

**FINNISH 2ND GRADERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE AND LEARNING ENGLISH**

Johanna Smedberg
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Author Johanna Smedberg	
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Abstract <p>Suomen hallitus linjasi vuonna 2018, että ensimmäisen vieraan kielen tai toisen kotimaisen kielen opiskelu aloitetaan kaikissa Suomen peruskouluissa jo ensimmäisellä luokalla vuoden 2020 alusta lähtien. Ennen vuotta 2020 ensimmäistä vierasta tai toista kotimaista kieltä alettiin tavallisesti opiskella kolmannella luokalla. Muutoksen taustalla olivat aiemmat tutkimustulokset, joiden perusteella varhennetulla kielienopetuksella voidaan edistää oppilaiden motivaatiota ja positiivisia asenteita kielten opiskelua kohtaan.</p> <p>Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan ensimmäisellä luokalla englannin kielen opiskelun aloittaneiden, toista luokkaa käyvien oppilaiden käsityksiä englannin kielestä ja englannin oppimisesta. Tutkimuksen teoreettisena lähtökohtana toimivat dialogiset ja sosiokulttuuriset näkökulmat kieli- ja oppimiskäsityksiin (<i>learner beliefs</i>). Tutkimuksen aineisto on kerätty osana Opetushallituksen rahoittamaa, Jyväskylän yliopiston ja Åbo Akademin yhteistyössä toteutamaa Varhennetun kielienopetuksen seurantatutkimusta syksyllä 2020 ja keväällä 2021. Aineisto sisältää 106 haastattelua, jotka analysoitiin temaattisen sisällönanalyysin keinoin. Lisäksi oppilaiden erilaisten taustatekijöiden, kuten heidän vapaa-ajan englannin käyttönsä mahdollisia yhteyksiä kielikäsitteisiin tarkasteltiin määrällisesti.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen mukaan oppilaat käsittivät englannin kielen suullisen kommunikaation välineenä, jota tarvitaan erityisesti kaukaisissa konteksteissa, kuten ulkomaille matkustaessa tai joskus tulevaisuudessa, ei niinkään vielä nykyhetkessä. Englantiin ja sen oppimiseen suhtauduttiin pääasiassa positiivisesti. Suomen ja englannin kielet käsitettiin monin tavoin toisistaan eroavina, mutta niissä nähtiin myös joitakin yhtäläisyyksiä. Sekä eroissa että yhtäläisyyksissä korostui sanaston rooli. Oppilaiden sukupuolella, heidän englannin osaamisellaan ennen kouluikää tai heidän englannin kielen käytöllään vapaa-ajalla ei havaittu olevan tilastollisesti merkitsevää yhteyttä heidän kielikäsitteisiinsä, joskin joitakin pieniä eroja ryhmien välillä oli havaittavissa. Vanhempien tarjoamalla tuella englannin käyttöön ja oppimiseen puolestaan havaittiin olevan tilastollisesti merkitsevä yhteys englannin kieleen ja sen oppimiseen liittyviin positiivisiin tunteisiin. Ne, jotka saivat enemmän tukea vanhemmiltaan, kokivat enemmän positiivisia tunteita englantia ja sen oppimista kohtaan. Jatkotutkimuksissa voitaisiin selvittää muiden taustatekijöiden mahdollisia yhteyksiä kielikäsitteisiin, kielikäsitteiden pysyvyyttä ajan myötä sekä kielikäsitteiden ja oppimistulosten suhdetta.</p>	
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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Due to a proposal made by the Finnish Government in 2018, all Finnish elementary schoolers have begun learning their first foreign language or the second national language in the first grade from the beginning of the year 2020 onwards. Before the year 2020, pupils usually started studying their first foreign language or the second national language in the third grade. The reasons behind the change include efforts to increase pupils' motivation and positive attitudes towards learning foreign languages, which are based on prior research into Early Language Teaching.</p> <p>The present study examines the beliefs that Finnish second grade pupils hold about the English language and learning English. The study participants started learning English as a foreign language at school in the first grade. The theoretical background of the study is based on dialogical and sociocultural approaches to learner beliefs. The data used in the present study was originally collected for the <i>Varhennetun kielenopetuksen seurantatutkimus</i> (A follow-up study on early language teaching) project during the autumn of 2020 and the spring of 2021. The data consists of 106 interviews that were analysed using thematic content analysis. In addition, possible connections between the pupils' background factors and their English-related beliefs were analysed quantitatively.</p> <p>According to the findings, second graders view English as a tool for spoken communication which is needed particularly in remote contexts, such as travelling abroad or in working life as an adult. The English language and learning English were mainly viewed positively. The Finnish and English languages were seen as different in many ways, but some similarities between them were also found. The role of vocabulary was emphasised in both the differences and similarities. No statistically significant connections were found between the participants' English related beliefs and their gender, their self-reported level of English skills before school age or their English use in free time. However, the support offered by parents regarding English learning was found to be a statistically significant factor in terms of positive emotions towards English: those with more support from parents seem to experience more positive emotions towards learning English. In future studies, the possible of connections between learners' other out-of-school background factors and their English related beliefs could be explored. Moreover, the stability of learner beliefs over time as well as the relationship between beliefs and learning achievements could be studied.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

At what age is it the most beneficial for children to start learning their first foreign language at school? This question has been at the centre of the discussion around improving language education in Finland in recent years. In 2018, The Finnish Government proposed that from the beginning of the year 2020 onwards, all children in Finland would start learning their first foreign language or the second national language at school in the first grade, as opposed to starting in the third grade at the latest, which had been the previous norm (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). In Finland, children start the first grade during the year they turn seven. Some schools had adopted the practice of early language teaching earlier, but from 2020 on, first graders in all schools in Finland have started learning a new language. Because of this recent nationwide change, it is relevant to find out what kinds of experiences the children who started learning another language at school in the first grade have of early language learning and what kinds of beliefs they hold about it. Researching learners' beliefs can give educators a better understanding of the language learning processes to help them support the young learners at the beginning of their language learning journey.

Learner beliefs have been studied for decades (see, e.g., Aro 2006; Barcelos & Kalaja 2011), and the exact definition of the term has been reinterpreted in many ways over the years by different researchers using various theoretical frameworks. Following Mari Aro's (2009) approach, the concept of *belief* is based on dialogical and sociocultural theories in the present study. The aim of the study is to find out what kinds of beliefs Finnish second graders hold about the English language and learning English. In addition, possible connections between pupils' background factors and their beliefs are explored to gain more insight into diverse aspects of their beliefs.

The data used in the present study was originally collected for a research project called *Varhennetun kielenopetuksen seurantatutkimus* ("A follow-up study on early language teaching") which was carried out by the University of Jyväskylä and Åbo Akademi University in 2020-2021 (Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021). The project aimed to gauge pupils', teachers', and parents' experiences of early language learning as well as test the language skills of the young learners. In the project, data in the form of interviews,

questionnaires and language tests was collected from several schools from different parts of Finland. Findings from this project have been previously reported in Mård-Miettinen et al.'s (2021) and Peltoniemi and Hansell's (2021) reports as well as in Mård-Miettinen et al.' (2022) and Hansell et al.'s (2022) articles. Overall, the pupils, parents and teachers had positive views on early language teaching, and the earlier start in language education in Finnish schools was seen as a success. In the present study, the interview data collected for the aforementioned project is utilised for exploring Finnish second graders' language-related beliefs in more detail than in the other studies published on this data. Additionally, a new perspective on the data is brought by combining qualitative and quantitative analysis to investigate possible connections between out-of-school factors and learners' beliefs.

First, I will present the theoretical background of my thesis in chapters two and three. In chapter two, the central concept of Early Language Learning will be discussed, both in general and in the context of Finland specifically. Chapter three covers the concept of learner beliefs, how they can be defined and how they have been studied previously as well as what factors affect learner beliefs. In chapter four, I will present the aims and research questions of this study as well as its data and methodology. In the fifth chapter, the process of analysis and the results of the study will be presented. Finally, I will discuss the main findings of the study and their implications in chapter six.

2 EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING

The present study falls into the fields of applied linguistics and language education. The theoretical framework for this study will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3. First, an important starting point of the study, the concept of Early Language Learning, is presented in section 2.1. Second, the specifics of early language education in Finland are explored in section 2.2.

2.1 Background of Early Language Learning

There is a wide variety of opinions, views, and research findings on whether Early Language Learning (ELL) is beneficial or not and in what ways. Usually, an early start to learning a new language is seen as beneficial to learning outcomes in the course of time (see, e.g., Nikolov 2009). However, no definitive answers have been found as to why this is the case. Many theories rely on the greater plasticity of children's brains to explain the differences between younger and older learners (Nikolov 2009). One of the most studied aspects of ELL is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), according to which language learning occurs more easily or leads to better outcomes during a certain period in childhood (Nikolov 2009: 2). Nevertheless, the exact neurological basis of this phenomenon as well as what specific advantages it may bring to language learning remain unclear (DeKeyser 2013).

More specific neurological processes related to age and language learning have also been studied. According to Nikolov's overview (2009), research indicates that young learners' manner of learning languages differs from that of adults, which may also shed light on why the learning processes are different between age groups. Neurobiological studies suggest that children and adults use distinct processes for language learning: young language learners tend to use a memory-based system, while

adult learners utilise rules as a basis for learning. Moreover, young children's language skills develop more slowly than adult learners. Therefore, adult learners can become proficient users of a language even though they start the learning process later in life.

Nevertheless, CPH and the neurology of language learning are not the only factors to consider while designing early language teaching: in addition to the differences between the learning processes of children and adults, there are factors to acknowledge in teaching languages to children of different ages. For example, Nikolov's 2009 overview of studies on ELL suggests that the assumption of the inherent advantages of an earlier start in language learning is not universally supported by research. Nikolov argues that the specific contexts of learning need to be taken into account when examining the benefits and outcomes of ELL. In essence, the way in which early language programmes are implemented is crucial, not just the exact age of the learners. Similarly to Nikolov, Enever et al. (2011: 11) emphasise the importance of the language learning environment and context in addition to the age factor. As they point out, acquiring a language in a natural everyday environment (which is what CPH research has mostly focused on) and learning a language in a school classroom are two very different things (Enever et al. 2011: 11). Additionally, much of previous research has been conducted in the context of bilingual education, in which the target language is acquired both at school and outside of school, and the learners are in contact with the language every day, not only in their language classes (Cenoz 2009: 191; Enever 2015: 16). As with language acquisition in everyday environments, however, the bilingual education context is not entirely applicable to foreign language learning, in which there is less contact with the target language.

To summarise, it is not clear that starting language learning earlier in itself inevitably makes learning results better; instead, it is only one relevant variable in the development of foreign language skills. Meriläinen and Piispanen (2019: 16) also emphasise the importance of age-appropriate teaching methods, such as play as an integral part of language learning and teaching, and the crucial role of integrating ELL theory into the practice of ELL. The age-appropriate methods can also include, for instance, the teaching of formulaic language, i.e., chunks of language or fixed expressions (Kersten 2015). The need for materials that are suited for the specific age group has also been identified by teachers, for example in Hansell et al.'s (2022) study on teachers' perceptions of ELL implementation in Finland.

While the effect of ELL on language learning outcomes is debated, there are other reasons for why implementing ELL is perceived as beneficial. Shaping young learners' attitudes towards, motivation for and beliefs about languages and language learning is seen as an important aspect of ELL: in fact, it could be argued that the most notable benefits of ELL are improved motivation and strengthening of positive attitudes

towards learning languages (see, e.g., Cenoz 2009, Butler 2009). These elements of ELL have been studied extensively in the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) study, which explored the implementation of early foreign language learning programmes in Europe, drawing on evidence from “over 1,400 children, their schools, teachers and families in seven country contexts” (Enever et al. 2011: 9). Among other things, the study investigated the feelings, attitudes, and motivation of young learners at the beginning of their learning experience and examined whether these elements changed after years of studying a language. According to the study, pupils tended to have positive attitudes and high motivation towards learning English as a foreign language from the beginning of their studies. According to the researchers (ibid. 2011: 44), these positive reactions may be related to the novelty factor of learning a new language. At the beginning, the children also indicated that they particularly enjoyed games, learning new words and singing, and almost half of them said there was nothing they disliked about their foreign language classes. (ibid. 2011: 45-46.) However, differences in attitudes to foreign language learning can be observed from the start and language teachers should be aware of them to be able to support the children’s learning process adequately. Furthermore, the results of the ELLiE study support the idea that attitudes towards language learning matter in terms of learning achievements as well: those with higher motivation and more positive attitudes towards language learning as well as themselves as learners achieved better learning outcomes over the course of time (ibid. 2011: 59). The positive effect of ELL on learners’ motivation has also been noted in Finland, such as in the *Kielenopetuksen varhentamisen kärkihankkeen seurantapilotti* project (Huhta & Leontjev 2019), in which language teachers and parents report noticing learners’ increased motivation in Early Language Teaching (ELT). The Finnish context of ELT will be discussed further in section 2.2.

In sum, the current consensus among educators favours an earlier start in language learning. Early language learning is widely regarded as beneficial for language learning outcomes, even if it remains unclear whether the improvement in learning achievements is linked to younger learners’ more efficient neurological processes of language learning or rather, more indirectly, to fostering positive attitudes and higher motivation towards language learning. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider that the effect of ELT on motivation is not always straightforward: in some cases, young learners’ motivation is high at the beginning of their ELL journey, but it deteriorates over time due to aspects such as increasingly challenging learning tasks (see, e.g., Enever et al. 2011: 149). It is therefore important that educators also consider the more specific factors that have an effect on learners’ motivation.

2.2 Early Language Learning in Finland

Early language learning has recently been widely adopted in Finnish elementary schools. In 2017, a report on the current state and development needs of Finland's language reserve was drawn up, and the need for an earlier start in foreign language instruction was identified (Pyykkö 2017). The Finnish Government made the proposal in 2018 that all first graders would start learning their A1 language, i.e., first foreign language or the second national language (Finnish or Swedish) in the spring of 2020 at the latest (Finnish National Agency for Education 2021). According to Skinnari and Sjöberg (2018), reasons behind this change included improving learners' motivation towards learning foreign languages and encouraging them to form positive attitudes towards language learning. Additionally, starting language learning earlier is seen as increasing educational equality, as it is believed to particularly benefit boys who are at a risk of underachieving and those who need support for their learning (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2018).

In 2019, the Finnish National Core Curriculum from the year 2014 was supplemented with new guidelines for A1 language teaching in grades 1 and 2. According to the updated curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019), some of the main aims of ELT include fostering a positive attitude for language learning and strengthening the pupils' confidence in their language skills. Moreover, the goal is that pupils become curious about the different languages of the world and observe the various linguistic stimuli in their surroundings. In the beginning stages of language instruction, no reading or writing abilities are required, and the teaching methods are focused on spoken interaction and functional language learning, such as play-based methods (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019: 25). These goals are in line with the commonly perceived advantages of ELL discussed in section 2.1.

