

# **Finnish Bookstagrammers' Perceptions of Learning English through Literature and Participating in the Bookstagram Community**

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Kirjallisuudella on historian saatossa ollut erilaisia funktioita kielenoppimisessa, ja sen merkitys tunnustetaan yhä. Perinteisesti kirjallisuuden avulla on opetettu muun muassa kielioppia ja sanastoa, mutta nykytutkimus on painottanut kirjallisuuden merkitystä myös kulttuuritietoisuuden rakentajana. Aikaisempi tutkimus on kuitenkin keskittynyt vieraskielisen kirjallisuuden käyttöön luokkahuoneessa, eikä informaaleissa konteksteissa tapahtuvaa vieraalla kielellä lukemista ole juurikaan tutkittu. Tutkielmani tavoitteena onkin selvittää, kuinka suomea äidinkielenään puhuvat kokevat oppineensa englantia vapaa-ajan lukuharrastuksen ja sosiaalisen median Bookstagram-kirjayhteisön kautta. Tutkielman osallistujiksi on valittu kaksi Bookstagrammaajaa, jotka lukevat aktiivisesti englanniksi vapaa-ajallaan. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin haastattelemalla osallistujia puolistrukturoidun haastattelun avulla. Haastatteluaineisto analysoitiin teemoittelemalla.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että kirjallisuuden lukeminen koetaan suurimmaksi osaksi hyödylliseksi tavaksi oppia sekä kieltä että sitä ympäröivää kulttuuria. Haastateltavien mukaan kirjallisuutta tulisi hyödyntää vieraiden kielten tunneilla useammin, oppilaslähtöisemmin ja tarpeeksi pohjustaen. Vapaa-ajalla tapahtuva englanniksi lukeminen nähtiin hyvin positiivisessa valossa, ja se koettiin myös sisäisesti motivoivana. Bookstagram-yhteisöllä ei sen sijaan vaikuttanut olevan suoraa yhteyttä kielenoppimiseen, mutta yhteisöt koettiin vapauttaviksi ja motivoiviksi harrastusympäristöiksi.</p> <p>Tutkimustulokset voivat auttaa kehittämään kirjallisuuden käyttöä opetuksessa sekä ymmärtämään, millaiset seikat motivoivat oppijoita lukemaan vieraalla kielellä sekä koulussa että vapaa-ajalla. Tutkimustulosten yleistäminen on haastavaa pienen otoksen takia, joten jatkotutkimus voi kehittää laajempaa ymmärrystä näistä aiheista. Kattavamman kokonaiskuvan luomiseksi jatkotutkimus voisi tarkastella myös kieltenopettajien kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä vieraskielistä kirjallisuutta koskien.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, foreign language literature has had an important role in language learning and its role in formal instruction has been an area of interest in research. The importance of written texts has also been acknowledged in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, which lists strengthening pupils' independent ability to look for texts in English as one of the learning goals in grades 7-9. Moreover, the National Core Curriculum emphasizes the increasingly prominent role of learning English in informal settings (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014). However, the phenomenon of learning a language through reading has not been studied widely in an informal context.

On the social media platform Instagram, communities centered around literature and reading are colloquially known as Bookstagram. These communities are very active: at the time of writing, a search for the Bookstagram hashtag on Instagram results in over 69 million posts. As the Bookstagram community indicates, the preferred reading language of many readers from around the world is English instead of their first language. The communication in Bookstagram contains many similarities to traditional reading circles, which are also one of the most common methods of utilizing literature in the classroom. Thus, Bookstagram is essentially a modern equivalent of the traditional reading circle in which participation is based on users' volition and willingness to contribute.

In this study, I will examine the effect of literature and the Bookstagram community on individuals' perceptions of their English learning. The present study is based on data gathered via interviewing two Finnish Bookstagrammers who are active members of these communities and regularly read in English in their free time. Studying reading in an informal out-of-class environment can aid in understanding individuals' motivations, reasons, and attitudes regarding reading in a foreign language. Very little research within this context exists, and thus investigating EFL reading in this framework would offer new insight into the phenomenon. In addition, teachers who wish to incorporate more literature in the language classroom might find individuals' personal perceptions concerning motivation and reading habits useful when planning materials and methods. The topic is also interesting to me on a personal level due to my own experiences with reading English-language literature and participating in the Bookstagram community.

In the next chapter, I will first discuss the role of literature in foreign language learning and introduce previous research related to the phenomenon. Secondly, I will examine the role of

reading communities in language learning and present an overview of Bookstagram. Thirdly, I will discuss informal learning. Chapter 3 presents the data gathering and data analysis methods used in the present study. The data will be analyzed and compared to previous findings in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 contains conclusions and discussion related to the limitations of the study.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 The role of literature in foreign language learning**

While previous research has seen the role of literature in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in a positive light, it has focused largely on the use of literature in the classroom. For example, Daskalovska and Dimova (2012) argue that literature has the benefits of increasing learner involvement, developing critical thinking skills, and exposing learners to authentic, stimulating content that helps them develop skills that are necessary in real-life interactions. In his overview of foreign language reading, Nation (2009) suggests that literature can strengthen learners' vocabulary, grammar, reading speed, and reading fluency. He further states that when learners begin reading in a foreign language, usually at an older age, they are already equipped with cognitive and metalinguistic skills as a result of learning their first language. Despite this readiness, using literature in foreign language teaching requires careful planning and awareness of learners' current fluency and linguistic abilities (Nation 2009). Although carefully chosen materials are vital for effective language acquisition, learning environments should also be planned so that they support the learning process: teachers should assist students to develop their reading strategies, understand the implications of different contexts and discourse styles, and encourage students to see reading as a pleasurable activity in itself, not as a means of completing a language task (Daskalovska and Dimova 2012).

