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11 Tensions in collaborative research with teachers in the context of language education policy change in Finland

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Abstract

Schools in Finland faced a major policy change in language education at the beginning of 2020, when the age to start learning the first foreign or second domestic language was lowered from third to first grade in primary school. With the aim of examining how practices are formed in this new situation, we planned a case study with one school. The outbreak of Covid-19 forced us to change our original plans in order to maintain contact with the school, and our perspective on the emerging new practices was broadened by including the language teachers' collegial network in online interviews. In this chapter, we analyse these interview data. By paying specific attention to the researcher–practitioner collaboration as it was realized in the interviews, we identified different strategies that the teachers and researchers used in points where tensions in the interviews seemed to arise.

1 Introduction

The context of this chapter is the major policy change in language education that schools in Finland faced in 2020, when the starting age for second/foreign language learning was lowered from the third to the first grade in primary school. The decision challenged schools in many ways. First, the policy decision was made exceptionally rapidly, leaving only a short time for schools to plan their implementation. Second, two new lesson hours were included in the schedule of grades 1–2 in primary schools to be used for language teaching, meaning that schools needed to rethink their teaching resources (Inha and Kähärä 2018). Third, the main policy objective was to broaden the language repertoire of Finnish school children, and schools were encouraged to offer several languages to choose from in grade 1 (Pyykkö 2017). Fourth, the implementation of the decision challenged the premises

for language teaching in Finland and raised questions regarding the best qualifications for teaching languages to grade 1–2 students (Hahl and Pietarila 2021).

With the aim of examining how this new and challenging situation influenced the formation of teaching and learning practices, we planned a collaborative case study with one primary school. In this chapter, we will analyse the interview data collected within this project and focus on the tensions that potentially arise in them.

2 The Finnish language education context

In Finland, education policy is carried out both nationally and locally (Vitikka, Krokfors, and Hurmerinta 2012). National education policy is formulated by the Ministry of Education and Culture, which decides which subjects should be taught in Finnish schools and determines the minimum number of lessons for each subject. The national body responsible for policy implementation is the Finnish National Agency for Education, which designs the national curriculum guidelines. However, within the framework of the national core curricula, the local education providers have considerable freedom: they draw up local curricula and can also decide how to allocate lessons for individual school subjects each year.

Regarding language education, until the end of 1990s Finland was known as a country where language learning began early and many languages were studied compared with other European countries. While many other countries in Europe lowered the starting age for languages to 6–7 years or younger in the 2000s, in line with the recommendation in the Framework strategy for multilingualism of the European Commission (2005), until 2020 Finland remained a country where language education began most often at the age of 9–10, i.e., in grade 3 of primary school. As early as the 1990s local decisions were made to introduce languages in grade 1, or even in pre-primary education, but this happened mostly in schools in bigger cities (Peltoniemi et al. 2018; Skinnari and Sjöberg 2018).

The language programme in Finnish schools consists of the compulsory learning of two languages, both introduced in primary school. By far the most common compulsory languages are English and Swedish, which is the second national language in Finland (EDUFI 2019). In addition to these, primary school students may also choose an optional language. These languages continue to be learnt in secondary school, where an additional language can be learnt as an elective subject. The minimum number of (foreign) languages in the language programme of a Finnish basic education student is thus two and the maximum is four. However, the majority of Finns only study the two compulsory languages (EDUFI 2019). This is due to several reasons: beliefs that language studies are demanding and that it

is not advantageous to know several languages, and schools not offering optional and elective languages (EDUFI 2019; Pyykkö 2017). This has resulted in a worrying narrowing interest in studying languages in the school.

In 2017 growing concern about the declining interest in language learning in Finland resulted in the Ministry of Education initiating an investigation into the current state of Finland's linguistic capital and its language needs both inside and outside the education system. However, this chapter discusses only the central education policy measure that was suggested to strengthen the country's linguistic capital, i.e., lowering the starting age for language learning for all students. It was suggested in the report (Pyykkö 2017) that 1) language learning should start in grade one in primary school at the age of 6–7 years; 2) an addition to the minimum number of lesson hours for languages should be made to facilitate the earlier start; 3) language learning should start, as a rule, with a language other than English; and 4) the voluntary language in primary school should begin in third grade (at the age of 9–10 years) and should normally be English. As an alternative to all schools starting with a language other than English, it was suggested that all education providers should at least be required to increase the opportunities for students to study languages other than English in primary school.