In Finland, early language learning has been investigated in the *Kielenopetuksen varhentamisen kärkihankkeen seurantapilotti* project by the Centre for Applied Language Studies of the University of Jyväskylä (see Huhta & Leontjev 2019). In this pilot study, over 700 children who attended schools that already practiced early language teaching were asked about their views on the English language and learning it as well as their use of English in their free time, and their English skills were tested. Parents' and teachers' views on ELL were also investigated. Most pupils, teachers and parents had positive attitudes towards earlier language learning, but there was more variation in the children's language abilities and in how much they used English outside of the school context.

As a continuation for the aforementioned project, the *Varhennetun kielenopetuksen seurantatutkimus* project was carried out in 2020–2021 (see Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021). It was funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education and executed as a

collaboration between the University of Jyväskylä (Centre for Applied Language Studies and the Department of Language and Communication Studies) and Åbo Akademi University. Similarly to the pilot study, pupils', parents' and teachers' views on starting to learn A1 language in the first grade were investigated, and the pupils' language skill level was tested. The participants included 363 pupils from grades 1–6. The project focused on pupils who were learning English, because it is the most studied foreign language in Finnish-medium schools in Finland, as well as pupils who were studying Finnish as the second national language in Swedish-medium schools. The teachers, pupils, and parents who participated in the study had mainly positive views on starting A1 language learning in the first grade. They viewed the focus of ELT being on play-based learning, which was seen as motivating for the pupils.

Because early language learning was recently put widely into practice in Finland, its long-term effects remain to be discovered. It is yet to be seen whether the goals of ELT (increasing positive attitudes and enhancing motivation towards language learning, and improving educational equality) can be achieved, but overall, previous research indicates that ELT can be beneficial in achieving those goals. Some related findings have been made in the *Varhennetun kielenopetuksen seurantatutkimus* follow-up study, in which the views of approximately 180 pupils who had participated in the pilot study in 2018 were compared with their views in 2020 (Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021). According to Mård-Miettinen et al. (2021: 52), the pupils' attitudes towards language learning had stayed positive during the two years. This indicates that the goal of fostering positive attitudes and beliefs towards early language learning can be successful. The more specific topic of language-related learner beliefs as a part of ELT is explored in the next chapter.

3 LEARNER BELIEFS

In this chapter, the concept of learner beliefs is introduced and explored. First, the history of the scientific study of learner beliefs is presented. Second, different approaches to studying learner beliefs as well as different factors affecting beliefs are discussed. Finally, previous research into Finnish people's English-related beliefs is presented.

3.1 Defining learner beliefs

The present study focuses on the beliefs that pupils in the second grade have about the English language and learning it. The term *belief* can be used to encompass wide-ranging aspects of mental concepts related to a certain topic or issue, which is why it was chosen as the central concept explored in the present study, as it makes it possible to investigate several aspects of learners' perceptions about language and language learning. For instance, Borg (2011) defines beliefs as "propositions individuals consider to be true and which are often tacit, have a strong evaluative and affective component, provide a basis for action, and are resistant to change".

In terms of language learning, relevant beliefs include ones that the learners hold "about themselves, about language and language learning and about the contexts in which they participate as language learners and language users" (White 2008: 121). Learner beliefs can be thought to include "the conceptions, ideas and opinions learners hold about language learning" (Aro 2009: 12). Beliefs as a relevant element in second language learning were first studied in the 1980s through questionnaires with Likert scale answers. However, more recently the focus has shifted to interviews, particularly semi-structured interviews, because questionnaires with ready-made sets of answers can be seen as too restrictive to measure something as multifaceted as learner

beliefs. (Aro 2009: 27.) More recent approaches to beliefs are not as concerned with what people believe about language, but rather how those beliefs are constructed in different contexts (Barcelos & Kalaja 2011: 282). In essence, beliefs are not seen as fixed structures in a person's mind, but rather they are evolving and created in a dialogue with other people and the surrounding community.

It should be considered that using the term *belief* may bring certain disadvantages: it can be seen as somewhat vague, and it might be confused with a more everyday definition of the word. However, as Aro (2009: 12) points out, the somewhat ambiguous nature of the term *belief* can also work to its advantage as it makes it possible to explore mental conceptions about a certain topic in a wide scope, with few artificial limitations. It has also become an established term in the study of language learning (Aro 2009: 12). Thus, the broad scope provided by the term belief was evaluated to be advantageous for the purposes of the present study.

Language beliefs are also closely connected to many other concepts relevant to learning, such as attitudes, conceptualisations, emotions, and self-concepts (Barcelos & Kalaja 2011; Barcelos 2015). These related concepts cannot be completely separated from beliefs, and the concept of belief encompasses aspects of all of them. In addition, language beliefs are related to metalinguistic awareness, which means "the ability to observe and analyse a language and its nature" (Aro 2006: 88). It is not always possible to extricate these factors from each other, as they are interconnected in many ways. For these reasons, in order to get a comprehensive view of children's language beliefs, these factors related to beliefs are also considered in the present study.

3.2 Construction of learner beliefs

3.2.1 Different approaches to beliefs

Beliefs about language and language learning are not easy to define or measure and they can be approached in many ways. One of these is the *discursive approach*, which Kalaja (2016: 109) describes as focusing on the way people talk or write about phenomena related to language learning. According to this view, language is used as a tool to construct aspects of the social world, and thus, language does not just reflect a person's thoughts (as the *cognitivist approach* to beliefs posits); instead, it actively builds them. As a result, beliefs can be seen as fluctuating in different contexts (Aro 2009: 22).

Aro (2009) argues that a middle ground between the discursive and cognitivist definitions of beliefs can be found in the *dialogical and sociocultural approaches*. As Aro (2009) reports, dialogism was originally based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and

Valentin N. Voloshinov. A central idea of dialogism is the concept of dialogue, which is seen as a principle of all human behaviour and idea formation, not only as a means of communicating with other people: as Bakhtin (1984: 293) proposes, “life by its very nature is dialogic, to live means to participate in dialogue”. In this dialogic framework, cognition is seen as emerging from the systemic relationship between a person and their environment. Thus, beliefs are regarded as dynamic: they are ever-changing, shifting based on new information that the individual receives from their environment (Dufva 2006: 136). This leads to the *multi-voiced* nature of beliefs: they may reflect several different viewpoints and voices that the individual has been in contact with, such as those of their friends, family, the school environment, and society at large (Markova et al. 2007: 17). The dialogical approach combines aspects of the discursive and cognitivist approaches because it argues that while beliefs are based on an individual’s experiences that they have stored in their memory, beliefs are ultimately processed in interaction and created in a situational context (Dufva 2006: 143).

Sociocultural approaches to the study of beliefs are based on Lev Vygotsky’s idea of *the zone of proximal development*, which can be defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance” (Vygotsky 1978: 86). In essence, a child can perform a task that is outside the scope of their current skill level if they receive adequate support, and later they internalise those skills so that they are able to perform the task without the presence of the teacher (Vygotsky 1978: 57). On a more general level, Vygotsky argues that this principle of internalisation applies to the formation of an individual’s culture-related psychological processes: they are first developed in social interaction and then internalised, transforming from *interpersonal* into *intrapersonal* ones (see, e.g., Vygotsky 1978: 57). This idea forms the basis for how beliefs are constructed in the sociocultural view. Similarly to the dialogical approach, the sociocultural view suggests that language and knowledge cannot be separated – speaking and writing inherently involve shaping one’s ideas and, therefore, the construction of knowledge as well (Alanen 2009: 58). However, the sociocultural framework relates beliefs to action more directly than dialogism. According to Alanen (2006), beliefs can be seen as dynamic tools that mediate human activity. As Aro (2009: 46) points out, “beliefs would thus mediate the way in which learners go about learning a language”. In sum, the sociocultural model presents the development of beliefs as the process of appropriating others’ perspectives and making them one’s own through speaking about them (Alanen 2006).

In the present study, learner beliefs are seen through the dialogical and sociocultural lenses. It is acknowledged that the beliefs expressed by the study participants may not be static and unchanging; instead, they are constructed within the situational context of the specific interview situations as well as all the influences from the

circumstances surrounding the informants: the school environment, friends, and family members, to name a few. From this perspective, the informants' views can be explored in a holistic way.

3.2.2 Factors affecting learner beliefs

Previous research on learner characteristics has largely focused on the connections between background factors and learning achievements rather than beliefs. For example, Lindgren and Muñoz's (2013) study found that the strongest out-of-school factors that predicted learning achievements in a foreign language (FL) were linguistic similarities between the learners' first language and the FL, exposure to FL and parents' use of the FL at work. Connections between socioeconomic factors and children's language learning have also been studied, for example, in a Greek context by Mattheoudakis and Alexiou (2009) who found that pupils coming from a higher socioeconomic background had an advantage over those from a lower one regarding ELL learning achievements. In addition, support received from parents has been found to have an impact on second language learning attainment (Pfenninger & Singleton 2019). It can also be considered whether these different learner characteristics have any connection with learner beliefs, in addition to learning achievements. Beliefs are a multifaceted concept that are affected by many factors, some of which are discussed in this subsection.

According to previous research, one relevant factor regarding both learning achievements and learner beliefs seems to be gender. For instance, some observations about the connections between gender and language learning were made in the *Kielenopetuksen varhentamisen kärkihankkeen seurantapilotti* project. Third-grade boys felt that they understood more English in the beginning stage of their English learning at school than third-grade girls, and they also used more English in their free time than girls. Furthermore, boys had somewhat better English skills than girls, whereas girls had better skills in their mother tongue than boys (Inha & Huhta 2018: 8). Gender differences in language learning attitudes and learning achievements have also been found elsewhere, for example, in England: girls tend to hold more positive attitudes towards language learning and have more success regarding learning achievements (Courtney et al. 2017). These differences can be relevant when examining both the effects of ELT and beliefs about ELL, as one of the goals of the earlier start is fostering educational equality between the genders by supporting boys who tend to have more challenges that can lead to underachieving in the language learning process (Skinnari 2018; Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture 2018).

Another relevant factor regarding learner beliefs is the role of personal experiences of using a language and learning it (Alanen 2006). When it comes to Finnish

learners' beliefs about the English language specifically, it is relevant to consider the role the English language has in Finnish society. In addition to being the most widely studied language at school, English was ubiquitous in Finland already in the 2000s, as Leppänen et al. (2009) report: it was encountered at work, in schools and in many free-time contexts. The influence of the language has increased since then. Regarding young learners specifically, Finnish elementary school children currently use English in many ways in their everyday lives, as will be seen in section 5.2.2 of this paper. Many play games, watch videos and TV shows as well as listen to music in English every week or even every day. This prominent role of the English language in Finnish society needs to be considered when examining Finnish children's beliefs, as it inevitably plays an important role in shaping their views on the language.

As discussed in section 3.2.1, the dialogical and sociocultural approaches to beliefs posit that the social environment is a crucial factor in constructing individuals' beliefs. Because of this, understanding the learners' social connections is important for examining the formation of their beliefs (see, e.g., Alanen 2006). As regards young learners, it is necessary to consider the dialogue they partake in in their everyday lives: for example, Mihaljević Djigunović (2009: 201) states that young learners tend to adopt the "attitudes of their parents and other significant others (relatives, friends, teacher)". Mihaljević Djigunović goes on to report that the classroom context and specifically the teacher typically have a crucial role in the formation of attitudes towards language learning. Similarly, Aro (2015: 45) emphasises the authority of the school context on young learners' beliefs: because it "offered a model for how to learn English, many participants took it as *the* model for learning English". The social environment can also be considered on a wider scale: as Aro (2009: 96) points out, the *voice* of the cultural community, i.e., widely held beliefs within society, can have an impact on beliefs. In summary, beliefs are constructed in interaction with the surrounding environment, but they are also affected by individual characteristics and personal experiences. Finnish people's beliefs about the English language are discussed in more detail in section 3.3.

3.3 Beliefs about English in Finland

Prior research into language-related beliefs has been conducted in Finland. Finnish people's views on the English language and its role in Finnish society were investigated on a large scale in a national survey conducted in 2007 (Leppänen et al. 2009). While beliefs were not an explicit focus of the survey, some of its findings can shed light on Finnish people's beliefs about English, as beliefs are a versatile concept. According to this study, most participants felt that English played a part in their

everyday lives, but they still considered themselves largely monolingual. English was perceived to be somewhat distant, more of a foreign language than a part of their own personal language repertoire. (Leppänen et al. 2009: 148.) Despite the presence of the English language in the surrounding environment, it was not seen as an integral part of the informants' identity as language users.

Finnish children's beliefs related to learning English have also been studied. Fifth graders' beliefs about knowing and learning English were investigated by Aro in 2006 in Finnish schools. In their view, knowing English was seen as necessary primarily for the purpose of speaking, for example in working life or while travelling. The main motivation for learning English seemed to be the need to be able to communicate orally with other people who speak the language, usually abroad or with people from other countries (Aro 2006: 92). The participants conceptualised two different Englishes – English that is learned from books at school and English that is used orally around the world (Aro 2006: 99). A similar divide between school English and English in out-of-school everyday contexts has been found in Finnish teenagers' learner beliefs by Pitkänen-Huhta and Nikula (2013: 118). Likewise, in Aro's 2009 study in which Finnish elementary school children's English-related beliefs were investigated at three different points in time, learning English at school and using it in everyday life were seen as two different things: the learners tended to associate learning activities with written language, whereas they connected using English with speaking it. Moreover, the learners' beliefs appeared to become more and more similar over time, which suggests that the surrounding environment (for example, the school context) had a significant impact on the development of their beliefs (Aro 2009: 154-155.).

Research into language beliefs prior to school age has also been conducted. Mård-Miettinen, Kuusela and Kangasvieri (2014) explored pre-schoolers' views on language learning and themselves as language users. According to the findings, the children had generally positive attitudes towards learning languages, and they perceived themselves as multilingual. Reasons that they gave for wanting to learn different languages were mostly related to travelling abroad. Palojärvi's 2015 study on kindergarten-aged children's views on language learning in bilingual early childhood education centres found similar results: the children's main motivations for learning other languages were travelling abroad and communicating with people from other countries. Some of the other motivations mentioned both in Mård-Miettinen et al. and Palojärvi's studies were having a family member who speaks the language, the general desire to learn and having positive conceptions of the language, e.g., thinking the language in question is nice or good in some way.