Nation (2009: 1-3, 25-27, 49-50) has defined the four strands of language learning that are required in order to create a balanced language course. These four strands are meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, and fluency development. Nation defines meaning-focused input as content that aims to develop learners' fluency by strengthening what they already know while simultaneously exposing them to new language items. However, Nation estimates that around 98 percent of the words in a text should be familiar to the learner for successful language development, while the remaining words should be decipherable based on the contexts in which they are encountered. Whereas

meaning-focused input emphasizes understanding the message of a text without explicit focus on linguistic features, language-focused learning is characterized by its deliberate focus on the skills that learners need in order to read such as comprehension of form and grammar. The strand of fluency development shares some similarities with the strand of meaning-focused input in that it aims to solidify learners' existing knowledge. Fluency is often developed by increasing learners' reading speed. The fourth strand, meaning-focused output refers to the language produced by the learners, the aim of which is to be understood and to successfully convey one's desired message. While these strands originally refer to formal language courses, in the present study I will also be examining them in relation to informal learning situations, focusing on the principles and aims of each strand instead of their application in the classroom.

Although EFL reading has been widely studied in formal learning contexts, research in non-academic EFL contexts exists as well. For example, Ro and Chen-Ling's (2014) study examined a group of 60 non-academic ESL students and their attitudes towards pleasure reading in English. The study revealed that when ESL students read for pleasure, they do so because they find reading in English personally rewarding and useful, although these answers were not further elaborated on as the data was gathered mainly through multiple choice questions. In open questions, the participants noted that they read in English to improve their language skills and comprehension level. Based on the results of the survey, the authors suggest that there is a correlation between a positive attitude towards reading and a higher frequency in reading (Ro & Cheng-Ling 2014).

Nasu's study (2015) of advanced-level foreign language speakers, most of whom were Japanese, examined the effect of literature on the learners' proficiency through the interviewees' oral histories of their learning. Out of the 35 learners interviewed, only seven mentioned the positive effects of literature in their foreign language learning. However, the author points out that works of literature are rarely used in Japanese foreign language classrooms, which may be reflected in the interviewees' negative attitude towards literary texts. The beneficial effects of foreign language literature mentioned by the interviewees were increased fluency, improved critical thinking skills, and cultural knowledge. One participant noted that literature had also helped her improve as an English speaker as she had gained a lot of general linguistic knowledge through extensive reading. In addition, many of those who viewed literature positively reported reading in their target language on their own or with a tutor (Nasu 2015). However, it is difficult to draw conclusions based on the findings of

Nasu's study as it did not include the oral histories of those who reacted to literature negatively. In general, non-native English-speakers' voluntary reading in English is closely linked to intrinsic motivation and a desire to learn about both the language and the culture surrounding it.

Reading in a foreign language is also connected to questions of identity and culture. Literature has historically been considered a means of entering the culture of its writers. However, the ability to read literature in a foreign language has simultaneously been considered a task restricted only to those with the highest linguistic proficiency (Hall 2015: 19). It seems that this notion, albeit dated and exclusive by modern standards, can nonetheless offer insight into attitudes towards reading in a foreign language: according to this view, a person who is able to read foreign-language literature can be considered a genuine master of the language and a member of its culture. The role of culture and language in the context of literature has been challenged in recent times with the increasingly globalized nature of the English language: it has been proposed that English should not be seen as a language but rather several languages due to its numerous variations (Hall 2015: 19). Consequently, the relationship between culture and language has also become more complex and multifaceted: as the English language does not signify a particular cultural context in today's world, it cannot therefore be said that literature allows access to a single culture of the English language.

The growing interest in authenticity in modern linguistics is also reflected in the changing attitudes towards literature in language teaching. While literature has historically served aesthetic, moral, and recreational purposes in foreign language teaching, its focus shifted in the 1980s when literature was recognized for its ability to provide readers with an authentic perception of another culture (Kramsch & Kramsch 2000). In Carroli's survey of Italian language students' attitudes towards reading and literature, very few students responded that their reading was specifically influenced by their personal interest in literature; instead, the students were motivated to read in order to learn more about the Italian language and culture (Carroli 2008: 32-33).

## **2.2 Reading communities and Bookstagram**

Like the effect of literature on language learning, previous research on reading communities has focused almost exclusively on formal settings (Rehberg Sedo 2003: 66). In the classroom, literature is commonly utilized in reading circles that fulfill similar functions as reading communities. In these circles, learners choose a book that they will first read alone and then

discuss together as a group in a safe and relaxed environment in which teacher interference is minimal. Literature circles have various educational benefits such as improving learners' comprehension skills and encouraging learner collaboration and participation (Elhess & Egbert 2015). In her analysis of middle school students' attitudes towards literature circles, Burns (1998) remarks that students' ability to affect their reading choices is also a source of empowerment: they were reading what they were personally interested in, not what the teacher required them to read. In addition, Burns emphasizes the importance of social interaction in literature circles: together, the students negotiated meaning with each student offering a different approach towards the story they were discussing. In spite of these benefits and the agency given to the learners, Burns' analysis was conducted in a classroom environment in which the groups were determined by the teacher and thus its results can be only loosely applied to informal reading circles.