A rapid decision-making process followed publication of the results of the investigation at the end of 2017. Already at the beginning of 2018, the Finnish Government decided that every primary school in Finland would be required to introduce the first optional language in grade 1 from January 2020 and recommended that it should be a language other than English (Inha and Kähärä 2018). To support this, the Finnish National Agency for Education offered project funding to schools so that they could pilot early language learning (Inha and Kähärä 2018). Many schools took this opportunity, and their experiences were highly positive (Skinnari and Sjöberg 2018). The decision also resulted in changes in the Decree on the distribution of lesson hours in basic education (Government Decree 793/2018): two hours of language lessons were added to grades 1 and 2. Furthermore, the National Curriculum guidelines were updated for language teaching in grades 1 and 2 (EDUFI 2020).

This national education policy decision also challenged teachers and the teaching profession in Finland. Both class teachers and subject teachers may teach languages in primary school, also in the first grade. All teachers from primary school to upper secondary school must have a master's degree. Class teachers major in education, and they are qualified to teach all subjects in grades 1–6. Teachers in secondary and upper secondary school are subject teachers and they specialize in teaching one or more subjects. They major in one

subject, for example English, and have another subject, for example German, and pedagogical studies as their minors. Class teachers may also specialize in language subjects and study them further so that they gain qualifications to teach those subjects in secondary school; in other words, they are double-qualified (Hahl and Pietarila 2021). The challenge is, however, that subject teachers in Finland are trained to teach children who are literate, and first graders are not necessarily literate yet. On the other hand, class teachers are trained to teach young learners, but they are not specialized in teaching languages even though they are eligible to teach any primary school subject. To overcome the challenge, the Finnish National Agency for Education granted state subsidies to municipalities to develop tutoring practices, and in-service training was arranged in methods to teach languages to young learners (Hahl and Pietarila 2021).

3 The study

In this chapter, we analyse interview data collected in this new language policy implementation context. Our particular focus is on possible tensions arising in researcher–teacher collaboration in a study that focused on how one school set out to implement the new early start to foreign language learning in their day-to-day practices. The school (a small primary school) was recruited through a mentoring network in a rural municipality. Due to the relatively small number of pupils, the school has combined classes with first and second graders in the same class. A few pre-schoolers were also integrated into the same class except for the lessons of English. The original goal was to engage in close collaboration with the school for the first three years of teaching English to first graders. The stakeholders involved included the subject teacher (specialized in languages), learners, and parents. The study was planned as cycles of classroom observation, stakeholder interviews and questionnaires, and classroom activities developed in teacher–researcher collaboration.

After starting to build trust with the school in three classroom observations, the outbreak of Covid-19 forced us to change plans in order to maintain contact with the school. This meant that instead of the researchers observing and collecting data in the English classroom, the school took responsibility for it and any data collection meetings with the teacher and students had to take place online. As we were not able to be present in the school, we broadened our perspective on emerging practices by including other stakeholders in the school; at the same time, we had to drop the idea of including parents more extensively as online interviewing proved to be too difficult to arrange. As the school’s head teacher (a class teacher by training) gained a more prominent role in teaching English alongside the subject

teacher, we also interviewed them via an online platform. To gain a deeper understanding of the collaboration taking place among practitioners, we also included the subject teachers' collegial network in online interviews. This network was part of a tutoring programme, funded by the National Agency for Education, in which subject teachers of English tutor class teachers who have no or limited prior experience of language teaching (see section 2).

4 Method

For the purposes of this chapter, we analysed interview data with the subject teacher, the head teacher and the teachers in the collegial network, including both the subject teacher and class teachers. As the two researchers, we are involved in teacher training at the university, but mainly with subject teachers specializing in languages. These different participant roles may potentially give rise to tensions in the interviews.

When giving examples from the interviews, we refer to these as subject teacher interview, head teacher interview, and group interview. In the interview transcripts, R1, R2 = researchers, ST = subject teacher, HT = head teacher, and CT1, CT2 = class teachers. We conducted four interviews with the subject teacher, one interview with the head teacher and one group interview with three teachers in the network, including our focal teacher. The examples from the interviews are translated from Finnish by the authors. The translations focus on the content of the turns and thus no pauses or nonverbal behaviour, for example, are marked. Commas are added in the examples for ease of reading. Words in square brackets are explanatory text when the direct translation alone would not have been transparent.