More recently, Finnish people's English-related views and experiences have been studied in the context of early language learning in the projects which were discussed previously in section 2.2. Specifically regarding beliefs about ELL, Mård-

Miettinen and Pitkänen-Huhta (2022) as well as Mård-Miettinen et al. (2022) have investigated young learners' and teachers' beliefs regarding English learning. According to the findings of a case study by Mård-Miettinen and Pitkänen-Huhta (2022: 84-85), both pupils and the teacher viewed English use at school and English use in everyday life as separate from each other, and they did not seem to recognise how children use English in out-of-school contexts. This was reflected in the teaching which was mainly based on the content of the textbook, and the themes of free-time English use were rarely covered. In Mård-Miettinen et al.'s (2022) study, second graders' views on learning English were examined using the same data set as in the present study. In addition, Mård-Miettinen et al. investigated the views of second graders learning Finnish as a second language. The findings indicate that the pupils mainly enjoyed early language learning and the languages themselves, though some differences in the learners' beliefs about their own language competence were observed: some felt they already knew the language to some extent, whereas others felt that they did not know the language at all yet. The present study will explore the learners' English-related beliefs in more detail and consider the perspective of background factors and their connections with beliefs.

In summary, Finnish people seem to regard English as something useful and necessary, and they have generally positive attitudes towards it. Common themes are that English is seen as something that is needed somewhere else than in Finland, and while using English is mainly seen as speaking, learning English is conceptualised through written language. While some differences between age groups can be observed, such as adults emphasising the role of working life in their reasons for wanting or needing to learn other languages, there are clear commonalities across age groups: while English is a part of many people's everyday lives, it is still considered as something distant and separate from their identities as language learners and users.

4 THE PRESENT STUDY

4.1 Aim, objectives, and research questions

The main aim of the present study is to explore what kinds of beliefs second graders in Finnish schools hold about the English language and learning English. This is relevant and timely because of the recent change in when children start learning their first foreign language or the second national language in Finnish schools. Since language teaching at school starts in the first grade in all schools, it is useful for teachers and policy makers to know what pupils think about it in the beginning of their learning process. Moreover, investigating the possible connections between pupils' certain background factors and their beliefs provides a more comprehensive view of the topic. Therefore, the research questions of this study are the following:

1. What kinds of beliefs do Finnish 2nd graders have about the English language and learning English?
2. What connections, if any, can be found between the participants' beliefs about the English language, learning English, and the following background factors:
 - a. their gender;
 - b. their use of English in their free time;
 - c. their self-reported level of English skills before school age
 - d. the support they receive from their parents regarding learning English?

The background factors for the study were chosen for their relevance in the area of language learning beliefs. Firstly, previous research has found that there seem to be gender differences regarding language learning outcomes and attitudes towards studying languages (see, e.g., Inha & Huhta 2018). Moreover, one of the reasons behind

the earlier start in elementary-school language teaching in Finland is specifically increasing equality in education and supporting boys' learning (Skinnari 2018). Secondly, other studies have found that while English is often widely used by Finnish people in their everyday lives, they still tend to consider English as something distant and not an integral part of their language competence (see section 3.3). The use of English in free time was selected to examine more closely whether there seem to be connections between the amount of English use and the way the participants view English: for instance, it could be assumed that those who use English more might consider it more connected to their identity. Thirdly, the level of English skills before school age was selected because pupils come from various backgrounds and therefore have different sociocultural environments that shape their language-related views. Considering this background factor may give indication of the family backgrounds of the participants (in terms of English use) and how it might be connected to English-related beliefs. Finally, because the role of the social environment is emphasised in the dialogical and sociocultural theories on beliefs, the possible connections between the learners' beliefs and the language learning related support that they receive from their parents is investigated.

The focus on background factors and their connections with beliefs makes the present study stand out from previous research on young learners' language beliefs in Finland as well as earlier analyses conducted with the same set of data (see Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021; Mård-Miettinen et al. 2022). Gaining a greater understanding of the factors that could have connections with learners' beliefs can be of use to teachers and policy makers for developing Early Language Teaching in accordance with the needs and individual characteristics of young learners.

4.2 Data selection and collection

The data that is used in the present study was originally collected for the *Varhennetun kielenopetuksen seurantatutkimus* project (see Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021 and Peltoniemi & Hansell 2021). While the original study focused on forming an overall picture of pupils', teachers' and parents' views related to language learning, the present study focuses solely on the data collected about second-grade pupils. Within this group, possible links between pupils' background factors and beliefs are investigated.

The data analysed in the present study includes responses from 106 structured interviews conducted with Finnish 2nd graders in four municipalities by four different researchers, including the author of the present study. The data was collected at five schools during the autumn of 2020 and spring 2021. Each interview lasted approximately 10-15 minutes, after which two language tests were conducted; in total, the

data collection situation lasted approximately 30 minutes. The present study focuses on 2nd grade pupils specifically because the aim is to explore the beliefs of children who have only just started their foreign language learning journey. The interviews were conducted with pupils in the second grade rather than the first, because the Covid-19 pandemic prevented data collection at schools in the spring of 2020. All of the pupils had started learning English at school in the first grade.

Most of the pupils (86%) reported to speak Finnish as their only home language. Nine pupils (9%) reported having other home languages in addition to Finnish. These included English, German, and Swedish, which is the second official language in Finland. Six pupils' (6%) sole home language or all home languages were something other than Finnish: Arabic, Bulgarian, English, Estonian, Russian, Iraq [sic] (the participant likely meant Arabic, Kurmanji or Sorani) or Japanese.

In the interview situation, both open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions were used, as well as a sentence completion task. The interview form is included in this paper as Appendix 1. In the multiple-choice questions the interviewer presented the options on a five-point Likert scale to the child, who then chose which one best reflected their views. Visualisations with thumbs-up or thumbs-down symbols were used to guide the children to interpret the options of the Likert scale in the way intended by the researchers. The interviewer also read the options out loud to the child, as it was assumed that not all of the interviewees would know how to read. The responses of the interviewees were written down during the interview by the researcher, and the interviews were also recorded. In this study, the responses written down by the interviewers are used as a basis for the analysis.

Ethical considerations were taken into account during the course of the research process. The participants and their guardians signed a consent form to signal that they were willing to take part in the study. They were also informed about the possibility to opt out of the study at any point. In addition, the data were anonymised to protect the privacy of the participants so that no participants can be identified from their responses. Certain issues need to be addressed because the respondents are children. Researchers must consider the unequal power dynamics between adults and children when conducting interviews. Because children are taught to "listen to, respect, and obey adults", it is important that this power dynamic and its possible influence on the children's interview responses is addressed (Gubrium & Holstein 2002: 182). In order to mitigate this effect, researchers need to aim to create a natural context for the interview and avoid associating the interview with questions asked by teachers in classrooms in which there are usually expected correct answers. In the interviews for the present study, the researchers tried to make sure that the participants felt comfortable in the situation by building rapport with them before the interview. To encourage the participants to share their thoughts as freely as possible, the researchers used

affirming words and body language as well as reminded the pupils about the fact that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions.

Another relevant factor affecting the interview situations was that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, certain safety measures were put in place, which may have impeded the goal of having a natural interview context. The interviewer wore a face mask for the whole duration of the interview, and there was a plexiglass shield between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, the children had been seeing their teachers and other adults with face masks for some time, so they may have been accustomed to seeing people with this kind of safety equipment on. Therefore, it is assumed that these safety measures did not significantly affect the results of the study, but the possibility should be acknowledged.

Finally, exploring learner beliefs at the second-grade level is relevant because beliefs at the start of the learning process can have an impact on later learning achievements (Enever et al. 2011: 59; Cadierno & Eskildsen 2018). Examining beliefs at this beginning stage also forms a basis for following their development in the long run, as many of the second graders who participated in the study and their guardians expressed willingness to be contacted about a follow-up study in the future and possibly to participate in it.

4.3 Methods of analysis

A mixed-methods approach is used in the present study: thus, both qualitative and quantitative data analysis are included. The methods used for analysing the interview data are thematic analysis and contingency tables. The participants' responses to the open-ended interview questions were used to examine the participants' beliefs about language learning and the English language: by investigating why the students want to learn English and their observations on the similarities and differences between Finnish and English, some of their underlying beliefs about English and language learning can be explored. The data was analysed by examining the responses of the whole group as well as comparing the answers of different sub-groups, based on factors such as gender and English skill level before starting to learn English at school.

Applied thematic analysis was used to analyse the responses to the open-ended interview questions as well as the sentence completion task. Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012: 15) define applied thematic analysis as "a rigorous, yet inductive, set of procedures designed to identify and examine themes from textual data in a way that is transparent and credible". In thematic analysis, the focus is on identifying underlying implicit ideas within the data which are called themes. From these themes, the researcher develops codes which represent them and applies them to data units as

markers (Guest et al. 2012: 10). The codes are then linked to specific data segments by the researcher. The process of thematic analysis often involves using an iterative process, i.e., creating a preliminary codebook (collection of notable codes), going over the data multiple times and revising the codes when needed. Applied thematic analysis is considered suitable for the purposes of the present study, as the aim is to identify implicit beliefs that the participants have about language and language learning. The framework used for investigating the participants' beliefs is a dialogical and sociocultural approach to the study of beliefs covered in section 3.2.

Braun and Clarke (2006: 79) describe one possible way of compiling a data set for thematic analysis by identifying "a particular analytic interest in some topic in the data, and the data set then becomes all instances in the corpus where that topic is referred." This model of thematic analysis is used in the present study: the corpus consists of all the interview data collected from second-grade pupils in the *Varhennetun kielenopetuksen seurantatutkimus* project, and the data set includes all instances across the data corpus that have relevance to the topics of beliefs about English language and learning English. In the quantitative part of the analysis, the prevalence of certain beliefs across the entirety of the data set is explored. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 79), the smallest unit of thematic analysis in this model is a data extract, which "refers to an individual coded chunk of data, which has been identified within, and extracted from a data item". In the final analysis, only some of these extracts will be presented. This is the approach used in the present study: extracts from the selected data set, which includes all interview question responses that have relevance to the topics of English- and English learning-related beliefs, are presented and explored.

Relative code frequencies, as opposed to absolute code frequencies, are used in this study. This means that if a participant expressed an idea related to a certain theme at any point in the interview, they are included in the category of that theme. Thus, the numbers in the belief categories are of participants who expressed the belief or theme in question at some point during the interview, not individual responses (so, if a participant expressed a theme multiple times, they are counted only once). It is also noteworthy that the theme categories are not mutually exclusive, and the same informants can be classified into multiple categories. These practices were adopted to allow for the complexity and interconnectedness of beliefs.

In the present study, the codes were developed by going through the data manually. When certain themes were identified pertaining to beliefs about English and learning English, those themes were given codes and the codes were listed in a codebook in addition to a description of when to apply each code. These codes were then used to form categories with which the participants' beliefs could be explored in more detail. Applied thematic analysis is, by nature, a subjective endeavour, but it is mitigated by carefully reporting on how and on which basis the analysis was conducted.

As Guest et al (2012: 50) point out, it is assumed that a researcher effect is present in the data analysis, and it is crucial to describe how that effect impacts the consequences of the study. Guest et al. (2012: 253) also state that it is essential to describe the rules according to which decisions were made for arriving at judgements during the process of data analysis. The purpose is to increase transparency in thematic analysis, which is inherently a somewhat subjective process. Similarly, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that to enhance the reliability of thematic analysis, the steps of the coding process should be described.

In order to conduct the analysis meticulously in the present study, a codebook was established in which each code and when to apply them was described. For example, two initial themes that were recognised within the interview responses were specific mentions of using English while travelling abroad and using English later in life rather than in the present moment. From these observations, initial codes *English use abroad* and *English use as an adult* were established. During the coding process, more specific codes were applied within each category: for example, within *English use abroad*, codes for *purposes for using English abroad* and *in which countries English is used* were created, with several sub-codes for each. The code *English use as an adult* was modified to *English use in the future*, because in some responses the need for using English seemed to be placed into the future, such as later studies or being older, but not necessarily in connection with being an adult. On a more general level, the codes *English use abroad* and *English use in the future* were grouped under the broader theme of *English use in remote contexts*. They were also reformulated into *English use in physically distant contexts* and *English use in temporally distant contexts* to better reflect the broader theme under which they fall. A similar process was used for analysing the rest of the data, and the findings are described in detail in chapter 5.

Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2006: 81) emphasise the importance of explicitly stating whether the researcher is attempting to use thematic analysis to describe the reality of the participants (a realist method), the responses of the participants as a reflection of societal discourses (a constructionist method), or something in between (a contextual method). In the current study, a contextual approach to thematic analysis is adopted: both individuals' own meaning-making of their experiences and the effect of the societal context on that meaning-making process is acknowledged. This is in line with the dialogical and sociocultural view of beliefs used in this study (see section 3.2).

Thematic analysis can also be expanded upon using quantitative methods. Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that an item appearing in more instances does not necessarily mean that the theme itself is more important than one that appears in a relatively small part of the data set, and researcher's own judgment is crucial for determining how to define or delineate a theme. However, in a data set that is adequately large, it

is possible to “compare the frequency with which codes are applied to text derived from different populations, subgroups, or categories of people to see if the overall patterning is similar or different” (Guest et al. 2012: 40). The patterns of beliefs emerging in the data set of this study are presented in section 5.2, which explores the possible connections between the pupils’ background factors and their English-related beliefs.

Contingency tables were used to find out if there are any connections to be found between the pupils’ beliefs and the following background factors: their use of English in their free time, their self-assessed level of English skills before starting school, the parental support that they receive for language learning, and their gender. The statistical significance of the findings was tested using Pearson’s chi-square test, which is suitable for cross-tabulations of relatively small-scale data (see e.g. Johnson & Christensen 2017: 558-559). The data was analysed using the programme IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The specifics of the quantitative analysis are presented in section 5.2.

5 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this chapter, the results of the study are presented. First, in section 5.1, the main themes emerging from the interviews are explored. Second, the backgrounds of the participants are examined in connection to their English-related beliefs in section 5.2.

5.1 Participants' beliefs about the English language and learning English

The following five open-ended interview questions were used in the present study for exploring the pupils' beliefs about learning English at school. It is noteworthy that the numbering of the questions presented here differs from their numbering in the interview form, as not all questions asked in the original interviews were included in the data set for the present study.

1. What do you like the most about studying English in school? (Please give an example)
Mikä englannin opiskelussa koulussa on mukavinta? (Kerro jokin esimerkki)
2. Is there something you do not like about studying English in school? (Please give an example)
Onko jotain mistä et pidä englannin opiskelussa koulussa? (Kerro jokin esimerkki)
3. Please continue the following sentence: I want to learn English because...
Jatka seuraavaa lausetta: Haluan oppia englantia, koska...
4. In your opinion, do the English and Finnish languages have anything in common?
Onko mielestäsi englannin ja suomen kielellä mitään yhteistä?
5. In your opinion, how does English differ from the Finnish language?
Miten englanti eroaa mielestäsi suomen kielestä?