Outside the context of formal instruction, research on reading communities has focused on attitudes and motivation. Rehberg Sedo's (2003) survey examining both online and offline book communities and their members' attitudes towards them found that readers' most common reasons for joining a book club were intellectual stimulation, meeting other readers, and participating in literary discourse. In addition, the participants of the study considered online communities highly flexible as they do not have the same restrictions of time and place as face-to-face reading circles. The results of Rehberg Sedo's survey are similar to those of Burns: the social aspect of reading was highly prioritized by the participants of both studies.

On the social media platform Instagram, the portmanteau term Bookstagram is widely used to refer to users whose accounts are centered around literature. In addition to posting photos of their favorite books or current reads, Bookstagrammers also engage in book-related discourse in the comments of their posts (Grenier 2019). In the larger Bookstagram community, users communicate with one another using English as their shared language, although posts might sometimes be written using both one's native language and English in order to reach a wider audience. In addition, smaller book communities in other languages exist as well: for example, the French and Finnish book communities on Instagram are known as Livrestagram and Kirjagram, respectively.

Bookstagram operates on several of the core principles of traditional reading circles: for example, users participate in themed reading challenges, share their thoughts on their current reads, and recommend their favorite books to other readers. While Bookstagram has

sometimes been criticized for its superficiality, Bookstagrammers have pointed out that their most notable reason for joining the community in the first place was the need to talk about the books they read, which they could not fulfill offline (Grenier 2019). This need to engage in literary discourse is very similar to that described by the respondents in Rehberg Sedo's survey (2003).

### **2.3 Informal learning**

The concept of informal learning refers to learning that occurs beyond the boundaries of traditional instruction. Livingstone (2006: 206) has defined informal learning as a self-directed activity in which learners attempt to increase their knowledge without the guidance of an instructor or a curriculum. Compared to formal classroom-based learning, informal learning has traditionally not been a major area of research. Possible reasons for this include the fact that informal learning situations are sometimes difficult to access and thus remain unobserved (Benson 2011: 8) and the problem of measuring learning that occurs in informal contexts (Livingstone 2006: 205). In recent years, however, informal learning situations and practices have been studied more widely, especially in the context of video games (for example, Sundqvist & Sylvén 2012).

Informal learning can also be understood through the materials that facilitate learning. Even though an instructor is not present in the situation, consuming media specifically designed for language learning is nevertheless considered instructed learning. In these situations, learners usually consume the media with the deliberate intention to learn. Similarly, individuals can learn in a more naturalistic way through media that is not intended for language use (Benson 2011: 11); in other words, learning occurs through authentic media. In the context of foreign language reading, learners have expressed their preference for authentic texts that expose them to more realistic use of language (Carroli 2008: 63).

The theory of imagined communities is relevant when examining Bookstagram in the context of informal learning. While the original theory by Benedict Anderson is related to the idea of a nation state, in recent research the definition of the concept has been broadened to include communities centered around a hobby, for example (Norton 2016). Imagined communities refer to communities that are not necessarily concrete or tangible but to which individuals can imagine belonging due to a shared practice or interest. The concept of imagined communities is closely related to language: for example, individuals are able to feel communion with a larger group of language users via a shared language, even if they will never meet the other

members of their language communities in person. Imagined communities lead to the creation of imagined identities, which can greatly affect language learning and learners' motivation (Kanno & Norton 2010). Using these views as a basis, Bookstagram can be considered a hobby-based imagined community in which users interact and communicate in a shared language according to the rules and norms of the community.

Palfreyman (2011) argues that informal learning often occurs when learners seek opportunities to use their language skills, typically with individuals who have a higher level of proficiency. This kind of learning is effective when learners are provided with comprehensible input, models of learning, and support from others. With Bookstagram's international nature, users coming from a variety of different linguistic backgrounds are highly likely to have varying levels of proficiency in their shared language of communication. Thus, more proficient users of English can become the models of learning for those with lower linguistic competence, especially if they use language that is highly specialized and relevant within the community in question.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

#### **3.1 Aim and research questions**

The aim of the present study is to examine how Finnish readers' experiences with reading in English and participating in the Bookstagram community affect their perceptions of their language learning. The first main research question of the present study is:

1. How do the participants perceive the role of literary texts in their English learning?

As previous research indicates, learners are able to adequately describe the linguistic areas they have improved in due to the influence of reading literary texts in a foreign language. As reading in foreign language has generally been studied in formal learning contexts, learners often have concrete evidence of their skills in the form of certificates and test results. For example, several of the participants in Nasu's study (2015) had taken the EIKEN test, a Japanese test measuring English proficiency, that provided them with proof of their linguistic improvement. The present study approaches the topic from the viewpoint of informal learning, focusing on one's personal experience of learning and not the concrete results of learning measured with formal tests, certificates, or assessment.