In analysing the interviews, we approached them as interactions between the researchers and the teacher(s), i.e., we paid systematic attention to how the teacher(s) reacted to the researchers' questions and prompts, on the one hand, and on how the researchers reacted to the teachers' responses, on the other hand. In our analysis, we were able to identify specific strategies that both parties used, and we analysed these thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006). We found out that in addition to the teachers talking about their own strengths and expertise, many of their accounts included responses in which the teachers appeared sensitive and self-conscious and seemed to assume they were being criticized and tried to explain their actions. As our focus in this chapter is on tensions that may potentially arise from the researcher–practitioner relationship in this participatory research setting, we address only these responses in our analysis.. The responses were categorized into four themes: *explaining actions, expressing inadequacy, expressing lack of knowledge, counterarguing*. In

the findings section, we will give examples of each of these and discuss the researcher accounts that precede and follow the teachers' responses.

5 Findings

5.1 Explaining actions

When talking about their classroom practices in the new situation, the teachers appeared to feel a need to explain their choice of practices at length. Their explanations were often connected to the use of certain materials and teaching methods, but they were also related to the timetable or the learners (e.g., age, skills).

In example 1 from the group interview, the researcher (R1) asks whether the teachers (CT1, CT2) have used textbooks in their teaching. Textbooks have a fairly prominent role in language teaching in Finland (e.g., Luukka et al. 2008), but the national core curriculum for language teaching in grades 1–2 (EDUFI 2020) emphasizes oral language and the use of varied teaching materials. There are also new textbooks designed for early language learners, following the national core curriculum and therefore giving the class teachers a backbone for teaching languages. This is also pointed out by CT1 in example 1, who explains using the book and the attached material even when there is a stronger focus on action-based methods. However, CT1 is anxious to emphasize that the learners do not have a book. This may be because the researchers are known to be teacher educators of subject teachers and subject teaching relies heavily on textbooks, so the teachers may assume that the researchers expect the use of textbooks in early language teaching as well. However, R1 also seems to be eager to reinforce the teacher's view that textbooks are not necessary in early language learning.

(1) Group interview

R1: have you, CT2 and CT1, had any textbooks in use or how has the teaching been [organized]

CT1: so I've had, just for myself, the go-book [*book title*] and its digital material, but last year I perhaps used it more, but this year less, but let's say it's there, but the children don't have a book

R1: hmm, what did you, when you said you used it more last year and less now, so is it like your own decision, is it like your experience that you don't need it after all

CT1: yeah, maybe I have like become, but well, there's been a lot of all kinds of needs for support in my group and such, so it's been more like playing and

singing, but it's still good to have it available anyway, but I haven't actively worked on it now

R1: yeah, have the pupils asked about it in any way

CT1: nooo

R1: no, yes it's funny that sometimes older pupils seem very conservative with the textbooks, so that we go through everything in the book, so it's nice if the younger pupils think that the book doesn't matter, that you can learn languages in many ways

CT1: yeah, nooo

In addition to explaining their own, the teachers even explain each other's practices. Example 2 relates to a situation where the head teacher (a class teacher) has started to teach one additional lesson of English on top of the one hour that the subject teacher teaches. The two class teachers in the group interview have previously explained that they are integrating English in other subjects, and the researcher (R1) asks the subject teacher (ST) whether the head teacher does the same in their school now that the head teacher is engaged in language teaching along with the subject teacher. This question leads to a lengthy response, where ST gives reasons for the head teacher's actions. First, ST indicates that there is not much contact between the teachers, as the subject teacher does not have a clear picture of what the head teacher does with the learners. Then ST goes on to explain how demanding the head teacher's job is and that English is probably not a top priority.

(2) Group interview

R1: have you noticed in your school where the class teacher now teaches one lesson, so has English been somehow, you know, do you know if it's included in teaching other [subjects]

ST: well I don't really have a very good picture of how well [name of head teacher] has done, so they haven't really been able to do that, [name of head teacher] has such a group, both pre-schoolers and first and second graders, and the head teacher tasks on top of that, so I know that English is not like that for them, so that they do it because they have to give that one extra lesson to all of my groups, so well well so, I think that they may sometimes take [English along with other topics], I have given her a calendar board that we always use at the beginning of the lesson, where there are days of the week and dates and

weather and such, and I think that they [*head teacher*] may use it sometimes, and sometimes they use songs that I have first taught the pupils, and then they sing them again with [*name of head teacher*], but it must have been quite small scale with that group

R1: yeah it is indeed, there are indeed many kinds of aims, and English is of course not the only aim there

ST: yeah, yeah

After listening to ST's lengthy account, R1 confirms it partly by repeating ST's justifications.