The participants' responses to these questions were analysed using thematic content analysis, with a focus on the themes related to beliefs about the English language and learning English. The analysis is not limited to question-by-question basis, but rather

the responses of the participants are explored holistically across all the different questions. However, the main focus of the analysis is the responses to the sentence completion prompt “I want to learn English because...”, since it was found to yield the most results in terms of English-related beliefs. A more detailed analysis of questions 1 and 2 can be found in Mård-Miettinen et al.’s article (2022).

The main themes discovered in the analysis are shown in Table 1. In sections 5.1.1 – 5.1.5, the most common themes are explored in more detail.

TABLE 1: Respondents' beliefs about English and learning English. N=106.

Theme	No. Participants Who Expressed Theme (%)
Using English in remote contexts	46 (43 %)
Sub-theme: Using English in physically distant contexts	45 (42 %)
Sub-theme: Using English in temporally distant contexts	7 (7 %)
Using English in immediate contexts	7 (7 %)
Using English as a tool for spoken communication	37 (35 %)
English as a source of positive emotions	24 (23 %)

5.1.1 Using English in remote contexts

One major division that was observed in the participants’ beliefs was whether the English language was seen as something that is used in *remote* or *immediate* contexts. The former is used in this study to refer to beliefs in which the need for English use is placed in remote contexts in terms of physical and/or temporal distance in relation to the participants’ everyday lives. The latter is used to describe beliefs about English being needed at home, in the present moment or in other ways close to the participant’s everyday lives. The idea of physical distance refers mainly to the belief that English is needed while travelling abroad. This theme of English being perceived as necessary for travelling abroad has also been found in previous analyses of the same data that is being used in the present study: see Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021 (43; 61; 81) and Mård-Miettinen et al. 2022 (pp. 49; 52). In this section of the present study, the responses related to English use in other countries are placed in the broader context

of English being perceived as something distant, and they are analysed in more detail pertaining to where, when, and how English is used abroad.

As seen in Table 1, one of the most common themes emerging from the participants' responses was that of English use in remote contexts. Most of these ideas appeared in relation to the sentence completion task "I want to learn English because...", and one participant alluded to it in their response to the question "What do you like the most about studying English in school?". In total, 46 respondents (43 %) expressed an idea related to using English while travelling or living in other countries, i.e., in **physically distant** contexts. Nine respondents within this category specifically referred to travelling abroad for a holiday, for example saying "if I go on holiday abroad then I can speak the language" (*jos menee lomalle ulkomaille niin osaan sitten puhua kieltä*). In addition to travelling for pleasure, one participant indicated that he would like to live in an English-speaking country one day: "I want to move to America as an adult" (*haluan muuttaa aikuisena Amerikkaan*). Most participants who mentioned using English abroad did not specify the purpose for going abroad, for example referring simply to "going" abroad: "if you go to England then you need it [English]" (*jos menee Englantiin niin sitä [englantia] tarvitsee*). In sum, many participants viewed going abroad at some point as a likely scenario, or at least something they wished to do, be it travelling for pleasure or other purposes.

In addition to the responses specifically stating that the participants wish to learn English for using it abroad, two respondents reported that they want to learn English because they want to be able to talk to people on holiday and during travel, but they did not specify whether they meant travelling abroad: "if I go on holiday" (*jos meen lomalle –*); "I can go travelling" (*minä voin mennä reissuihin*). Even though there is a slight possibility that they may have been thinking of domestic travel, it is reasonable to assume that they mean travelling to foreign countries, so their answers are included in the "using English in physically distant contexts" category. Nonetheless, these two responses indicate that the informants deem knowing English to be a necessary skill specifically for special occasions such as travelling for a holiday.

When it comes to the responses relating English use to going abroad, two categories can be observed in terms of places where English would be used: out of the 45 participants who raised this theme, 13 mentioned a specific English-speaking country in their response, whereas 33 talked about unspecified foreign countries (Table 2).

TABLE 2: *Using English in physically distant contexts and sub-themes.*

Theme: Using English in physically distant contexts (46 mentions) - Where?		
Sub-theme: Using English in unspecified foreign countries (33 mentions)	Sub-theme: Using English in English-speaking countries (13 mentions)	
	England (11 mentions)	America (2 mentions)

As seen in table 2, England was the country that was mentioned the most often, 11 times in total. One potential reason for the prominence of England within the responses is the name of the English language which may have led the respondents' thoughts to England specifically. For example, one respondent said she wanted to learn English because "I can go on holiday there" (*voi mennä lomalle sinne*), apparently meaning going to England, despite the country not being mentioned in the sentence completion task prompt "I want to learn English because..." This demonstrates how strong the conceptual link between the English language and the country of England seems to be for some respondents, quite logically as the connection between the country and the language is apparent. It is also possible that since the respondents' home country, *Suomi* (Finland), and the most widely spoken language there, *suomi* (Finnish) have a similar etymological link, the children are used to the linguistic connection between a country and the language spoken there. A similar conflation between a country and a language could also be observed with the participant who reported their home language as "Iraq". This phenomenon was also evidenced by the responses to the question "how does English differ from the Finnish language?": some respondents talked about the differences between Finland and England, rather than the languages, for example saying "they speak English in England and Finnish in Finland" (*Englannissa puhutaan englantia ja Suomessa suomea*).

In addition to England, America was mentioned by two participants as a potential location for using their English skills, demonstrating awareness of English-speaking countries other than England. For one of them, America is familiar through personal experience: "we go to America a lot" (*käymme paljon Amerikassa*). The other has given thought to his future: he wants to move to America as an adult. These responses seem to indicate that Finnish 2nd graders are generally not yet aware of many other English-speaking countries than England, or at least they do not consider them potential travel destinations for themselves, unless they have had personal experiences with them, such as travelling with family. The UK and the USA are also quite prominently represented in media in Finland, such as in films, TV shows and music, which is a

likely additional reason for these being the most familiar countries to 2nd graders. It is also possible that these countries are represented in their schoolbooks, other learning materials and tasks they do in their lessons. As Mård-Miettinen et al. (2021: 35) report, ELL teachers use a wide variety of teaching materials from different sources, such as websites, schoolbooks and self-made materials. This variety offers the opportunity to use materials representing many different English-speaking cultures, but perhaps at the very beginning of the language learning journey, the teachers choose to focus on the countries that are the most familiar to pupils, which are likely to be the UK and the USA.

For those who mentioned using English abroad but did not specify whether they would do it in an English-speaking country or other countries, it is unknown whether they believed that English could be used in many countries despite it not being a local language and did not specify it for that reason, or if they meant that they would use English in principally English-speaking countries and just did not mention it specifically. Many respondents mention unspecified “other countries” and using English there, for example saying they want to learn English because “if you go to some country it’s a bit difficult if you don’t know how, if you talk to someone” (*jos menee johonkin maahan nii se on vähän vaikeeta jos ei osaa jos juttelee jollekin*) or “if I travel abroad” (*jos matkustan ulkomaille*). It is possible that due to their young age, they do not yet know many other countries, but they have a general awareness that English can be used in a great deal of places. This would imply that some participants may think in terms of *lingua franca* English: it can be used nearly anywhere in the world, no matter what country one might travel to. Four respondents specifically said that English is spoken by “many people” or in “many countries”, suggesting that they are aware of the fact that English is used as a communication tool between people who do not have the same first language. Two respondents mentioned specifically that they believed English is spoken everywhere in the world: one stated that “you can speak it [English] in every country” (*sitä [englantia] voi puhua kaikissa maissa*) whereas the other said they wanted to learn English because then “I can speak that one language that everyone understands” (*voi puhua sitä yhtä kieltä jota kaikki ymmärtää*). In addition, one respondent mentioned that “it [English] is one of the most important languages” (*se [englanti] on yksi tärkeimmistä kielistä*), which indicates this respondent is also aware of the *lingua franca* status of the language. These responses suggest that many pupils are quite aware of the role of the English language as a tool for communication not only between non-native and native English speakers, but also among people whose native language is not English.

In addition to where the respondents wish to use English, many participants expressed what they would like to do with English abroad. In general, most respondents do not seem to have very clear or specific ideas about what they would use English

for while abroad, or at least they did not deem it necessary to be expressed in their responses (or it simply did not occur to them to mention this). Some broad themes can still be identified within this category. One notable theme is the use of English as a tool of spoken communication specifically (25 mentions within the *using English in remote contexts* category), rather than for example reading or writing. These responses will be examined more closely in section 5.1.3. The rest of the answers within the *using English in physically distant contexts* category do not specify what English would be used for abroad: the participants whose answers fall into this miscellaneous category seem to think that knowing English is simply necessary or beneficial for travelling abroad, without specifying why or how. One informant, for instance, stated their reason for wanting to learn English as “I want to get to go to England” (*haluan päästä Englantiin*), which suggests that knowing the language is seen as a prerequisite for travelling to England. One participant said that for travel purposes, “it is good to know English” (*on hyvä osata englantia*). English was also seen as a means of managing different situations or being fine while staying in the country: “I would like to go to different countries so then I will be fine there” (*haluaisin käydä eri maissa, nii sit mä pärjään siellä*). It seems that knowing English is simply seen as good for travelling abroad, whatever its more specific benefits may be.

The prominence of this broad theme of English use in physically distant contexts indicates that the respondents place their need for using English mainly outside of Finland. The pupils do not seem to want to learn English for the purpose of using it in their everyday life, but rather on more special occasions, such as travelling abroad for a holiday. Very few respondents mentioned using English at home, in Finland (these responses will be covered in section 5.1.2). A similar belief of English being mainly needed abroad has arisen in previous research as well. For instance, in Aro’s study (2009) on Finnish 7-, 10- and 12-year-old pupils’ beliefs about English and the learning of English, one of the main themes expressed by the participants was indeed the theme of using English abroad. Additionally, similar results have been noted in research on kindergarteners by e.g. Mård-Miettinen et al. (2014) and Palojärvi (2015).

In addition to the need for English being placed in physically distant locations, i.e., other countries, the broader theme of remoteness can be observed in terms of **temporal distance** as well. The idea of temporal distance, i.e., English is needed specifically in the future, was observed in seven participants’ answers. The theme could be seen, for example, in responses in which participants stated that they want to learn English so that they can travel when they are “big” or “bigger”: “I will go to some countries when I’m big and there I need to learn to speak English” (*meen isona maihin ja siellä pitää oppia englantia puhumaan*). Some also make reference to working life, thus placing the need for using English to adulthood: “it could make it easier in working life too if you knew [English]” (*se vois helpottaa työelämässäkin jos osaisi*). Since second

graders are quite far from being personally familiar with working life, it is likely that these beliefs have been constructed in interaction with their significant others, such as their parents or teachers. One respondent expressed self-awareness about the fact that he does not yet know what kinds of needs he might have in terms of learning English in the future:

(1) I'm going to travel to some country when I'm big, and then it is good to know English. Maybe something else too at some point, but you don't know that yet as an 8-year-old.

Aion isona matkustaa johonkin maahan, ja sitten on hyvää osata englantia. Ehkä muutakin joskus, mutta sitä ei vielä tiedä 8-vuotiaana.

The respondent in question has quite perceptively observed that the needs that an 8-year-old might identify for their English learning are quite likely different from those of an older child, a teenager, or an adult.

There was also a response that could be interpreted as referring to using English in the future rather than in the present moment, despite it not containing explicit reference to being older or being an adult: one participant mentioned that he wants to learn English because “you can get somewhere in life with it [English]” (*sillä [englannilla] pääsee eteenpäin elämässä*), which would seem to refer to adult life rather than the pupil's current situation. This response is phrased in a way that is more typical of adults' speech, and it is possible that the respondent has heard this being said by, for example, his parents: this could be seen as a prominent example of the *internalisation* process of a belief that has been expressed in the person's social environment. Since a follow-up question was not asked, it is not known if the participant himself had an idea of in what way specifically English would help one “get somewhere in life”.

5.1.2 Using English in immediate contexts

Despite the prevalence of the larger theme of English being needed in physically and temporally remote situations, English was also seen as necessary in more **immediate contexts** by some, albeit only seven participants. While they did not explicitly mention using English in Finland or in the here and now, it can be inferred from their answers that they likely considered English to be necessary in their current, everyday circumstances or in the near future. Responses that indicate closeness to everyday life in some way were placed in the category of *using English in immediate contexts*, as a counterpart to the previously discussed theme of *using English in remote contexts*.

For example, the same respondent who mentioned that English helps one get somewhere in life, mentioned in section 5.1.1, also brought up that “it [English] helps in school” (*se [englanti] auttaa koulussa*), perhaps indicating that he considers English as a generally good subject to know. The implication here might be that the participant

considers it important to do well in English class, but he might also refer to the idea of knowing languages being indicative of more general intelligence and this being conducive to doing well in other school subjects, too. This might be an example of an internalised belief, if the participants' parents or teachers have expressed that succeeding in English classes is important. Five participants reported wanting to learn English for communicating with family members or relatives, for example "so that I can talk to my aunt's husband" (*että voi puhua tädin miehelle*). One participant also mentioned wanting to learn English so that he can use it "in games". Since the participant also reported currently using English in games almost every day, he seems to consider learning English to be useful and something that is possible to put into practice right away.

Five respondents also indicated that while they did not specifically mention going abroad themselves, they wanted to learn English for using it with foreigners. For example, one participant said she wanted to learn English because she wanted to be able to "speak to English people" (*sitten voi puhua sitä vaikka englantilaisille*) whereas another said "you can speak to people who speak different languages" (*voi puhua erikielisten kanssa*). This could refer to speaking to people encountered in Finland, perhaps tourists, or speaking to them while one is travelling abroad. These responses were not included in the "using English in remote contexts" nor in the "using English in immediate contexts" category, since it is unclear whether they refer to using English abroad or in Finland, but they are indicative of the idea that English was seen as a means of communicating with foreigners, be it in Finland or abroad. This is consistent with previous findings: e.g., Aro (2009: 65) noted that children tend to associate foreign languages with foreigners instead of foreign countries.

The respondents who expressed beliefs related to immediate contexts seem to have identified specific contexts for using English in their own lives by encountering situations in which knowing English would be useful, and they are likely basing their reasons for wanting to learn English on these personal experiences. Thus, they view English as useful in their life in the present moment. However, as will be seen in section 5.2.2, many of the other participants use English in their everyday lives as well, yet they did not report wanting to learn English in order to use it in their everyday lives. This indicates some sort of disconnect between the frequency of English use and English as a part of one's identity as a language user. This idea is discussed in further in section 5.1.6.