The second main research question is:

2. How do the participants construe the role of participating in Bookstagram in their English learning?

Reading circles exist in both formal and informal contexts, and Bookstagram represents an informal setting as it is based on having literature as a hobby. The social media aspect of the community provides users with possibilities to communicate with others from different countries and cultures through the community's shared language, English. Therefore, Bookstagram seems to contain a promising foundation for informal learning situations. In addition, questions of motivation and identity are highly interesting in the context of Bookstagram, where readers are situated in an international community whose members are united by a shared interest. These factors might affect readers' language choices: for example, when readers opt to read in English, do they do so in order to display a certain identity?

### **3.2 Data gathering**

As informal learning situations have been considered difficult to measure, it is appropriate to examine readers' personal experiences regarding the matter. In order to obtain this kind of data, an interview is a suitable method for gathering data. Interviews are considered an effective way of collecting responses related to language practices, personal experiences, and behavior (Rolland, Dewaele & Costa 2019: 279). The interviews followed the model of a semi-structured interview, in which interviewees are prompted by pre-existing questions but in which they will also be allowed to expand on the themes that they bring up themselves (Rolland, Dewaele & Costa 2019: 280).

The process of narrowing down possible interviewees was guided by the following criteria:

1. The participants should be native Finnish speakers who read in English
2. The participants should actively participate in Bookstagram communities

In order to find suitable participants, I created a public Instagram post stating the purpose and intentions of the study. This post was then shared by the account of a Finnish book community, and those who were interested in participating in the study contacted me personally via private messages. The two participants selected for the interviews on the basis of the aforementioned criteria will be referred to with the pseudonyms Venla and Roosa. The participants are aged 23 and 35, respectively. Both participants have a history of studying English as a mandatory subject in basic education and continuing their studies in upper secondary school. In addition, Roosa has attended university level literature courses in which the primary language was English.

The two interviews were conducted in Finnish via Zoom, and they were divided into three main sections: the participants' experiences with 1) English-language literature in formal education, 2) reading in English as a hobby, and 3) the Bookstagram community. Each section had a set of predefined questions which served as a foundation for the conversations, but questions were added and elaborated on based on the themes that emerged during the participants' narratives. The data was transcribed after the completion of the interviews.

### **3.3. Method of analysis**

As the interviews contained several recurring themes, the transcribed interview data was analyzed via the method of thematizing. Thematizing refers to finding similarities between the participants' responses and coding them according to the themes present in them. However, this categorization is based on the researcher's interpretation of the different themes. In addition to the themes established in the interview questions, the participants are highly likely to bring up various other themes that offer interesting perspectives (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008: 173). After dividing the data into three main themes, the themed responses were then contrasted with and compared to one another. For the purposes of the present study, relevant examples from the data have been translated into English. The original Finnish transcriptions are included in the appendix.

## **4 ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Experiences of reading in English**

#### **4.1.1 Reading in English in formal contexts**

The participants recollected different kinds of experiences regarding reading in English in formal education: while Roosa had had negative experiences, Venla had had mostly positive ones. Despite her positive attitude towards English-language literature, Roosa recalls that her experiences of reading in English in formal education are largely negative. In upper secondary school, students were offered a list of classics from which each student had to choose one book to read for a course. However, as Roosa points out in Example 1, the class did not discuss how to approach or analyze classics prior to reading them and thus the reading process was hindered by the lack of this knowledge. She suggests that instead of instructing students to read English classics such as *Heart of Darkness* without proper preparation or guidance beforehand, books that better matched students' personal interests and more freedom to affect one's reading choices might have led to better learning results and mitigated the students' feelings of frustration.

### Example 1

Roosa: It would have been nice to read longer texts in English even back then, perhaps something like young adult books or Harry Potter, which I have read many times, like a familiar book but in English... it [reading] was very school- and teacher-led, the teacher gave a list of books that we were supposed to read and we could not really affect what we wanted to read except by choosing a book from that list... it did not work very well.

As Nation (2009) points out, in order to successfully implement literature in the language classroom, learning materials and teaching methods need to be planned according to learners' skills. As Roosa's example demonstrates, unsuccessful book choices and inadequate instruction can instead lead to poor learning results and loss of motivation towards reading. These circumstances can also be examined from the viewpoint of Nation's (2009) strands of language learning. It is evident that, in regard to developing the skills necessary for reading, teaching was poorly balanced in formal education. By choosing motivating reading materials and focusing explicitly on language with the help of a dictionary, Roosa was able to create a better balance between the different strands outside the classroom. Simultaneously, she developed her fluency as a result of active reading.

Roosa's suggestions for improving the methods used in teaching are in line with Burns' (1998) observations of classroom reading circles: the more freedom learners have to influence what they read, the more motivated they are to read. From these suggestions it can also be inferred that literature aimed towards the age group in question (young adults) and familiarity with the content correspond more accurately with learners' proficiency levels, real-life needs, and personal motivation. This, in turn, could lead to seeing reading as an inherently motivating and satisfying activity (Daskalovska & Dimova 2012).

