

**ENGLISH HERE, ENGLISH THERE, ENGLISH EVERY-
WHERE - LANGUAGE SHOWERING MATERIAL PACK-
AGE FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CLASSROOMS (AGES 3-6)**

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>Varhainen kielenoppiminen sijoittuu aikaan ennen oppivelvollisuuden alkamista ja se voidaan jakaa kahteen ikäryhmään: varhaisiin kielenoppijoihin (iät 7–12) sekä erityisen varhaisiin kielenoppijoihin (iät 3–6). Tämä materiaalipaketti on tarkoitettu varhaiskasvatuksen henkilökunnalle, joka työskentelee erityisen varhaisten kielenoppijoiden kanssa.</p> <p>Varhaiskasvatuksen yksiköt noudattavat Suomessa varhaiskasvatussuunnitelmaa (2022). Varhaiskasvatussuunnitelma korostaa lapsen kokonaisvaltaista kehitystä, mutta mainitsee myös vieraan kielen oppimisen tavoitteiksi muun muassa kieliin tutustumisen ja mielenkiinnon herättämisen. Aikaisemmat tutkimukset eivät ole yhtä mieltä siitä, onko nuoresta iästä etua oppimisen kannalta vai ei. Toisaalta ajatellaan, että on olemassa herkkyyskausi, jolloin kielenoppiminen olisi helpompaa kuin kauden ulkopuolella, mutta toisaalta ajatellaan, että ympäristö- ja yksilötekijöiden yhteisvaikutus on ikää tärkeämpää. Erityisen tärkeiksi tekijöiksi mainitaan opettajan ammattitaito sekä nuorten oppijoiden korkea motivaatio ja innokkuus oppia uutta.</p> <p>Varhaisessa vaiheessa kieliä opetetaan suullisen kielitaidon kautta ja se painottuu lähinnä sanaston opeteluun. Sanaston oppimisen kannalta tärkeitä kriteerejä on muun muassa sanojen konkreettisuus sekä niiden riittävä toisto. Tehokas keino kielenoppimiseen onkin sanastoon tutustuminen arjen rutiinien lomassa kielisuihkuttelemalla. Tämä materiaalipaketti onkin luotu tarjoamaan materiaalia kielisuihkutukseen aiemmin mainitut seikat huomioon ottaen. Suihkutuskielenä toimii englannin kieli. Tämä materiaalipaketti eroaa aikaisemmista materiaalipaketeista siten, että se keskittyy lapsen kokonaisvaltaiseen kehitykseen, mutta sisällyttää kielenoppimista arjen ympärille. Tämä materiaalipaketti tarjoaa myös vinkkejä sanaston toistamiseen ja kielenoppimisprosessin jatkuvuuteen. Materiaalin toimiminen on riippuvaista opettajan omasta kielitaidosta tai innokkuudesta vieraita kieliä kohtaan</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

Early language education is considered an education that introduces children to school-like environments and covers years between birth and the start of formal education. Early childhood education is carried out in the Finnish context through facilities that follow the National Core Curriculum (NCC) for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The NCC for ECEC highlights the overall development of a child and areas to develop are said to be linguistic, social, cultural, physical, artisanal among other things. This thesis focuses on the language learning part of the development of a child through all the other aspects of development.

The early foreign language learning field can be divided into young language learners (ages 7-12) and very young language learners (ages 3-6) and this thesis focuses on the younger learners (ages 3-6). It has been a worldwide trend to introduce foreign languages earlier and earlier to children and Finland is no exception. The language chosen for introduction is most typically English due to its stance as the *lingua franca*. Past studies have argued whether an early start guarantees better learning outcomes or whether the better learning outcomes are a result of various factors combined together (See for instance Rixon, 2015; Ellis, 2019; Enever, 2015; Inha & Huhta, 2019). One of the most important factors is said to be teacher expertise. Starting early can also be beneficial due to children's own attributes compared to older learners (See for instance Roiha, Mäntylä & Dufva, 2021). Some of the advantages of starting young are their enthusiasm to learn new and high motivation towards learning (See for instance Mihaljevic Djigunovic & Lopriore, 2011). Children are also said to lose that motivation easily since they lack skills to overcome harder tasks.

Teaching a foreign language to very young learners happens through vocabulary introduction and through spoken language since very young children typically have not yet learned to read. This restricts the possibilities for material use and challenges teachers to use only oral activities. Common ways to introduce foreign languages are through songs, rhymes, games, stories, and drama. These are used to introduce

familiar topics the children are typically interested in such as colors and animals. As was discussed earlier, for better learning outcomes some criteria must be filled. When it comes to vocabulary learning, the criteria is that exposure should be frequent and repeated enough (See for instance Mäntylä, Roiha, Dufva & Pakula, 2024). Best way to carry this out is to introduce the foreign language here and there among daily activities through functional language learning activities, that are related to daily routines and thus meaningful for the learners. In the Finnish context this is called language showering (See for instance Bärlund, Nyman & Kajander, 2015).

This material package aims to provide material for the teachers of very young language learners wanting to incorporate English language to their daily activities in the ECEC classrooms. Many of the existing material packages focus on individual English language sessions and center them around chosen themes, whereas this material package focuses more on the natural occurring themes in the daily life of Early Childhood Education and Care classrooms and the continuing nature of language learning by offering tips how to repeat tasks or vocabulary on a yearly level. In addition to focusing on foreign language development, this material package also highlights developing other skills such as musical-, artisanal-, graphical-, verbal- and bodily skills as mentioned in the Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care.

In addition to the few mentioned above, some of the main principles this material package will also focus on are vocabulary learning and the frequency of input, since that is considered to be the beginning of the language learning (See for instance Mäntylä et al., 2024). Learning through play is also at the core of this material package (See for instance Enever, 2015).