5.1.3 English as a tool for spoken communication

A prominent theme across the pupils' answers was that of using English specifically as a **tool for spoken communication** with other people. The responses were included in this category if speaking was mentioned in some capacity, or if the word speaking

was not included but the response otherwise clearly indicated that the participant was thinking of situations in which oral communication would typically be used. In total, 37 participants mentioned wanting to learn English specifically for being able to speak it. For example, one respondent thinks English is needed if someone asks him a question while travelling:

- (2) If I go on holiday with my family, I can respond if someone asks something.
Jos meen lomalle oman perheen kanssa nii sitten osaan vastata jos joku kysyy jotain.

It is interesting that the respondent seems to deem it more likely that he is the one who would have the answers in the situation, rather than being the one who would pose questions: this might indicate that the respondent is familiar with travelling abroad and perhaps this kind of situation has occurred, which has informed his views on the topic. Additionally, it is notable that the participant is planning to take agency in the language use situation: even though he would be travelling with his family, he plans to be the one to communicate in the situation, which indicates a sense of confidence in himself as a competent language user.

Three participants mentioned specifically that they wanted to learn English because they wanted to form new social connections with people from different countries:

- (3) a. if you go to England then you can speak and make friends
jos menee Englantiin niin voi puhua ja saada ystäviä
- b. if I meet a friend, I can play with them or make a new friend
jos tulee kaveri vastaan nii pystyn leikkimään sen kaa tai saada siitä uuden kaverin
- c. you can make friends with different people using different languages
voi saada erilaisia ystäviä eri kielien avulla

One participant (3 c.) emphasised the role of knowing other languages in general in the process of getting to know different people, not just English. These respondents indicate that they view English (and perhaps language more generally) as a tool for getting to know people and form connections with them. Additionally, some informants allude to maintaining or strengthening existing social connections, such as those with family members who speak other languages. These responses were covered in section 5.1.2 regarding the theme of *using English in immediate contexts*.

Most respondents within this category do not specify in what kinds of situations they would need to speak English; rather, their responses contain the implication that knowing how to speak English is useful, for example for travelling abroad, even if it is not specified why this is the case. The prominence of the theme of speaking could indicate that the respondents see speaking as the primary purpose of language use

and as the most important of the four core language skill areas (speaking, listening, reading and writing). The other skill areas were rarely specifically mentioned by the participants: one said she wants to be able to understand what is said in other countries, whereas one other mentioned that he would like to be able to understand texts written in English, but these were the only specific allusions to other skill areas than speaking. Naturally, due to the respondents' age, they may not write or read a great deal even in their mother tongue yet, which might be a reason why speaking is emphasised in the responses. In addition, the national Finnish core curriculum states that spoken language should be the focus in early language teaching (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019), which leads to its prevalence in English classes at school and thus may also contribute to the prominence of this particular skill area in the responses.

5.1.4 English as a source of positive emotions

The themes explored so far in section 5.1 refer to beliefs that the informants have about English as useful in some way, be it while travelling abroad or talking to relatives, for example. However, one notable category of beliefs did not refer to the potential uses of the language but rather the **positive emotions** related to learning it. 24 informants brought up some kind of positive emotion related to the English language or learning English as a reason for wanting to learn it. The word nice (*kiva* or *mukava*) was frequently used to describe learning English. Some participants stated simply that they want to learn English because they like it: for example, one informant said that "English is nice and it is fun to learn it" (*englanti on mukavaa ja sitä on kiva oppia*). These responses indicate that for some learners, the positive emotions connected to studying English arise specifically from the pleasantness of the language learning process itself rather than the perceived usefulness of knowing the language. It is possible that these respondents have not yet considered English much outside of the context of their English classes: if English is mostly familiar to them in a school context, they may consider it primarily as a school subject and express how they feel about it in this specific context, particularly if they have not encountered situations in which knowing English would be useful to them in their everyday lives yet.

In addition to the open-ended interview questions, two Likert scale questions related to positive emotions regarding English and learning it were asked. The responses to these questions have been covered previously in Mård-Miettinen et al.'s article (2022: 47-49), so they are not explored in detail in the present study, but they are explored in connection with background factors in section 5.2.4. Overall, the responses to these questions indicate that the informants have primarily positive attitudes towards the English language and learning English, which is in line with the observations made about the open-ended question responses. Previous research also

indicates that it is typical for young learners to have mostly positive attitudes towards language learning at the beginning of their formal language learning journey at school, but the attitudes tend to become somewhat less positive over time (see, e.g., Enever 2011). To support language learners, it would be useful to conduct further research on when these changes in attitudes happen and whether they can be influenced by school instruction in some way.

5.1.5 Metalinguistic awareness and the importance of vocabulary

In the interview, the participants were asked to describe what differences and similarities there are between the English and Finnish languages. The interview questions that were posed to the participants were the following: “In your opinion, do the English and Finnish languages have anything in common?” and “In your opinion, how does English differ from the Finnish language?” Answers to these questions brought up some beliefs that the respondents seem to hold about the English language specifically in relation to the Finnish language. They also offer insight into the informants’ metalinguistic awareness. An overview of the responses to these questions has been reported by Mård-Miettinen et al. (2021: 46), whereas in the present study, the responses are analysed in more detail and placed in the wider context of learner beliefs. Firstly, English was mostly seen as quite different from Finnish, and it was easier for the participants to come up with differences than similarities between the languages. Secondly, the participants focus most on vocabulary as well as speaking and writing out of all aspects of language (although all aspects were brought up at least once: speaking, understanding, reading, and writing).

Many participants made observations about the similarities and differences between the vocabularies of English and Finnish. In total, 49 participants (46 %) brought up vocabulary in some way: some have observed words such as *pizza* and *pink* that are similar in both languages, whereas others note that some words might look similar even though they mean different things, such as the words “no” (exclamation *well* in Finnish) and “on” (third person present tense of the verb “olla”, *to be*, in Finnish). Vocabulary seems to be a dominant aspect of language in the minds of the respondents as a clear majority of them brought up a theme related to words, either in terms of differences or similarities between the Finnish and English languages, or both. This is quite natural, since vocabulary is commonly seen as the basis of a language and the most crucial aspect to learn: for example, grammar, while important, is usually regarded as secondary to vocabulary. Another reason behind this perception could be the experience that the pupils have of formal language instruction so far: in ELT, grammar is not usually a focus whereas vocabulary lists are likely something already familiar to the participants. It is also possible that even if the children were aware of some grammatical similarities or differences between English and Finnish, they may

not have had the terminology to describe these elements as they have not become familiar with the names of the relevant concepts yet. The prevalence of vocabulary has also been noted in previous research: for example, in Mård-Miettinen and Pitkänen-Huhta's study (2022: 81), children had a conception of school English which involves learning specific words and phrases. It seems that the participants in the present study may hold a similar view.

Most respondents did not find similarities between Finnish and English or found only few, and they found more differences between the languages. Moreover, the similarities are quite surface-level, such as singular words, whereas the differences include more fundamental aspects such as the role of letter-sound correspondence in the pronunciations of the two languages. Many respondents seem to be quite aware of the complexity of English spelling rules compared to Finnish in which the orthography more closely represents morphemes phonologically. This idea was worded in many ways, such as "English is spoken differently than it is written, but Finnish is spoken the same way [as it is written]" (*enkussa puhutaan eri tavalla kuin kirjoitetaan*) and "it's pronounced in a different way from how it's written" (*ääntyy eri tavalla kuin kirjoitetaan*). These answers indicate some quite developed metalinguistic awareness, i.e., the ability to make observations about a language and analyse it. On the other hand, these responses may reflect a prevalent belief in society that many Finnish speakers hold: Alanen (2006: 65) uses this very belief of "Finnish is written as it's spoken" as an example of a *cultural artifact*, a commonly held belief which plays a role in creating social cohesion among a group and which is difficult to change despite evidence to the contrary. It seems that many of the young learners have internalised this commonly held belief in Finnish society. The respondent who uses the expression "to be pronounced" (*ääntyä*) also seems to have internalised some language-related vocabulary in the school context, which demonstrates how the school environment affects the construction of learners' beliefs.

Some respondents explicitly say that English is difficult or more difficult than Finnish. In addition, many describe English not only as different from Finnish, but in some way odd or strange:

- (4) a. there are some weirder words in it [English]
siinä [englannissa] on vähän oudompia sanoja
- b. it is not spoken normally like this but really different somehow
ei puhuta tälleen normaalisti vaan jotenkin ihan erilaisesti
- c. English is gibberish. It is easier to speak Finnish than English
englanti on siansaksaa. Suomea on helpompi puhua kuin enkkua
- d. [in English] words are different, fancier and a bit strange
[englannissa] sanat on erilaisia, hienompia ja vähän outoja

The responses shown above present many emotions and perceptions associated with English, such as that it is *gibberish* or *fancier than Finnish*. One informant demonstrates awareness of the subjectivity of perceiving languages as odd: “English words sound strange to us, and Finnish words sound strange to English people” (*englannin sanat ovat oudon kuuloisia meille ja suomen sanat oudon kuuloisia englantilaisille*). On the whole, these beliefs about English as something strange and mostly different from Finnish seem to demonstrate a similar idea of English as *remote* from the learners as the conception of English being used in remote contexts, which was discussed earlier in this chapter.

Overall, it seems that English is perceived through the lens of vocabulary, it is seen as quite different from Finnish, and the differences are seen as a source of challenges by some. Since these themes are quite broad and challenging to quantify, they are not examined using contingency tables in the present study, but they can still shed light on what kinds of ideas children hold about the English language and learning it. The importance of vocabulary for young learners has been noted in previous research as well: for example, learning new words is often mentioned by young learners as a positive aspect of learning foreign languages (Enever et al 2011: 44). Since second graders demonstrate quite perceptive metalinguistic observations, indicating that the children are interested in the similarities and differences between languages, more multilingual activities could perhaps be fostered also in formal language instruction at school to encourage the development of the pupils’ metalinguistic awareness even further.

5.1.6 Summary

In sum, the most notable learner beliefs about the English language that arise in this study are that English is used in *remote contexts* (both in terms of physical and temporal distance) as a tool of *spoken communication*, and it is associated with *positive emotions*. English as a language is viewed as quite different from Finnish, and it is conceptualised mainly through *vocabulary*.

Many of the ideas indicated by the participants may be based on their previous personal experiences. For example, they may have noted while travelling abroad themselves that English is needed there. However, one might assume that the increasing use of technology as well as the prevalence of social media in the lives of children would be reflected in their beliefs about where English can be used. The respondents likely have a great deal more contact with the English language than for instance Aro’s (2009) study subjects more than a decade prior to this study, yet the beliefs among the respondents are very similar. In addition to the idea of English being needed abroad, another similarity to Aro’s (2006: 91) previous findings is the belief that English is

mainly needed for speaking: oral communication with people who speak foreign languages is seen as the most significant use of English for the informants both in the present study as well as in Aro's.

Aro (2006: 96) also points out that not only are children's beliefs shaped by their own experiences, but they are also reflective of more general attitudes towards English in society: the so-called voice of the Finnish cultural community can be observed within the children's responses. In Leppänen et al.'s (2009) study examining Finnish people's English-related beliefs, English was perceived as something foreign and distant rather than a part of the speaker's own language identity. Based on the similarities observed in the beliefs of children at the time of the present study compared to Aro, or Leppänen et al., it seems that the Finnish cultural community's voices, the societally prevalent views on the English language, have stayed somewhat similar. Even though English is sometimes unofficially referred to as the third national language in Finland (despite it not actually having that status), there is still a certain disconnect between the use of the English language and the perception of its role in people's lives.

To summarise, it seems that young learners conceptualise English mainly as something that they will use outside the context of their everyday lives. A possible reason for this could be that they conceptualise the English learned and used in school as something different from the English used elsewhere – school English is learned through formal instruction, whereas real-life English is used for actual communication with people in different contexts. This division between the conceptualisations of school English and everyday English has been observed in previous research (see, e.g., Aro 2006; Aro 2009; Pitkänen-Huhta & Nikula 2013; Mård-Miettinen & Pitkänen-Huhta 2022).

It should be noted that the way the interview was conducted may have had some effect on the prevalence of the conception English as foreign and distant in the responses. The themes in question mostly came up in the sentence completion task "I want to learn English because..." This sentence may be seen as containing the implication that the children do not know (much) English yet, which may direct the respondents' thoughts to the future, to that distant point when they "have learned English", whatever that may mean to them. This factor could shed some light on why so few respondents mentioned wanting to learn English for the purpose of using it in their everyday lives in the near future. To add, the fact that the interviews were conducted at school may have reinforced the idea of school English within the participants' minds. Nevertheless, the findings are largely consistent with previous research, so it seems that these ideas are worth further exploration in future research.

5.2 Background factors and beliefs

The present section aims to answer research question 2: What connections, if any, can be found between the participants' beliefs about the English language, learning English, and the following background factors:

- a. their gender;
- b. their use of English in their free time;
- c. their self-reported level of English skills before school age;
- d. the support they receive from their parents regarding learning English?

This question is explored by using cross-tabulation to demonstrate possible differences between groups and the beliefs they hold. As Johnson and Christensen (2017: 518) state, cross-tabulation can be used for examining relationships between two (or more) categorical variables. Categorical variables are defined as variables that are "made up of different types of categories of a phenomenon", and they typically involve different groups (Johnson & Christensen 2017: 39). In order to analyse the connections between beliefs and participants' backgrounds quantitatively, both the beliefs and background factors were operationalised into a numerical form and as categorical variables. The ways each of the background factors were quantified and categorised will be described in corresponding sections 5.2.1 – 5.2.4. The operationalisation of the language-related beliefs will be described in the present section.

The numerical operationalisation of something as complex as learner beliefs is not a simple task. Since pre-existing data was used for the present study, the operationalisation was done afterwards based on the qualitative data collected via a structured interview. Because of the interconnected nature of beliefs, it was not seen as meaningful to do the quantitative analysis based on mutually exclusive belief categories, since having expressed a certain belief does not inherently imply that the person in question cannot hold another language-related belief as well. As Guest et al (2012: 177) point out, there are theoretically an infinite number of response options to open-ended questions, so the data they produce are not truly dichotomous in nature. For example, if an informant expresses the belief that "English is mainly needed for spoken communication" but not that "English is mainly used in remote contexts", this does not necessarily mean that the person does not also believe that English is mostly used in remote contexts – it could be simply that the person did not express the latter idea in this interview, yet he or she holds both beliefs simultaneously. Nevertheless, to investigate possible connections between beliefs and the participants' backgrounds for the purposes of the present study, the operationalisation was made based on

whether a certain belief was expressed or not: thus, the possible categories for each belief variable were either 1 (participant expressed this theme at some point during the interview) or 0 (participant did not express this theme during the interview).