In contrast, Venla had already begun reading in English in her free time before having to read an English book for a mandatory course in upper secondary school. Overall, Venla's previous experience with literature in the English classroom is positive, although she did not mention specific teaching methods or give specific reasons for this claim. While Venla wishes that literature had been used in teaching more extensively, she also believes that it was difficult to increase the amount of reading in language courses due to the differing proficiency levels between the students in her class.

Although both participants essentially read in order to complete a task in formal education, the teacher's approach towards literature contributed greatly to the end result of reading. It is worth noting that while the students of Roosa's class were told to choose a book from a list of

classics provided by the teacher, Venla remarks that students were able to freely choose which books they wanted to read for an English course, thus providing learners with more agency and freedom of choice. These contrasting experiences might be explained by the age difference of 12 years between the participants, during which period the core curriculum has undergone changes and its language learning objectives have consequently shifted. As the current basic education core curriculum indicates, language teaching aims to take into account the varying interests of learners in the selection of texts chosen for teaching (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014: 348). It appears that in light of these new improvements, teacher-led methods have undergone development to allow students more freedom to express their opinions and hopes concerning the materials used in teaching.

#### **4.1.2 Motivation and reading in English in informal contexts**

The participants listed several reasons for why they started reading in English and why they might prefer it over their native language, Finnish. Although Roosa prefers to read in Finnish and appreciates well-translated works, she explains that sometimes the books she is interested in do not get translated into Finnish at all and thus she is essentially forced to choose their original English versions if she wishes to read them. She cites this lack of translated works as her major motivation for reading in English, although she adds that sometimes she opts to read in English due to her personal stylistic preferences: for example, in her opinion, the concise linguistic nature of comic books suits the English language better than Finnish.

##### Example 2

Roosa: When I first begun reading more in English I felt like something was missing from the experience because it felt a bit strange to read in another language, I understood it but read with a dictionary in hand [--]. It felt like ‘it is so hard to read in this language’ but then with the next book I no longer used a dictionary and the pieces kinda fell into place.

When recalling her first experiences with reading in English outside the classroom, Roosa mentions struggling with the process at first. As Example 2 demonstrates, Roosa used a dictionary as a reference while reading, as vocabulary in particular proved difficult to her. However, she continued actively reading in English, thus developing her fluency and reaching a level of proficiency at which the aid of a dictionary was no longer necessary for comprehension. She further states that nowadays the language of reading does not affect the experience of reading much and she is able to gain enjoyment from literature in both languages, even though reading in English might sometimes be slightly slower.

When Venla first started reading in English at the age of fifteen, she did so because of both internal and external factors. At that time, Venla was intrinsically motivated to improve her English proficiency through reading, but she also attributes her motivation in part to external influences: in her experience, one was seen by others as smarter and cooler when one reads in English, as Example 3 shows. She further states that these attitudes were created by the society surrounding her, in which the ability to read in any language that is not Finnish is automatically considered a status raiser. Echoes of the traditional views of literature being linked to a high linguistic proficiency (Hall 2015: 19) can be observed in these attitudes.

### Example 3

Venla: I started reading in English because, well, I wanted to be better at it but also if you read in English you were seen as smarter and cooler, I kinda wanted that too.

Authenticity is a major point of interest in both informal learning and foreign language reading. Literature is valuable as a form of authentic media due to its ability to provide learners with an overview of the culture of the target language (Kramsch & Kramsch 2000) and its naturalistic qualities: literature that is not written for educational purposes contains realistic and naturally occurring use of language (Benson 2011: 11). Authenticity was mentioned by Venla as one of her reasons for reading in English instead of Finnish. According to her, the original work is altered whenever something gets translated, and therefore reading a book in its original language gives her a more accurate understanding of it. It is unclear whether this statement refers to loss of cultural aspects or loss of linguistic details. However, based on Example 4 presented in the next section, it can be presumed that the emotional nuances conveyed by the original text can sometimes be lost in translation.

When asked about what they have learned through reading English-language literature, the participants mentioned cultural and societal issues in addition to vocabulary and grammar. It is not surprising that vocabulary and grammar were mentioned as they have widely been recognized as one of the benefits of reading in a foreign language (Nation 2009; Carroli 2008). The findings regarding cultural knowledge are akin to those of Carroli (2008) and Nasu (2015), although the participants of the present study did not specify whether they deliberately read in English in order to learn about these issues or whether this knowledge was a byproduct of reading for other purposes. In comparison, the acquisition of cultural knowledge was cited as one of the most significant reasons for reading in a foreign language in Carroli and Nasu's studies.

Overall, the perceptions of the participants' language learning results were somewhat ambiguous and described in a rather generalized manner, although some more specific areas such as certain vocabulary items were pinpointed in more detail. Previous research indicates that in addition to strengthening learners' cognitive reading abilities, the positive effect of literature may also be transferred to their oral skills (Nasu 2015). While Roosa did not mention oral skills in particular, a similar theme was salient in her remark regarding her being able to understand spoken language better through the vocabulary she has acquired via literature, although encountering new words in written texts sometimes causes difficulties if their pronunciation cannot be instantly deduced. The problems that have arisen in previous research concerning informal learning (Benson 2011; Livingstone 2006) might explain the vagueness of the participants' reports of their learning: as informal learning is seldom measured due to its elusive nature, one might find it challenging to verbalize what one has learned based solely on one's personal perceptions. In contrast, Nasu's study (2015) included participants who, after extensive reading in English in informal situations, had taken the EIKEN proficiency test that served as proof of literature's effect on their language skills. Therefore, even though learning does occur in informal settings, a formal certificate or improved test results might serve as useful guidelines when one constructs a narrative of one's learning.