5.2 Expressing inadequacy

Another theme connected to tensions was the teachers expressing inadequacy. In example 3 from the group interview the inadequacy is related to class teachers not having any specific training (referring to qualifications) to teach languages. What is interesting here is that the researcher (R1) merely asks whether this is the first time the class teachers have taught languages. This prompt triggers a response when CT1 first explains that this is not the first time and CT2 continues about having taught Swedish a long time ago, but not having any training (or qualifications) to teach languages. R1 acknowledges this with a minimal response (*yes*), and then CT1 continues by explaining about studies in German years ago but having no experience of teaching English. As the researchers are language teacher trainers, they focused on experiences in their question rather than on the issue of qualifications. They also appear to make an attempt to remain neutral in their stance and resort to minimal responses (*yes*, *hmm*) when the teachers bring up their feelings of inadequacy as to qualifications.

(3) Group interview

R1: have you taught before, is this like the first time you started teaching languages or teaching English, have you had foreign languages to teach before

CT1: no we haven't, we haven't had

CT2: well I have taught, many many years ago, English and Swedish for [special class] ninth graders, but not otherwise, and I don't have any training for that, but last autumn we had training for early language teaching in [*name of city*], so that was really very good, but now I teach English for third and sixth graders in my own [school]

R1: yeah

CT1: I have a little language –, I have long ago, so I have studied German like after teacher training, like I've been interested in languages so that I have studied until intermediate studies like donkey's years ago, but I don't really have such experiences of English, and I don't really have [taught] German, except for single workshop type events related to German

R1: hmm

CT1: such experiences I've had

R1: yes yes

CT1: long ago during my studies, I've taught Swedish for the longer period in a secondary school, so such [experiences]

Example 4 is from the head teacher's (HT) interview. In this extract, HT expresses feelings of inadequacy in English pronunciation and thus not being a good example for the learners. Interestingly HT contrasts class teachers and 'professionals'. Professionals means here the teacher of English with a subject teacher training. The researchers (R1, R2) remain in the background and appear to be reluctant to take any specific stance to the deprecatory talk.

(4) Head teacher interview

R1: Mmm, but that then means of course that the English teacher has to be on the same map of what's going on in there, yes sure, but here it must be, I don't know if you have seen it so that if it could be a class teacher in your school [who teaches English], but you of course have the challenge that you only have three teachers, but if you had an ideal opportunity that you had a class teacher who would teach English, so do you think it would be better or different, or somehow

HT: well, if it were a class teacher who would teach it, so they would know better what they've done and they would use the words more, so it would be good, yes, but on the other hand there's the fact that it's just this kind of class teacher like me [an especially deprecatory expression in Finnish] who is always afraid of pronouncing something wrong or something, so if there's the professional who definitely knows how it goes

R2: right

HT: is it me the class teacher teaching English like so and so, they [the pupils] always pick up something, there are of course these recordings so that they learn words properly too

R1 and R2: yeah, right

Teachers' feelings of inadequacy were not only connected to their teaching and expertise but also to the researcher–practitioner collaboration itself. In example 5 the researcher (R1) initiates a discussion on the collaboration. R1 highlights the researchers' incompetence in early language teaching when asking the question about the collaboration. The teacher (ST) continues in similar deprecatory manner when talking about the researchers' benefitting from the collaboration.

(5) Subject teacher interview

R1: we could still ask you at the end how you've liked these discussions of ours, how you've experienced this, this talking with ignorant outsiders

ST: well, it's been easy, because there's been no need to prepare myself in any way for these, or at least I haven't had time to prepare, so I don't know if you've got anything logical out of my stream of consciousness, I've just told you anything that comes to my mind

R2: hmm

ST: I haven't thought about before [our meetings] what they might ask about and what I should reply

R2: it's good that you haven't, that wasn't the intention

ST: so that, I hope that you have got something out of this

R2: yes, we have, we'll start going through these

R1: yeah this has been very, very interesting for us, because we haven't had any connection there and this new early start to languages has been such a big thing, so it's been very important that we've had a chance to get to understand what's going on there

ST's accounts that signal inadequacy result in R1 giving a lengthy response that emphasizes that the teacher's contributions have been interesting and highly important in understanding the implementation of the national policy of an early start to foreign language learning in the day-to-day practices.

5.3 Expressing lack of knowledge

The third theme of potential tensions in the interviews was teachers expressing lack of knowledge in relation to various issues in their novel situation of early teaching and learning of English. This is not unexpected as the implementation of the policy was done quickly and the teachers were not given systematic training prior to it. Their feelings of lack of knowledge concerned, among other things, materials and methods they used for teaching, parents' engagement in their children's learning, the learning of English and the learners' overall skills.