To test the statistical significance of the cross-tabulation, this study uses Pearson’s chi-square test, which can be used for examining the significance of a relationship between variables (see, e.g., Davis 2013: 105). Only the major themes, i.e., those with the most mentions, were analysed using a chi-square test, as the numbers of responses in the sub-themes were so low that valid statistical analysis could not be performed. This is because it is necessary to have “at least 20 observations [of a theme] in the sample, with at least 5 in each category” in a cross-tabulation (Davis 2013: 105). However, since the data is not truly dichotomous as previously mentioned, and the sample of the study is nonrandomised, it is advised by Guest et al. (2012: 176) that inferential statistics, such as probability values (p-values), should be used solely for descriptive purposes and they are “not intended to be inferential toward any larger population”. While these limitations need to be considered, this study can give a starting point for exploring these factors with different methods in the future.

In the following sections, the themes identified in the interviews will be explored in more detail in terms of the background factors of the participants. It is important to note that tables 3–6 are not contingency tables, but rather they present the main results of several cross-tabulations and their chi square test results at once for the sake of conciseness.

5.2.1 Beliefs and gender

Table 3 shows how many participants expressed each of the major beliefs, classified by gender.

TABLE 3: Relation between English-related beliefs and gender.

Theme	Total (N=106)	Girls (n=55) n (%)	Boys (n=51) n (%)	Chi-square test of independence
Using English in remote contexts	46 (43 %)	24 (44 %)	22 (43 %)	$X^2(1, N = 106) = .003,$ $p = .959$
Using English as a tool for spoken communication	37 (35 %)	19 (35 %)	18 (35 %)	$X^2(1, N = 106) = .007,$ $p = .936$
English as a source of positive emotions	24 (23 %)	12 (22 %)	12 (24 %)	$X^2(1, N = 106) = .025,$ $p = .873$

The variables of the beliefs identified in the thematic analysis and participants' gender were cross-tabulated according to the principles outlined in section 5.2: A chi-square test of independence was performed to evaluate the relationship between the participants' gender and whether they expressed the belief or not. As can be seen in Table 3, there is very little difference between the responses of girls and boys: 44 % of girls and 43 % of boys mentioned the theme of *using English in remote contexts*, and 35 % of both girls and boys mentioned the theme *using English as a tool for spoken communication*. The third theme, *English as a source of positive emotion*, was brought up by 22 % of the girls and 24 % of the boys. As expected based on these initial observations, the chi-square tests of independence showed that there was no significant association between gender and the belief variables, as all the p-values were substantially higher than the required significance threshold of $p=0.05$ (see, e.g., Johnson & Morgan 2016: 204). The exact results of the chi-squared tests are reported in Table 3.

These results suggest that gender may not be a significant factor when it comes to beliefs about the English language and learning English in the second grade, at least regarding the beliefs examined in the present study. In future research, a bigger sample size could be used to explore the results on a wider scale. It would also be beneficial to know if boys and girls start having differing attitudes towards and beliefs about learning English later and how teachers could take this into account in language education, since one of the goals of the earlier start in foreign language teaching in Finland is specifically supporting boys' study motivation and achievements (Skinnari 2018).

5.2.2 Beliefs and use of English in free time

During the interview, the participants were asked to describe their use of English in their free time. The interview question was "How often do you use English somewhere else than at school in English classes (for example at home, at a friend's house or in a hobby)?" The interviewers then posed questions about more specific subcategories, which included the following: a) speaking English with a friend or someone else; b) listening to songs/music in English; c) watching shows/videos in English; d) playing games in English (for example on a phone, a tablet or a console); e) in a hobby (for example football, dance, ballet); f) reading something in English somewhere else than at school (for example magazines, books, websites); g) writing something in English somewhere else than at school; and h) doing something else in English. (Sub-question h. is excluded from the present study, as these responses mostly overlapped with the participants' other responses.) The answer options were the 0 = not at all or less often than once a month, 1 = monthly, 2 = weekly and 3 = almost every day. Because the responses to these questions have been analysed previously by Mård-Miettinen et al. (2022: 49), they are not reported in detail here: instead, the values which were

relevant for the statistical analysis of this study are presented. The mean values of participants' English use are reported in Figure 1.

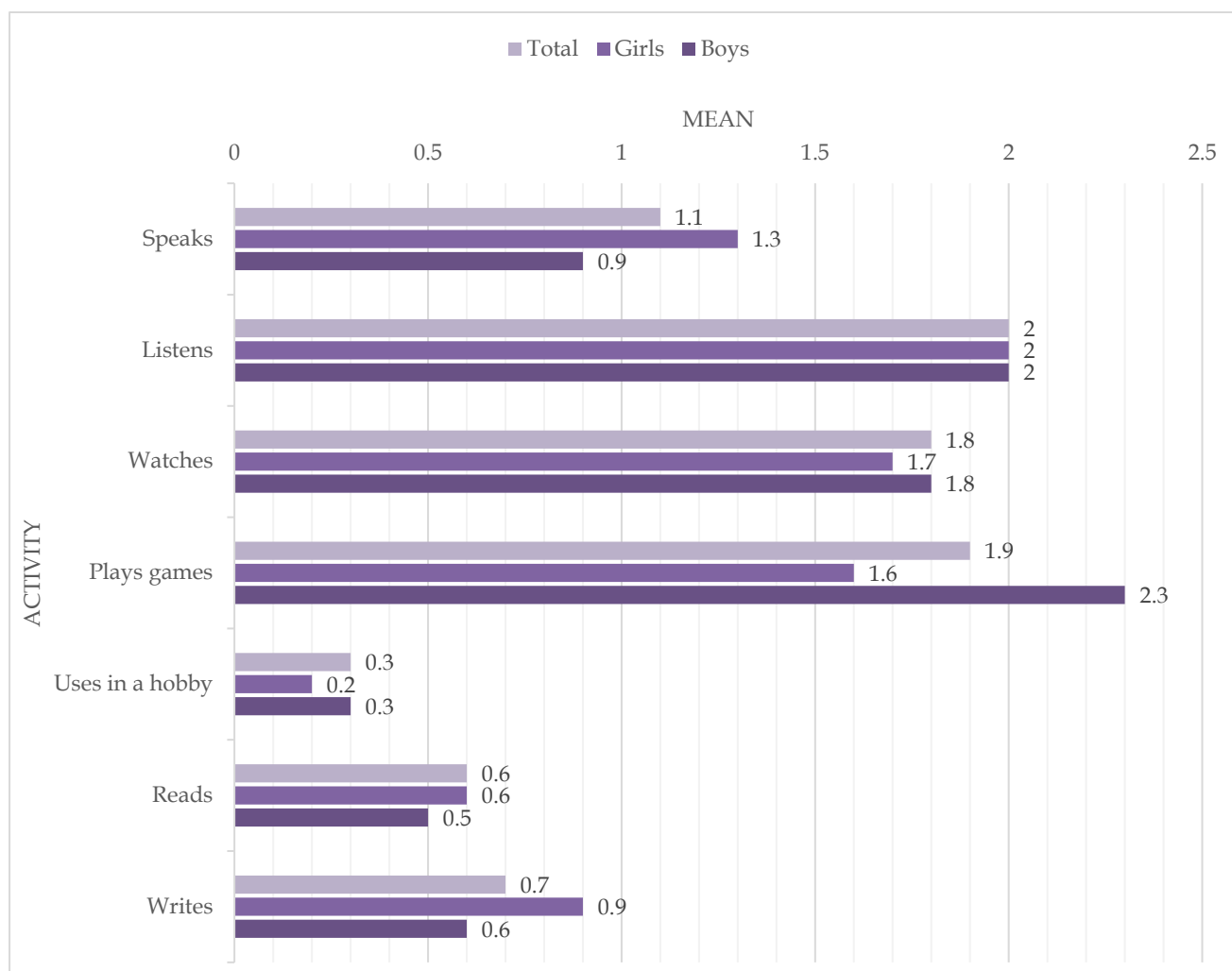


FIGURE 1: The participants' self-reported use of English in their free time. 0 = less often than once a month or not at all, 1 = monthly, 2 = weekly, 3 = almost every day. (Total N=106, girls N=55, boys N=51.)

The most frequently practised activity the participants reported was listening to something in English which they did approximately weekly (M=2). Other common activities were playing games in English (M=1.9) and watching something in English (M=1.8). The clearest difference between boys and girls can be observed in playing games in English: boys played them at least weekly (M=2.3), whereas girls played them less often than weekly (M=1.6). There are also some small differences in other categories: for example, girls reported speaking and writing in English slightly more often than boys, whereas boys said they watch content in English and use it in hobbies somewhat more often than girls. Most of the respondents who reported doing

something else in English said that they used English at home with family members or relatives.

To be able to explore the connections of English use in free time with beliefs, participants' self-reported use of English was quantified as a single number that represents the participant's overall use of English in their free time. This number is the mean (M) of the participant's responses to the questions of how often they speak English, listen to English, watch something in English, play games in English, use English in a hobby, read something in English or write something in English. Based on this *English use in free time* variable, the participants were categorised into three groups: those who use English *rarely* (M=0-0.99, n=41), those who use English *sometimes* (M=1-1.5, n=39) and those who use English *often* (M=1.51-3, n=26). For instance, if the informant's value of the *English use in free time* variable is 1.3, he or she was placed in the "uses English sometimes" category. The category limits were decided based on group sizes: to perform the statistical analysis with an adequate expected count in each category, the groups needed to be approximately similar in size.

It should be noted that because the intervals between the options are not equal and thus the data is ordinal rather than interval in nature (see e.g. Johnson & Morgan 2016: 101), the mean does not represent a real-life value of how often the participants use English; it is rather used as an analytical tool for comparing the frequency of the participants' English use relative to one another.

TABLE 4: Relation between English-related beliefs and free-time English use.

Theme	Total (N=106)	Uses English rarely (n=41) n (%)	Uses English sometimes (n=39) n (%)	Uses English often (n=26) n (%)	Chi-square tests of independence
Using English in remote contexts	46 (43 %)	14 (34%)	19 (49%)	12 (46%)	$X^2(2, N = 106) = 1.304, p = .521$
Using English as a tool of spoken communication	37 (35%)	14 (34%)	15 (39%)	8 (31%)	$X^2(2, N = 106) = .423, p = .809$
English as a source of positive emotions	24 (23%)	7 (17%)	10 (26%)	7 (28%)	$X^2(2, N = 106) = 1.324, p = .516$

Table 4 shows how many informants expressed each of the beliefs classified by English use in free time. The results of the chi-square tests are also reported in the table.

Similarly to the cross-tabulation with gender as a variable, no statistically significant association between beliefs and English use in free time was found ($p > .05$). Despite that, some observations can be made: it seems that a smaller proportion (34 %) of those who use English *rarely* expressed the idea about *using English in remote contexts* than those who use English *sometimes* (49 %) or *often* (46 %). An explanatory factor here could be that those who use English more often might be people whose families travel more: thus, the children in question may use English more because they have use for it while travelling, and these experiences in turn reinforce the idea that English is specifically needed in remote contexts, i.e., travelling abroad.

In addition, despite the lack of statistical significance, it can be noted that the percentage of pupils who brought up positive emotions related to English in the *uses English rarely* group is slightly smaller (17 %) than in the *uses English sometimes* (26 %) and *uses English often* (28 %) groups. This could perhaps indicate either that those who use English more are more likely to feel positive emotions towards the language, or that those who perceive the language positively also enjoy using it in their free time.

It is particularly notable that only one participant brought up wanting to learn English for using it in games despite 71 participants (67 %) reporting that they use English in games almost every day or weekly. In general, the participants reported doing something in English in their free time quite often, yet very few indicated that they would want to learn English for the purpose of using it more in their free time activities. It is possible that the pupils were thinking about 'school English' during the interview, as they were asked earlier about their English classes in school, and the interview itself was conducted at school. A similar disconnect between the English used in school and English use in everyday life has been noted in previous research, such as in Aro's 2006 study. This idea was previously discussed in section 5.1.6.

5.2.3 Beliefs and level of English skills before school age

The interview participants were asked to describe what their skill level in English had been before starting to learn English at school. More specifically, two questions were asked: "If you don't speak English at home, could you speak any English when you started learning it at school last autumn (or in the beginning of the year 2020)?" and "If you don't speak English at home, did you understand any English before you started learning it at school last autumn (or in the beginning of the year 2020)? (when you hear someone speak English or you see text in English)". The responses to both questions were reported on a scale from 0-3 in the following way: 0 = could not speak/understand English at all, 1 = could say/understand a few words, 2 = could say a few things/could understand a few sentences, 3 = could speak/understand quite a lot already. The findings on English skill levels have been previously presented in

the final report of the *Varhennetun kielenopetuksen seuranta tutkimus* project (Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021: 43-44). However, since these findings are being used for the purposes of quantitative analysis in this study, they are presented in a different format here: In order to use this data for statistical analysis, it was deemed necessary to create one number that represents each participant’s overall English skill level in terms of both speaking and understanding. This was achieved by calculating the mean value of the responses to the two questions about knowing English before school age for each participant. These mean values are presented in Figure 2. The participants who reported having English as a home language were not asked these two questions, but they are included in Figure 2 as their own category.