In summary, the participants' experiences with English-language literature in informal contexts are generally more positive than their experiences in formal contexts. Accounts of reading in a foreign language for pleasure were clearly present in the participants' narratives. Reading in English was also prompted by a desire to improve one's language skills, but, over time, reading gradually developed into a fun, satisfying activity not related to learning goals. The participants reported learning grammar, vocabulary, and culture through literature, although their results of learning were somewhat generalized. In addition, the participants expressed their views of English fulfilling aesthetic and stylistic purposes which affected their language preferences.

#### **4.2 Constructions of identity**

While questions regarding identity were not explicitly included in the interview questions, the topic was nevertheless brought up both indirectly and directly by the participants. The theme of identity was particularly prominent in the participants' views of English, but it was briefly brought up in relation to other contexts as well.

When the participants discussed their motivations for reading in English, they simultaneously construed an image of English as a lingua franca that allows them access to the English-speaking world. The imagined identity achieved through reading English-language literature was one of a globalized individual, who, through language, becomes part of a larger community of English speakers. Furthermore, English was considered superior to Finnish on account of two qualities: its attractiveness as a language and its social functions.

#### Examples 4 & 5

Venla: English is somehow really beautiful to me and, in my opinion, it is a much richer language than Finnish because it is older and spoken on a wider scale... [English] vocabulary is much larger and diverse... you can describe very specific emotions with a single word that might not necessarily work in Finnish.

Roosa: I think it is really important to know English because if you were able to speak only Finnish or some Nordic language you would not be able to experience or understand a large part of the world [--]. It is, well, basically a lingua franca at the moment and everyone knows it at least to some degree, so it has also been an important communication tool.

Contrasting the above examples with Example 3 in the previous section, it is interesting to observe the various attitudes embedded in the participants' responses. On the one hand, English is a powerful tool of communication uniting individuals coming from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. On the other hand, knowing English denotes a high status and a sense of learnedness. Based on these narratives, it seems that the mastery of English has a somewhat idealized position in Finland. A contributing factor to these beliefs might be that, as the participants mentioned, English can be heard and seen everywhere: it is the language of popular culture and a means of intercultural communication. Even though cultural identities or issues were not discussed, the emphasis on the global and widespread nature of English echoes the modern view of English as several Englishes (Hall 2015: 19), which no longer connote an individual's membership to a single culture of English.

Similar themes were brought up in relation to the language use on Bookstagram. Example 6 demonstrates Roosa's observations concerning the various languages she has encountered within the Bookstagram community. In this narrative, non-native English speakers' use of English creates a sense of accessibility and signals a global identity that non-native speakers can display through their language choices. In addition, Roosa sees venturing outside the so-called Finnish bubble and presenting a more global identity as a positive thing.

#### Example 6

Roosa: English is very prominent there, of course, and you also see German and other European and non-European languages, but my own Bookstagram community consists mostly of Finns who use English as well because it is then more accessible to non-Finnish people... in a sense, they haven't stayed in the 'Finnish bubble', it is very international.

Furthermore, the concept of bilingualism was brought up in the context of Finland. Roosa mentions that even though one is expected to be bilingual in Finnish and Swedish in Finland, she considers Finnish and English her two strongest languages. However, as bilingualism is not the focus of the present study, I will not be delving deeper into this theme. Nevertheless, these perceptions regarding the status of Swedish and bilingualism in Finland could offer an interesting foundation for future research.

To summarize, the English language signals a globalized identity according to the participants. This identity was portrayed as highly desirable as it enables one to better experience the world and to attain a respected status in the eyes of others. Literature was considered a means through which it is possible to identify with and relate to the English-speaking world, although the position of English as a lingua franca was discussed in a more general manner as well. In addition, English was considered superior to Finnish by the participants due to linguistic and social qualities not achievable through Finnish.

#### **4.3 Perceptions of Bookstagram**

One of the aims of this study was to examine Bookstagram as an imagined community and how this community might affect its members' language learning. As imagined communities are closely related to imagined identities (Kanno & Norton 2010), it can be assumed that these identities are also created on Bookstagram. However, while questions of identity were present in the participants' reasons for reading in English, they did not seem to be an important part of their participation in the Bookstagram community. Rather than being a place for exploring one's desired identity and engaging with the English language, Bookstagram acts as an important motivator in the participants' reading hobby.

In general, Bookstagram did not appear to have significant effects on the participants' perceptions of their language learning. Venla describes the language use on Bookstagram as lacking depth and points out that while she has learned literature-related vocabulary and rules of discourse from other Bookstagrammers, she was already familiar with the casual English that is typically used on the platform. She further characterizes Bookstagram as a motivating

environment through which she is able to acquire new friends and reading recommendations. The motivational aspect of Bookstagram was also highlighted by Roosa, for whom Bookstagram serves as a reading diary, a source of new reading suggestions, and a platform to communicate with other users. Roosa primarily uses Finnish in her posts but sometimes uses hashtags and specialized terms in English which she, like Venla, has acquired from other Bookstagram members.