In example 6, the researchers (R1, R2) and the subject teacher (ST) talk about parental support for the learning of English in the class. When asked whether some of the learners are not supported from home, ST expresses lack of knowledge due to not knowing the learners well enough. R2's reaction to the teacher account is to express understanding by referring to the fact that a subject teacher meets the learners much less frequently than a class teacher. By this R2 may indicate that the original question was not fully relevant.

(6) Subject teacher interview

R2: so have you noticed, like with some pupils, that there's never any like, or do you suspect that there's someone who doesn't get any support from home

ST: well I don't really know them that well yet, so that I could say, but there are always some, but I can't say anything precise about these

R2: hmm, and it is indeed difficult if you only meet once a week, so you won't get that kind of sustained contact

The researchers frequently appeared to attempt to formulate their responses so that they would show understanding as in example 6 above or would empower the teachers, such as 'It [that a learner doesn't want to sing in the English lessons] may be a more general characteristic which isn't connected to the English language' when the teachers expressed lack of knowledge.

5.4 Counterarguing

The final theme we identified in the data was counterarguing. Often the teachers explained their actions quite indirectly in the interviews, as shown in the previous sections. However, sometimes the teachers were very direct in expressing clear counterarguments to

researcher prompts. In example 7, from the head teacher (HT) interview, the researcher (R1) asks a question related to integrating English with other subjects, first seeking confirmation that HT has taught English as a separate lesson, and then instead of asking the teacher directly, R1 makes the assumption that English has not been embedded in other subjects. This leads to HT affirming that the assumption was correct and R1 confirming the answer. R1 starts to continue, but HT interrupts and says it is obvious what the researchers are looking for and uses the technical term ‘integrated’. HT thus reacts to R1’s assumption about HT not integrating English with other subject and shows that the concept of (content and language) integration that is mentioned in the renewed national core curriculum (EDUFI 2020) is a familiar concept to them. The fact that it is a curricular concept makes HT assume that it is thus a preferred practice by the researchers. HT adds apologetically that integration has unfortunately not been implemented in HT’s own early language teaching.

(7) Head teacher interview

R1: so, when you had that one lesson, so you had it as a separate lesson, you didn’t put it into some other subjects

HT: I didn’t put, it was a separate lesson there

R1: right, so that, so that it’s been such that

HT: yes, now that I know that you’re looking for how much it’s been integrated there, they’ve been separate lessons and

R1: yes, okay

HT: it, unfortunately I haven’t been able to

R1: there’s nothing unfortunate about it

R2: noo, it’s not like, yeah, it’s just interesting what kinds of practices are formed

R1 seems to attempt to mitigate the tension by saying that there is nothing unfortunate about the situation. R2 also appears to be anxious to explain that they as researchers are just interested to see how practices develop and to confirm that they do not know whether integration is good or bad.

6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have shown some examples of the challenges in researcher–practitioner positions and in building trust between researchers and teachers when doing research on the implementation of a new language education policy in Finland. The delicacy

of the relationship shows how sometimes mutual (mis)interpretations of the purposes of the other party may lead to tensions which then call for mitigation of one's own argument. The study identified strategies that the teachers used when reacting to the researcher prompts and questions and the researchers' reactions to them.

As regards the teachers, the results show that they appear to feel the need to explain their position. In this study, the explanations by the teachers were connected to feelings of insecurity as teachers of languages to young learners, i.e., there appears to be underlying uncertainty in the new situation, as for example Hahl and Pietarila (2021) also show. In this new situation they feel that their professionalism is being questioned or at least put to the test, and they have to defend their actions to the researchers, who are teacher educators. For the researchers, it is important to build trust to gain the practitioners' view of the new situation. It seems that the researchers sometimes recognize an arising tension in the interviews and try to mitigate the situation in different ways. This shows in the researchers attempting to align themselves with the teachers by showing that they agree. Sometimes the researchers appear to see a need either to empower the teacher by pointing out crucial factors or to detach themselves from the situation and not to affirm or reinforce certain feelings.

Overall, the study confirms that the research relationship is full of tensions: researchers and teachers are professionals in their respective functions, interested in the same phenomenon but approaching it from two different positions. Even though there is common understanding on the surface, the delicacy of the relationship is revealed by detailed examination of the interaction. Both parties experience considerable underlying insecurity and uncertainty regarding their respective roles.

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