and movements. Secondly, the already mentioned filter, or censoring one's behavior and words, was a common difference identified by all three teachers. And the third difference was the knowledge about school and its functions. As one can imagine, a 3rd grader is much more used to the rules, activities and routines of school compared to a 1st grader. These things, such as how to behave in class, how to ask for a turn to speak, when to go to each class, and what you need to bring to the class, to name a few, are new to children when they first start school. Therefore, a big portion of classes is simply about learning to get used to these different things at school.

Finally, the methods used in early language teaching could be summarized as playful, fun, and active. Mostly the methods reported were games – including boardgames, web games, traditional kid's games, as well as songs, kinesthetic activities, drama, and so on. Mostly all methods were such that it was difficult not to participate, which is very much in line with the active learning theory. And since reading and writing are a challenge at the start of school since most are still practicing the alphabet, most traditional “school-like” methods were not used, or they were modified greatly to fit the age group. This means that word tests, exams, writing answers, reading texts, and so on, were not used in the 1st grade.

The teachers also mentioned that any game or activity can be turned into a language activity, in general, and that there is therefore no limit to methods. Still, it was highlighted in all interviews that the teacher needs to get to know the students and the groups in order to cater to their needs and interests. So, each class would have their unique set of methods used based on the students. One teacher, for example,

described using a lot of songs and musical methods, since the class seemed to enjoy them a lot and get motivation through such methods.

It seems that the interviewed teachers' ideologies and methods are quite similar. Although the execution differs to an extent, due to resources available, the purposes and goals behind it all is quite closely related. All teachers of course need to follow the core curriculum in their teaching, but it does not necessarily result in such similar methodology. Teachers can do things very differently based on observations I have done before the pandemic, as well as accounts from teachers in different schools, while still technically following the curriculum. This similarity could be because all teachers were still quite young and seemed very motivated and passionate about their profession.

It is commonly accepted that knowing the importance of one's job is meaningful for their motivation and performance at work (Coleman, 2017). I would guess, based on their interviews, that all these teachers did in fact realize that their work matters. They are teaching and raising a new generation. Therefore, one could argue that the fact that these teachers had such similar ideologies was because they are motivated and thus follow the latest news in education and do their best to make education as accessible and as motivating and fun to their student as they can.

From the findings of this study, it could be concluded that, at least to an extent, the added two years of language learning in the first and second grade allow for a more playful and less academically oriented start to the students' language learning journey. Based on the interviews, younger learners also appear to lack the "filter" that third graders tend to already display, and so it could be hypothesized that this could also help in learning, for example, the language's sound and intonation patterns more successfully.

For further research, it would then be very interesting to find out whether this early language learning will have an impact on the attitude and success - however defined - of the students who start their language learning in first grade. Clearly this would have to be a longitudinal study as the results could only be observed in the students' later life. Another big problem in this would be whether it would be possible to establish a correlation between early language learning and positive attitude and success in languages. Nonetheless, it would be very interesting and beneficial for education providers to get data on how the methods work and how well they lead these young learners into their future learning careers.

As mentioned in the introduction, early language learning in the 1st and 2nd grade in the Finnish context has not been studied much yet, as the change was made in 2018 and put into effect at the latest in 2020. Therefore, early language learning in elementary school presented itself as the perfect thesis topic, since it was so current. However, there were some changes that had to be made, due to the pandemic and restrictions. The original idea was to interview and observe students at their schools, but as the pandemic continued making this method of data collection quite difficult, the focus had to be adjusted. Therefore, the teachers' perspectives were chosen as the second-best alternative to give insight into the methods used in early language learning.

In fact, the ideal situation would have been to include the observation of classes with interviewing teachers after the class, but as it is, this was not a possibility at the time of the data collection. Additionally, it would have been interesting to also interview some of the students separately and together to get the students' point of view, as well - individually, so that they get to say what they want without interruptions or being aware of peers listening in, and together as a group, so that they could build on the answers together, since sometimes the peers may understand better than the researcher and help the researcher understand exactly what they mean. But again, there was no possibility due to the restrictions for this either.

However, for future research, the aforementioned combination would be an interesting method to study this topic. It would be beneficial to hear from the students themselves, how they feel about language learning in each grade. It would be interesting to see the development of the attitude towards language learning, since they could reveal crucial points in which the attitude may change, such as if there is an experience that has made them more motivated or less motivated. Also, we could learn which methods they like the best and which methods best support their learning, in their opinion of course. Then it could be compared to the teachers' answers to see if they are on the same page or not. Nonetheless, this thesis is a start for such research and already gives some ideas to new early language teachers, who are interested in what some other teachers in a similar position have had to say.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS IN FINNISH

Teemat:

- Opettajan ajatukset varhennetusta kielenopetuksesta hänen opetusfilosofiansa
 - Opettajan käsitys oppilaiden ajatuksista ja asenteista kielenopiskelua kohtaan
 - Varhaistetussa kielenopetuksessa käytetyt metodit ja niiden erot aiempaan (eli 1lk. ja 3lk. metodien erot)
 - Suositellut metodit tuleville ja nykyisille opettajille
1. Aluksi haluan kysyä ihan yleisiä tuntemuksia muutokseen liittyen, miltä muutos on tuntunut?
 - a. Mitä hyvää, mitä huonoa?
 2. Miten muutokseen valmistauduttiin koululla?
 - a. Kuinka pitkä aika teillä oli valmistautua tähän muutokseen?
 3. Onko kielenopetuksen ensimmäisissä vaiheissa jotain eroja, kun vertaa ykkös- ja kolmasluokkalaisia?
 - a. Entä mitä samaa?
 4. Miten ykkösluokalla opiskellaan, mitä siellä tehdään?
 - a. Millaisia tavoitteita näillä tehtävillä on?
 5. Minkä tyyllisiä tapoja oppia suosit yleisesti ala-asteikäisillä oppijoilla?
 - a. Miksi juuri näitä tapoja?
 6. Onko jotain tapoja tai tyyliä, joita käytät tietoisesti vähemmän tai jopa vältät?
 7. Minkä tyyllisiä metodeja olet käyttänyt varhennetussa kielenopetuksessa?
 - a. Miksi juuri näitä tapoja? Miksi koet, että ne sopivat juuri varhennettuun kielenopetukseen?
 8. Oletko huomannut, että jotkut kokeilemasi metodit eivät toimisi ykkösluokkalaisille? Ja jos olet, miksi luulet et ne eivät toimineet?
 9. Mistä tavoista oppia oppilaat tuntuvat tykkävän?
 - a. Miksi luulet, että oppilaat tykkävät just näistä tavoista?
 10. Mistä metodeista oppilaat taas eivät tunnu tykkävän?
 - a. Miksi luulet, että oppilaat eivät tykkää näistä tavoista?
 11. Onko oppimateriaali muuttunut aiemmasta erityisesti varhennettuun kielenopetukseen sopivaksi vai käytätkö samoja materiaaleja, kuin ennenkin?
 - a. Millaista materiaalia siis käytät?
 - b. Koetko, että kyseinen materiaali (kirja, nettilähde, yms.) on hyvä sellaisenaan vai tarvitseeko sinun muokkailla ja vaikka lisätä paljon siihen?

12. Onko oppilaiden innostuksessa kielenoppimista kohtaan sinun näkökulmastasi merkittäviä eroja ykkös- ja kolmosluokkalaisten välillä? Ja miten ne erot näkyvät?
13. Onko varhennettu kielenopetus tuonut jotain haasteita mitä aiemmin ei ollut?
14. Onko sinulla jotain erityisiä vinkkejä muille nykyisille tai tuleville ala-asteen opettajille aiheeseen liittyen?
15. Ja lopuksi tulisiko jotain vielä mieleen mitä haluaisit sanoa tai unohtui sanoa jossain vaiheessa?

APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH (TRANSLATION)

Themes:

- Teachers' ideas on the change, early language learning and their language teaching ideology
 - Their understanding on students' ideas and attitudes about language learning
 - Methods used in early language learning when starting in 3rd grade and when starting in 1st grade and their differences and similarities.
 - Methods the teachers prefer and suggest other teachers and new teachers use
1. First, how do you feel about the change, how has it been?
 - a. Anything positive? Anything negative?
 2. How did you prepare for the change at your school?
 - a. How much time did you have to prepare?
 3. Are there any differences in the first phases when you compare 1st grade and 3rd grade English?
 - a. What about similarities?
 4. How do students learn in 1st grade, what kind of activities do you do?
 - a. What goals do these activities have?
 5. What kind of methods do you prefer, in general, in the elementary school?
 - a. Why these methods?
 6. Are there any methods you knowingly use less, or even avoid using?
 7. What kind of methods have you used in early language learning?
 8. Why these methods? Why do you think they fit early language learning?
 9. Have you noticed any methods that do not work in the 1st grade? If so, why do you think that was?
 10. Which methods do the students seem to like?
 - a. Why do you think they like those methods?
 11. Which methods do the students seem to dislike?
 - a. Why do you think they dislike those methods?
 12. Has the teaching material changed from what it was like before to fit this early language teaching, or do you use the same materials?
 - a. What kind of materials do you use?
 - b. Do you think that this material is adequate as it is, or do you need to modify or add to it a lot?
 13. Have you noticed a difference in excitement towards language learning between 1st and 3rd graders?

14. Have you had any new challenges with early language teaching that you did not have before?
15. Do you have any tips or advice to other early language teachers on these topics?
16. Finally, do you have anything else you would like to add or forgot to say at some point?