The popular belief regarding the superficiality of Bookstagram (Grenier 2019) was explicitly mentioned by Venla, which may contribute to the lack of learning experiences. This remark can be compared to Krashen's (1992) input hypothesis, which suggests that language acquisition occurs when learners are presented with content that is a little above the learner's current proficiency. This is represented by the formula  $i+1$ ,  $i$  being one's current skill level and  $+1$  the next level of proficiency. Venla had already reached a certain level of proficiency before participating in Bookstagram and thus the input provided by this community did not facilitate language acquisition as it failed to offer input that would have fulfilled the requirement of  $+1$ . Following this model, it seems that Bookstagram might be a beneficial language acquisition environment for those with lower language proficiency, while it might not help more advanced language users further improve their skills.

Bookstagram shares many similarities with more traditional reading circles such as interaction with other readers and active participation in literary discourse (Rehberg Sedo 2003), and it seems that these factors make Bookstagram an attractive environment for the participants to share their love for reading and literature. Although Burns' (1998) observations concern reading circles in a classroom environment, similar feelings of empowerment and freedom are sparked by Bookstagram, especially in comparison to reading in formal contexts:

#### Example 7

Roosa: Environment does play a role in it [reading], when you read books for school it is usually like 'forced reading' [--]. For example, the teachers, who are much older than the pupils or students, are not interested in [the same] things, but when you open Bookstagram and browse your newsfeed you can find a huge amount of books you have never heard of before, but it doesn't matter that those suggestions basically come from the outside because I am interested in discovering new books there.

As Roosa's use of the term 'forced reading' in reference to formal instruction indicates, the experience of reading is fundamentally different in formal and informal contexts. Even though book recommendations in Bookstagram are provided by another person similarly to

the book lists in upper secondary school, Roosa says that this external influence does not play a remarkable role as she is able to freely choose and filter what she wants to read based on her own interests. She further compares Bookstagram to the book lists in formal education by remarking that by nature, a list is rather limited and static, whereas the recommendations in Bookstagram are more dynamic and updated on a daily basis.

In summary, Bookstagram holds a significant meaning in the participants' reading hobby but not in their language use. Furthermore, it does not seem to be very effective as an imagined community or help its members create imagined identities that guide their language learning. Instead, Bookstagram was deemed an enjoyable environment which encourages users to read and allows them to find new like-minded friends. These narratives contained very few examples of learning English through Bookstagram with the exception of acquiring specialized vocabulary items from other members of the community. Despite this, Bookstagram seems to have an implicit effect on learning: it could be argued that while the participants might not have learned English through Bookstagram directly or consciously, it nevertheless leads to learning by motivating users to read more books in English.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

The aim of the present study was to examine native Finnish-speakers' perceptions of learning English through literature and participation in the Bookstagram community. In addition, I wanted to investigate their attitudes and motivation concerning reading in a foreign language in both informal and formal contexts.

The first research question aimed to create an overview of how the participants perceive the role of literature in their language learning. Both participants had experience with reading in English for an upper secondary school course, although this was only considered beneficial by Venla, who reported having read in English before entering upper secondary school. Lack of proper instructions, insufficient knowledge of language, and poorly chosen reading materials negatively affected the use of literature in the English classroom. In contrast, the experience of voluntarily reading in English outside the classroom was positive for both participants. Although the participants were at first motivated to read in English in order to improve as English speakers and to read books that were unavailable in Finnish, reading later developed into a personally rewarding activity.

The second research question examined the role of Bookstagram in the participants' perceptions of learning English. One of the hypotheses of the present study was that as Bookstagram unites EFL speakers from various countries in a setting similar to traditional reading circles, it would have a remarkable role in the participants' perception of their language learning. However, while the social angle of Bookstagram was deemed important by the participants, neither of them considered it particularly useful in language learning and the communication within the community was described as casual and shallow. The participants' main reasons for using Bookstagram were participating in reading challenges, finding new books to read, and communicating with other community members. However, the Bookstagram community appears to have a positive effect on reading motivation, and thus it can indirectly promote learning by encouraging users to read English-language literature.

Although the status of the English language was not initially a major aspect of the present study, it became a prominent theme during the interviews. English was seen positively, and its importance in the modern world was emphasized. Both participants agreed on the status of English as lingua franca and its ability to transcend national boundaries. In addition, English held great personal value to the participants, who appreciated its poetic qualities and how they can be used in literature. Interestingly, the English language was also linked to emotional questions. Why Finns might consider it easier and more natural to consume literature – or any media, for that matter – in English instead of Finnish due to more accurate portrayals of emotion could be an interesting topic for further research. Another interesting angle for further research could be the perceptions of Swedish and bilingualism in Finland that were touched upon by Roosa.