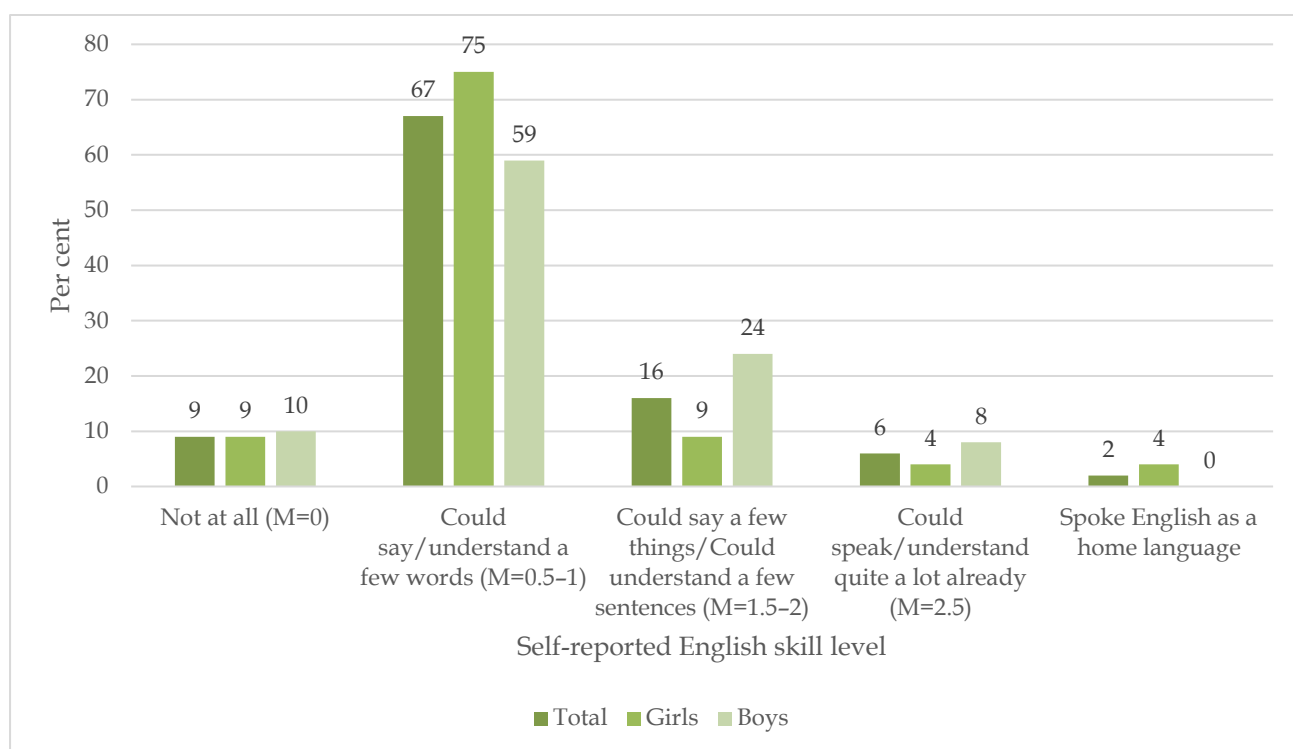


FIGURE 2: How much the participants reported they could speak and understand English before starting to learn it at school.

Total N=106, girls N=55, boys N=51.

As shown in Figure 2, a clear majority of the participants (67%) reported that they could say and/or understand a few words in English before starting to learn it at school. 9% reported not having been able to speak or understand any English before starting school, whereas 16% reported that they could say a few things and/or understand a few sentences. 6 % of the participants expressed having had a higher proficiency in English, stating that they could speak and/or understand English “quite a lot already”. Two percent of the participants reported speaking English as a home language, so it can be assumed that these participants were quite familiar with English.

Some differences between boys and girls can be observed in Figure 1: a higher percentage of girls (75 %) reported belonging in the category “could say/understand a few words” than boys (59 %). Conversely, 24 % of boys reported having been able to say a few things and/or understand a few sentences, whereas only 16% of girls reported the same. All in all, boys reported having a somewhat higher skill level in English than girls before starting to learn English at school. Whether this can be attributed to a genuine difference in skills or rather a difference in girls’ and boys’ confidence in their skills remains to be explored in further research. A similar disparity has been noted in some previous studies, such as in Inha and Huhta’s (2018) research which indicated that boys had somewhat higher skill levels in English than girls, which may have been the result of boys using English more in their free time.

For the purposes of the cross-tabulation, the mean values presented in Figure 2 were recoded into three categories: 1=Did not know English or knew very little (M=0-0.5, n=38), 2=Knew a little English (M=1, n=43), and 3=Knew at least some English (M=1.5-3, n=25). Those who spoke English as a home language were included in the third category. The reason for re-coding the responses into specifically three categories was to make the statistical analysis possible, since had there been more categories, they would have been too small for valid cross-tabulation. Similarly to the variable *English use in free time*, these categories were intentionally formed so that the group sizes would be balanced. In Table 5, the beliefs are presented based on the classifications of level of English skills before starting English classes at school. The results of the chi-square tests are also shown.

TABLE 5: Relation between English-related beliefs and self-reported level of English skills before school age.

Themes	Total (N=106)	Did not know English or knew very little (n=38) n (%)	Knew a little English (n=43) n (%)	Knew at least some English (n=25) n (%)	Chi-square tests of independence
Using English in remote contexts	46 (43 %)	15 (40 %)	21 (49 %)	10 (40 %)	$X^2(2, N = 106) = .874, p = .646$
Using English as a tool of spoken communication	37 (35%)	12 (32 %)	18 (42 %)	7 (28 %)	$X^2(2, N = 106) = 1.625, p = .444$
English as a source of positive emotions	24 (23%)	8 (21 %)	10 (23 %)	6 (25 %)	$X^2(2, N = 106) = .137, p = .934$

As with the previously examined two variables of gender and English use in free time, no statistically significant differences between the groups were found ($p > .05$). Nevertheless, some small differences can be observed. The theme of *using English in remote contexts* seems to be the most prevalent in the middle category, with those who *knew a little English* before starting to learn it at school (49 % versus 40 % in the two other groups). Perhaps the participants' personal experiences may shed light on these differences: those who knew a little English already before school may have had the opportunity to utilise their skills already while travelling (perhaps that is how they have acquired their skills) which could lead them to associate English use with going abroad. In contrast, those who did not know any English yet may not have encountered situations in which they could use English abroad, which might lead to this association not being as prevalent in their minds. Regarding the group of those who knew the most English, it could be that since they already knew English (some even speak it as their home language), they have observed other situations and contexts for using English which are not necessarily related to travelling abroad.

In terms of using English as a tool of spoken communication, the middle category of those who knew a little English emerges as the largest with 42 % of informants in this group mentioning this idea. This might be due to the fact that those who know a little English are perhaps likely to know specifically spoken English: before school age, it seems unlikely that they would be able to interact a great deal with written English since they might not know how to read in their native language yet either, whereas, for instance, those whose home language is English might be more familiar with written English as well and they may have used it themselves. Regarding positive emotions connected to learning English, the responses are very evenly spread among the different groups, so experiencing positive emotions regarding English does not appear to be connected to the level of English skills before school age.

5.2.4 Beliefs and parental support

The variable of parental support was not originally included in the research questions of the present study, but it was added during the analysis process as I made the preliminary observation that the variable would be relevant in terms of the main aims of this research. Because parental support has been found to have an impact on language learning achievements, it is relevant to examine whether it has any connection with learner beliefs as well (see Pfenninger & Singleton 2019). In the original data collection process for the *Varhennetun kielenopetuksen seurantatutkimus* project, the participants were asked four questions related to parental support regarding their English learning. The questions were the following:

Do your parents ask what you do in English classes at school?

Do your parents help you with studying English (e.g., doing homework or if you ask them how to say something in English)?

Do your parents encourage you to use English outside of school (e.g., at home or while travelling)?

Do you talk with your parents about where you can see and hear English outside of school (e.g., at the store, in TV programmes, in games, in newspapers)?

The participants chose the most fitting answer on a five-point Likert scale, with the options being “often”, “sometimes”, “I don’t really know”, “almost never” and “never”. The overall responses to these questions have been previously reported by Mård-Miettinen et al. (2021: 48–49): the majority of the participants said that their parents help them with studying English at least sometimes, and the parents also ask what their children do in English class at least sometimes. Approximately half of the participants said that their parents encourage them to use English outside of school, and about a third reported that they talk about seeing and hearing English outside of school at least sometimes. It is noteworthy that the responses are based on the children’s perceptions, and the results might differ if the same questions were posed to the parents themselves.

For the purposes of this study, the responses to all four parent-related questions were operationalised into one variable, *parental support*, by calculating a mean value (M) of each of the four responses for each participant and then dividing the participants into two groups based on the means: those with *less parental support* (M=0–2.5, n=56) and those with *more parental support* (M=2.51–4, n=50). The cut-off point for the mean dividing the two groups was determined based on making the groups approximately equal in size for the purposes of the cross-tabulation.

Table 6 shows how many informants expressed each of the beliefs classified by parental support regarding English learning and the results of the chi squared tests. Whereas no statistical significance was found regarding the themes of *using English in remote contexts* and *using English as a tool of spoken communication*, a statistically significant difference between groups was found regarding the theme *English as a source of positive emotions*: those with more parental support report experiencing English as a source of positive emotions more often than those with less parental support (36 % versus 11 %, $p = .002$). This result indicates a connection between parental support and positive emotions related to the English language and learning English. It is possible that parents encouraging their children to use English in everyday contexts and helping them with studying English help foster positive emotions towards the language. However, it should be noted that a causal relationship between the variables cannot be assumed. For example, it is also possible that pupils who view English as a source of positive emotions are more likely to initiate discussions about English with

their parents, or there could be some other factor that enhances both the English-related positive emotions of the children and the support offered by the parents. It also must be noted that while these results show that those with more parental support brought up their positive emotions regarding English more often than those with less parental support, it is possible that those with less support also experience positive emotions and just did not bring them up while answering the open-ended interview questions, because the theme categories are not mutually exclusive.

TABLE 6: Relation between English-related beliefs and parental support.

Themes	Total (N=106)	Less parental support (n=56) n (%)	More parental support (n=50) n (%)	Chi-square tests of independence
Using English in remote contexts	46 (43 %)	27 (48 %)	19 (38 %)	$X^2(1, N = 106) = 1.122, p = .290$
Using English as a tool of spoken communication	37 (35%)	22 (39 %)	15 (30 %)	$X^2(1, N = 106) = 1.002, p = .317$
English as a source of positive emotions	24 (23%)	6 (11 %)	18 (36 %)	$X^2(1, N = 106) = 9.351, p = .002$

Because of the possible connection between parental support and English as a source of positive emotions, further analysis was conducted: as discussed previously in section 5.1.4, the interview data includes two relevant multiple choice questions with five-point Likert scale options when it comes to the theme of experiencing positive emotions related to English and learning it: “How much do you like studying English at school?” and “Is English a nice language?”. Because these two questions are directly relevant to the theme of English as a source of positive emotions, it was seen as appropriate to analyse whether the variable *parental support* had any connection to the responses to these two questions.

The Likert scale answers (0–4) to the question “How much do you like studying English at school?” were recoded into three categories (1=*Likes less*, 2=*Likes somewhat*, 3=*Likes a great deal*) in order to make the cross-tabulation possible with a relatively small data set. Due to the low number of responses in categories 0=“not at all”, 1=“not much” and 2=“I don’t really know if I like it or not”, they were all included in the category *likes less*, meaning that these participants like studying English less than

3=“somewhat” or 4=“a lot”. Table 7 shows the participants’ view on studying English at school in connection with the parental support they report receiving.

TABLE 7: Cross-tabulation of view of studying English and parental support.

View of studying English at school	Less parental support	More parental support	Totals
1 Likes less	13 (23 %)	3 (6 %)	16 (15 %)
2 Likes somewhat	26 (46 %)	26 (52 %)	52 (49 %)
3 Likes a great deal	17 (30 %)	21 (42 %)	38 (36 %)
Totals	56 (100 %)	50 (100 %)	106 (100 %)

Statistically significantly different values are indicated with a grey background.

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between parental support and how much the participants like studying English at school. The relation between these variables was significant when it comes to the category *likes less*, $X^2(2, N = 106) = 6.352, p = .042$. Of those who receive less parental support, 23 % indicate liking studying English *less*, whereas only 6 % of those who receive more support from their parents report liking English *less*. This indicates that there is a connection between a lower level of enjoyment of studying English and receiving less parental support for learning English. There also seems to be some difference, though not statistically significant, between parental support and liking English a great deal: a greater number of those who receive more parental support report liking English *a lot* (42 %) than those who receive less parental support (30 %).

Regarding the question “Is English a nice language?”, a re-coding was again performed for the Likert scale answers (0–4). The codes used in the cross-tabulation were 1=Not so nice (including the answers “not at all nice”, “not very nice” and “I don’t really know”), 2=Quite nice and 3=Very nice. The results of the cross-tabulation are presented in Table 8.

TABLE 8: Cross-tabulation of view of English and parental support.

Is English a nice language?	Less parental support	More parental support	Totals
1 Not so nice	15 (27 %)	2 (4 %)	17 (16 %)
2 Quite nice	26 (46 %)	24 (48 %)	50 (47 %)
3 Very nice	15 (27 %)	24 (48 %)	39 (37 %)
Totals	56 (100 %)	50 (100 %)	106 (100 %)

Statistically significantly different values are indicated with a grey background.

The relation between parental support and how nice the participants found the English language was examined by performing a chi-square test of independence. The relation between these variables was significant both in the *not so nice* and *very nice* categories, $X^2 (2, N = 106) = 11.796, p = .003$. Out of those who reported having less parental support, 27 % found English to be *not so nice*, whereas only 4 % of those with more parental support reported the same. In terms of the middle category, finding English *quite nice*, no statistically significant difference between the groups was found. However, when it comes to the third category, almost half (48 %) of those with more parental support reported finding English *very nice*; conversely, only approximately a quarter (27 %) of those who receive less parental support reported the same. These findings lend further support to the idea that parental support has a connection to the learner experiencing positive emotions towards English and learning the language.

To conclude section 5.2, no statistically significant connections were found between beliefs and the background factors *gender*, *English use in free time* or *level of English skills before school age*. However, statistically significant differences regarding positive emotions related to English were observed between those who had more *support from their parents* in their language learning and those who had less of it. Those with more support from their parents seem to experience more positive emotions towards learning English. The observed connection between parental support and positive emotions related to English can be seen as connected to the dialogical and sociocultural theories of beliefs that form the basis for the present study. In a dialogical and sociocultural view, a learner's beliefs are constructed within the framework of the surrounding social environment. It is evident that parents have a crucial role within a child's social sphere, and thus they are likely to have a great impact on the formation of the child's beliefs as well. These findings lend credence to the idea that support given by parents can be beneficial for fostering children's positive emotions towards language learning.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study set out to explore second graders' English-related learner beliefs due to the nation-wide change towards an earlier start in foreign language teaching in Finnish elementary schools. As the dialogical and sociocultural approaches to beliefs posit, beliefs are formed in a dynamic process in interaction with one's surroundings and social environments: in the present study, the beliefs were considered through these lenses. The following research questions were posed:

1. What kinds of beliefs do Finnish 2nd graders have about the English language and learning English?
2. What connections, if any, can be found between the participants' beliefs about the English language, learning English, and the following background factors:
 - a. their gender;
 - b. their use of English in their free time;
 - c. their self-reported level of English skills before school age?
 - d. the support they receive from their parents regarding learning English?

In regard to the first research question, the main findings of the present study indicate that English is mainly seen as something that is needed outside the context of the pupils' everyday lives. One prevalent theme emerging from the data is the idea of English as something that is needed in other countries or with foreigners. Some specify that English is needed in typical situations that tourists encounter abroad, whereas others state or imply more generally that knowing English is necessary or at least beneficial for going abroad, be it for a holiday or other purposes. The informants also seem to be aware that English can be used in many different places, even as a lingua franca between people who do not share the same first language. These findings are

in line with previous research: for instance, Aro's findings in 2006 and 2009 are similar to those reported here in terms of English use in physically remote contexts being a prevalent theme.