Based on the participants' narratives, the use of English-language literature in the classroom has undergone improvements over the last decade. Nevertheless, the results of the present study indicate that literature could be utilized in teaching more successfully. From language learners' point of view, formal teaching does not always adequately take into account students' interests and needs regarding foreign-language reading. The participants' statements of learning English through reading in informal contexts suggest that formal teaching could motivate learners to read more by providing appropriate materials, raising awareness of suitable texts, and properly preparing learners before reading tasks. If the goal of language teaching is to encourage students to develop into self-directed readers (Finnish National Agency for Education 2014) who consider reading inherently enjoyable (Daskalovska and Dimova 2012), it seems that formal teaching can play a vital role in shaping learners' beliefs

and attitudes concerning reading. Creating positive experiences of literature in the classroom is therefore important as they can correlate with an increased interest in foreign-language literature outside formal education as well and direct learners towards activities that facilitate informal learning.

The present study contains some limitations. As the sample consisted of only two interviewees, it is difficult to generalize these findings as they only represent the views of these two individuals and my interpretations of them. In order to create a more comprehensive overview of the phenomenon, it could also be interesting to examine perceptions of literature from language teachers' viewpoint. Secondly, some questions could have been better elaborated on during the interviews. For example, it could have been intriguing to examine whether the participants acknowledged a correlation between actively reading in English outside the classroom and improved test performance, as previous research seems to suggest. However, as the present study focused on the experience of learning in informal situations, including this theme might have been outside the scope of a small-scale study. It is also worth mentioning that I felt quite nervous during the first interview, which might have affected the number of additional questions asked. Therefore, studying the topic on a larger scale might produce more varied results and allow the exploration of themes that could not be discussed within the limits of the present study.

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## APPENDIX: EXAMPLES IN FINNISH

### Example 1

Roosa: Ois ollu kiva jo sillon lukea enemmän englannin kielellä semmosia pitkiä tekstejä, [--] just vaikka niinku nuortenkirja tai Harry Potter minkä olen lukenut moneen kertaan, semmonen niinku tuttu kirja mutta englanniksi... se [lukeminen] oli hyvin sellanen koulu- ja opettajajohtoinen, niinkun opettaja antaa listan kirjoista mitä luetaan ja sitte itte ei tavallaan saanu vaikuttaa siihen mitä ois halunnu lukea ku valitsemalla jonkun siltä listalta ja ei se nyt ihan hirveen hyvin toiminu.

Roosa: Siinä ihan alussa tuntu ku aloin lukemaan enemmän englanniksi että jotakin jää niinku puuttumaan siitä kokemuksesta ku kuitenkin siellä alussa tuntu vähän vieraalta lukea toisella kielellä, ymmärsin mutta minä luin sen sanakirjan kanssa [--], tuntu siltä että tää on tosi vaikeeta lähteä lukemaan tätä kieltä, mutta sitte vaan niinku seuraava kirja ku en enää käyttäny sanakirjaa vaan se niinku lokshti sitte jotenki siitä.

### Example 3

Venla: Mie alotin lukeen enkuksi sent takia koska no, mie halusin olla parempi siinä mut se myös että jos tavallaan luki enkuksi niin siut nähtiin niinku vähän niinku fiksumpana tai coolimpana, tavallaan myös halusin vähän niinku sitä.

### Example 4

Venla: Englannin kieli on jotenki kauhean kaunis ja se on minusta niinku paljon rikkaampi kieli kun Suomi koska se on tietysti vanhempi ja sitä puhutaan laajemmalla... sanavarasto on paljon isompi ja paljon niinku kattavampi... [--] voit kuvailla tosi tarkkojakin tunteita jollain tietyllä sanalla mikä välttämättä suomessa ei käy.

### Example 5

Roosa: On niinku hyvin tärkeää minun mielestä osata englannin kieltä koska jos ois vaan ainoastaan suomen kielen tai ainoastaan pohjoismaisen kielen osaava niin sitä niinkun hirveen iso osa maailmasta jäis kokematta ja avautumatta [--]. Se on semmonen, noh, käytännössä maailmankieli tällä hetkellä että kaikki osaa englantia ainaki jossakin määrin että tärkeä kommunikointiväline sitte myöskin ollu.

### Example 6

Roosa: Englanti on tosi vahvasti siellä tietenki läsnä ja jonkin verran näkee saksaa ja joitaki muita eurooppalaisia ja ulkoeurooppalaisia kieliä, mutta oma Bookstagram-kupla on suurimmaksi osaksi suomalaisia joista suurin osa heistäki käyttää englantia koska se on sitten saavutettavampaa muille ku suomalaisille [--], ei tavallaan olla jääty siihen Suomi-kuplaan siellä, et se niinkun on hyvin kansainvälistä.

## Example 7

Roosa: Kyllä se kuitenkin vaikuttaa se ympäristöki [lukemiseen], että koulussa kun luetaan kirjoja niin ne yleensä on niin sanottua pakkolukemista [--]. Niinkun vaikka opettaja, joka on paljon vanhempi kun oppilaat tai opiskelijat, niin eivät ne oo kiinnostuneita [samoista] asioista, ni sitte ku taas, vaikka niinku avaat vaan Bookstagramin ja lähtee selaamaan sitä newsfeediä ni sieltähän löytyy ihan valtava määrä kirjoja mistä ei oo koskaan ennen kuullu, mut sitten se ei haittaa että ne tulee tavallaan ulkopuolelta ne suositukset koska sitten itte kuitenkin on kiinnostunu etsimään niitä kirjoja myöskin sitte sieltä.