In addition to spatial distance, the need for using English seems to be placed in temporally distant contexts as well: English will be needed as an adult, for instance, in working life, not yet in the here and now. Moreover, even though only few participants expressed the belief of using English in temporally distant contexts, it is possible that some of the responses related to English use in physically distant contexts contain the implication of temporal distance as well, if the participants view going abroad as something they plan to do as an adult rather than in the near future. Earlier research has found a positive connection between learners' future-focused motivation and higher language learning achievements (Pfenninger & Singleton 2016) so understanding these beliefs can be beneficial for supporting the learners in many ways. However, some informants who have had personal experience with using English in their everyday lives did find uses for English also in more immediate contexts, such as playing games in English or talking to English-speaking family members. This reinforces the idea that the social environment in which children live has a great impact on the beliefs they hold about the English language and learning it.

Another prevalent theme in the data appeared to be using English specifically as a tool for spoken communication, used in interaction situations both for forming new social connections and fostering existing social relationships. Potential reasons behind the prominence of this theme could include the methods used in ELT and the guiding principles of the national curriculum, in which spoken communication is emphasized (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019). The children may also not be able to read fluently in their native language, which can increase the importance of the role of spoken communication in their perceptions. The prevalence of speaking as a theme in young learners' views on language has also been observed in previous research, for example, in Aro's 2006 and 2009 studies.

In addition, positive emotions related to the English language and learning English were mentioned often by the participants: studying English was generally seen as a pleasant activity in itself. This is in line with previous research on Early Language Learning (see, e.g, Enever et al. 2011). Additionally, the English language was perceived to be different from Finnish in many ways, and vocabulary was often brought up as the fundamental difference (and in some cases similarity as well) between the two languages. Young learners' views of vocabulary as a main target of learning (see Mård-Miettinen & Pitkänen-Huhta 2022) or a prominent source of motivation for studying a language (see Enever 2011: 58) have been noted in previous research as well.

In terms of the second research question regarding background factors and beliefs, statistically significant differences were found regarding positive emotions towards English between those who received more support from their parents and those who received less of it. This finding demonstrates the crucial role that parents have in shaping a child's worldview, including their learner beliefs. It is important that parents are aware of the significance of their role in supporting their children's learning. On the other hand, teachers need to consider the differences that may arise from the pupils' different family backgrounds: while some may receive ample support for their learning from their parents, this is not the case for all, and certain learners may consequently need more support at school. The findings of this study contribute to an increased understanding of the ways in which parental support received at home affects learners and their beliefs about learning.

The study did not find statistically significant differences in the English-related beliefs of children in terms of their gender, self-reported English skill level before starting English classes at school or their self-reported use of English in their free time, although some small differences were observed. Even though no significant differences between groups were observed in regard to these background factors, the results of the study can still give some insight into the topic of learner beliefs and what factors affect them. In future studies, a bigger sample size would be necessary to be able to examine these issues on a larger scale.

Overall, the findings of this study are mostly in line with many previous studies examining language learner beliefs in ELL. It seems that despite the passage of time between, for example, Aro's 2009 study and the present study, both of which investigate language learner beliefs among Finnish children, similar ideas are still prominent in both data sets. Some of the similarities in beliefs may be due to similar personal experiences that the participants in the studies have had. Considering the dialogical and sociocultural approaches to beliefs, the surrounding environment is a major factor in shaping individuals' beliefs in addition to their own personal experiences. In the case of schoolchildren, this environment includes for example their families, friends, and the school context. Since similar beliefs regarding languages and learning are still prevalent, it suggests that the culturally prominent ideas about the role of English in Finnish society have not changed a great deal, even though the role of English has become more and more pronounced: even though many people – children and adults alike – use English to a great extent in their everyday lives, they still may not consider English to be a part of their language repertoire or at least their identity as language users.

Since English was seen quite prominently as a language that can be used as a communication tool abroad, with some pupils specifically stating that most or all people can speak English, there could be some potential implications for the children's

motivation to study languages other than English. The diminishing of Finnish people's language repertoire has been a subject of societal discussion and concern (see, e.g., Pyykkö 2017), and perhaps the idea of English as a universal language that can be used for communicating with anyone anywhere could contribute to the lack of willingness or motivation towards learning languages other than English. Because attitudes towards language learning tend to be widely positive in ELT, its possibilities could be utilised for fostering a positive outlook towards a variety of languages. In the Finnish context, some recent research has been conducted on learner beliefs regarding other languages than English, for example, on young learners' beliefs about learning Finnish as a second language (see Peltoniemi & Hansell 2021) as well as on university students' multilingual learner beliefs and identities (see Pirhonen 2023). In future research, it could be examined what kinds of beliefs children in elementary school hold about other languages than English to find out how the language study choices could be diversified.

Some limitations of the present study need to be addressed. The data is limited to 106 participants, so broad generalisations about all young language learners cannot be made. In addition, the data was not originally collected for the purposes of the present study, so the interviews did not include as many questions about beliefs as would have been the case if beliefs had been the specific focus of the original study. Future studies could explore these themes with more specific questions about beliefs and a larger sample size to establish possible connections between background factors and beliefs. It should also be noted that, as discussed in section 3.1, the concept of *belief* evades strict limitations and definitions. On the one hand, this conceptual freedom gave the present study the opportunity to investigate the participants' views about language and language learning from a wide perspective. On the other hand, the vagueness of the term belief posed certain challenges for the rigorous analysis necessary in investigating possible statistically significant connections between beliefs and the participants' background factors. Regarding the background characteristics of the participants, some issues need to be considered. All the information about the participants' English skill levels, English use and parental support for English learning presented in this study was reported by the participants themselves. In other words, these factors were not objectively measured, which is important to consider while interpreting the results, as the pupils' perceptions may differ from reality. It should also be noted that the participants were not asked to state their gender, so the genders of the pupils were recorded according to the assumptions of the researchers. Only the binary female-male distinction was made for the purposes of this study.

To conclude, the findings of the present study can be of use to language teachers, parents of school-aged children and policy makers. Beliefs related to language learning are an important aspect in learners' motivation towards learning a language, and

teachers can benefit from having a more in-depth understanding of what kinds of beliefs their pupils hold about the language they are learning and about the learning process. Therefore, the findings can be useful for examining the success of the implementation of early language teaching in Finnish schools. In addition, they can be utilised for the purpose of improving early language teaching, for example when new curricula for language teaching at the elementary school level are designed.

Because longitudinal research into children's views about language learning is being carried out by the University of Jyväskylä and Åbo Akademi University, the results of the present study can be valuable for exploring and comparing children's language beliefs in the long run. For example, the same pupils' beliefs at the start of their foreign language education can be compared with their beliefs further down the line when they have studied the language for several years. This would provide an opportunity to examine the possible effects that language instruction in school may have on language-related beliefs. Possible connections between learner beliefs and learning results could also be investigated in the future. In sum, studying learner beliefs can give crucial insight into making language education more equitable and effective for all learners.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: The interview form

HAASTATTELU 2. LUOKAN OPPILAILLE






1. Mikä on nimesi: _____
2. Mitä kieltä tai kieliä puhut kotona? (voit merkitä montakin kieltä)
 - suomea
 - ruotsia
 - jotain muuta; kerro mitä kieltä / kieliä _____
3. Mitä kieltä osaat omasta mielestäsi puhua parhaiten?
 - suomea
 - ruotsia
 - jotain muuta kieltä; kerro mitä kieltä _____
4. Jos et puhu englantia kotona, osaitko puhua yhtään englantia, kun aloitit sen opiskelun koulussa viime syksynä (tai vuoden 2020 alussa)? (merkitse rastilla sopivin vastaus)
 - en yhtään
 - osasin sanoa muutaman sanan
 - osasin esimerkiksi kertoa muutaman asian
 - osasin puhua jo aika paljon
5. Jos et puhu englantia kotona, ymmärsitkö yhtään englantia, kun aloitit sen opiskelun koulussa viime syksynä (tai vuoden 2020 alussa)? (kun kuulet jonkun puhuvan englantia tai näet englanninkielistä tekstiä) (merkitse rastilla sopivin vastaus)
 - en yhtään
 - ymmärsin muutaman sanan
 - ymmärsin muutaman lauseen
 - ymmärsin jo aika paljon
6. Mitä teette englannin tunneilla koulussa? (Kerro jokin esimerkki)

7. Mikä englannin opiskelussa koulussa on mukavinta? (Kerro jokin esimerkki)






8. Onko jotakin mistä et pidä englannin opiskelussa koulussa? (Kerro jokin esimerkki)

9. Jatka seuraavaa lausetta: Haluan oppia englantia, koska _____




10. Miten mukavaa sinusta on opiskella englantia koulussa? (ympyröi sopivin vastaus)

				
pidän siitä tosi paljon	pidän siitä jonkin verran	en oikein osaa sanoa pidätkö siitä vai en	en pidä siitä kovin paljon	en pidä siitä ollenkaan

11. Onko englanti kiva kieli? (ympyröi sopivin vaihtoehto)

				
tosi kiva	aika kiva	en oikein osaa sanoa	ei kovin kiva	ei ollenkaan kiva

12. Kielitaidon itsearviointi

				
	osaan tätä jo tosi hyvin	osaan tätä jonkin verran	osaan tätä ihan vähän	en vielä osaa tätä
a. Osaan tervehtiä opettajaa tai kaveria englanniksi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Osaan laskea yhdestä kymmeneen englanniksi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Osaan sanoa värejä englanniksi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Osaan sanoa eläimiä englanniksi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Osaan sanoa viikonpäivät englanniksi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Osaan kertoa englanniksi itsestäni tai perheestäni	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g. Osaan kertoa englanniksi millainen on oloni (esim. iloinen, väsynyt, surullinen)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h. Osaan kertoa englanniksi mitä harrastan	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
i. Ymmärrän kun opettaja antaa minulle ohjeita englanniksi tehtävien tekemiseksi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
j. Ymmärrän kun kaverini sanovat jotakin englanniksi tunnilla	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
k. Osaan sellaisia englanninkielisiä sanoja, joita ei ole opetettu koulussa	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

13. Kuinka usein käytät englantia **muualla kuin koulussa englannin tunnilla** (esimerkiksi kotona, kaverin luona tai harrastuksessa)?

	Melkein joka päivä	Viikoittain	Kuukau- sittain	En kos- kaan
a) puhun englantia kaverin tai jonkun muun	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) kuuntelen lauluja / musiikkia englannin kielellä	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) katselen englanninkielisiä ohjelmia / videoita	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) pelaan englanninkielisiä pelejä (esim. puhelimella, tabletilla tai konsolilla; esim. Nerf war, Pokemon go, Brawl Stars, Minecraft, Garry's Mod, Roblox)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) harrastuksessa (esim. jalkapallo, tanssi, baletti)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f) luen jotain englanniksi muualla kuin koulussa (esim. lehdet, kirjat, verkkosivut)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
g) kirjoitan jotain englanniksi muualla kuin koulussa	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
h) teen jotain muuta englanniksi	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mitä muuta teet englanniksi:				

Kielitietoisuus





14. Mitä muita kieliä kuin englanti ja suomi tiedät olevan olemassa? Missä olet kuullut niitä?

15. Onko mielestäsi englannin ja suomen kielellä mitään yhteistä?






16. Miten englanti eroaa mielestäsi suomen kielestä?

17. Kielenoppimistaidot

Miten helppo sinun on oppia näitä asioita?






					
	opin tätä tosi helposti	opin tätä aika helposti	en oikein osaa sanoa	tätä on aika vaikea oppia	tätä on tosi vaikea oppia
a. Opin ymmärtämään englantia	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Opin puhumaan englantia	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Opin muistamaan uusia englanninkielisiä lauluja	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Opin toistamaan englanniksi, mitä opettaja sanoo (esimerkiksi tervehdyksiä, sanoja)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e. Opin pelaamaan englanninkielisiä pelejä ja leikkejä, joita meillä on koulussa	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
f. Opin englannin kieltä muualla kuin koulussa (ohjelmista, videoista, peleistä, harrastuksista)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

18. Vanhemmat






					
	usein	silloin tällöin	en oikein osaa sanoa	ei juuri koskaan	ei koskaan
a. Kyselevätkö vanhempasi, mitä teette koulussa englannin tunneilla?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Auttavatko vanhempasi sinua englannin opiskelussa (esim. läksyjen tekemisessä tai jos kysyt heiltä mitä jokin asia on englanniksi)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Rohkaisevatko vanhempasi sinua käyttämään englantia muuallakin kuin vain koulussa (esim. kotona, matkoilla)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Jutteletko vanhempiesi kanssa siitä, missä englantia näkee ja kuulee koulun ulkopuolella (esim. kaupassa, ohjelmissa, peleissä, lehdissä)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Englannin käytön jännittäminen

19. Jännittääkö sinua puhua englanniksi koulussa englannin tunnilla? (Tutkija esittää tarvittaessa avokysymyksen: Miksi se jännittää?)

				
ei jännitä koskaan	jännittää vain harvoin	en oikein osaa sanoa jännittääkö vai ei	jännittää silloin tällöin	jännittää aina






20. Jos joskus puhut englantia jossain muualla kuin koulussa (esimerkiksi kotona, matkoilla, peleissä, harrastuksissa, ...), niin jännittääkö sinua puhua englantia? (Jos et puhu englantia muualla, tähän ei tarvitse vastata)

				
ei jännitä koskaan	jännittää vain harvoin	en oikein osaa sanoa jännittääkö vai ei	jännittää silloin tällöin	jännittää aina

21. Jos et ihan tarkkaan muista, miten joku asia sanotaan englanniksi, niin yritätkö siitä huolimatta sanoa sen?






				
kyllä, yritän aina	kyllä, yritän aika usein	en oikein osaa sanoa	en yleensä yritä	en koskaan yritä

22. Kun opettaja pyytää sinua sanomaan jotakin englanniksi koulussa englannin tunnilla, niin vastaatko mielelläsi ja sanot jotain englanniksi?

				
kyllä, vastaan oikein mielelläni	kyllä, vastaan melko mielelläni	en oikein osaa sanoa	en vastaa kovin mielelläni	en halua ollenkaan vastata

Kaverit

23. Onko englannin opiskelu koulussa kavereittesi mielestä kivaa?

				
he pitävät sitä tosi kivana	he pitävät siitä jonkin verran	en oikein osaa sanoa	he eivät pidä siitä kovin paljon	he eivät pidä siitä ollenkaan

24a. Auttavatko kaverisi, jos et muista miten jokin asia sanotaan englanniksi tai mitä jokin sana tarkoittaa?

				
usein	silloin tällöin	en oikein osaa sanoa	vain joskus	ei juuri koskaan

24b. Osaatko kertoa esimerkin?