First this thesis will introduce the main principles of early language learning. Next I will discuss the specifics of early language teaching. Third I will discuss the early language learning context in Finland. Finally, I will introduce the material package and the background of it.

2 EARLY LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

This chapter will discuss the specific principles of teaching and learning English with young language learners. First I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of starting early continuing on to discussing the different stages of learning a language early on. I will also introduce the main principles of vocabulary learning before introducing the different aspects to consider when teaching young language learners.

2.1 Early language learning

For over 50 years the worldwide trend has been to introduce foreign languages to younger and younger students (Enever, 2015; Rixon, 2015; Mourao, 2015; Vahtola, Lintunen & Maijala, 2022). Early language learning covers a wide range of ages, therefore, it is important to distinguish the difference between young language learners (ages 7-12) and very young language learners (ages 3-6) (Ghosn, 2019; Kirkgöz, 2019). The field for very young language learners is fairly new (Ghosn, 2019), and most of the research discussed here considers young language learners. This thesis will implement these findings with very young language learners (ages 3-6).

According to Vahtola et al. (2022, p.348), in the European context starting earlier and earlier is a result of the multilingual strategy set by the European Commission in 2005, where it was stated that each child should have the possibility to learn at least two new languages in addition to their mother tongue as early as possible. The reason why language learning begins earlier is to achieve one or all of these goals: higher language skills, higher motivation to learn languages, higher knowledge about different languages, and cultures and positive attitude towards them (Inha & Huhta, 2019). The early start is also a response to the changing world around us: societies are more multilingual and multicultural than ever, which requires open mindedness towards other languages and cultures (Inha & Huhta, 2019; Pyykkö, 2017) In the Finnish context, English language is most often the first language being introduced (Mård-Miettinen, Huhta, Peltoniemi & Hansell, 2021; Inha, 2018; Pyykkö, 2017).

2.1.1 The advantages and disadvantages of starting early

The benefits of starting early is a question of debate among researchers in the field. Enever (2015) reports that older studies indicate that there are no benefits in introducing foreign languages early in life, since there is hardly evidence of children making progress. This view is opposed to what Inha & Huhta (2019) found in their study about early language learning. They found that, at least momentarily, positive results are produced in language proficiency and attitudes towards languages when starting early. Ellis (2005, p.6) also reports that the age of acquisition is in fact in correlation with the ultimate second language proficiency in the fields of grammar and pronunciation, meaning that the earlier one starts the higher ultimate language proficiency one has in grammar and pronunciation. Roiha, Mäntylä & Dufva (2021, p.16) also report that the early start has been shown to produce positive attitudes towards languages. Enever's (2015, p. 14) results were based on perspective that languages had been taught by teachers with little or no knowledge of age-appropriate methods, therefore leading to insufficient results. Rixon (2015) also adds that the inconclusive results could be an outcome of studies with different circumstances. Some studies about early language learning have been carried out with children from bilingual families and some studies with children in immersion contexts (Rixon, 2015). These

studies compared to the studies with children who only come across the foreign language one or two hours a week are going to be substantially different. Relating to this, Inha & Huhta (2019, p.82) state that the field of research is slowly drifting away from the age question towards other attributing factors such as the amount of language input and the quality of teaching. Therefore, the question of starting early remains inconclusive to this day and relies heavily on circumstantial properties.

Although there is no definitive answer to the age question, it is clear that the learning and teaching of a foreign language is different depending on the age of the learner. One of the reasons lies in the functioning of the brain. With neuroimaging it has been proven that children's brains function differently from the adult brain (Enever, 2015, p.16). According to some studies there seems to be a critical or sensitive period for language learning, where the brain is extremely sensitive to stimuli and for example catches on sound distinctions better than after the period is over (Long, 2013). Children have a shorter attention span and cannot focus on singular tasks for long periods at a time (Kirkgöz, 2019). Some studies indicate that generally language learning does seem to get harder as you get older (Enever, 2015, p. 18). Younger learners are also said to require physical movement due to their higher energy levels (Kirkgöz, 2019). Next I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of starting to learn foreign languages early.

One of the advantages of young learners is their enthusiasm and openness towards learning (Cameron, 2010, p.1; Mård-Miettinen et al., 2021, p. 43; Huhta & Leontjev, 2019, p.25). Mihaljevic Djigunovic and Lopriore (2011) report findings from a study called Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) and say that according to the study, young learners begin learning languages with highly positive attitudes and motivation. Related to this, according to Enever (2015, p.19), children have a natural instinct for play and fun and are more eager to participate in pretend activities. Enever (2015, p.20) also adds that children make sense of the world through their imagination and are therefore more willing to create new identities within language classrooms. Both Cameron (2010, p.1) and Enever (2015, p. 20) agree that children are said to be less embarrassed and less anxious than adults when talking in a new language, which

makes them less afraid to try. Children are also said to focus more on communication and less on accuracy (Enever, 2015, p. 19). The advantages seem to all relate to children's enthusiasm and ability to use their imagination.

As was mentioned previously, one of the advantages with young learners is their enthusiasm towards learning (Cameron, 2010; Enever, 2015; Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021) and their positive attitude and high motivation to learn languages (Mihaljevic Djigunovic & Lopriore, 2011). According to Li, Han and Gao (2019) the knowledge available about what motivates young learners to learn foreign languages is still limited. They also add that more knowledge is available for older learners, which may not be generalizable to young learners due to different levels of cognitive, psychological and affective development. As some studies record young language learners to have high motivation, they are also said to have weak instrumental motivation, which means that they have very few external reasons to learn languages compared to older learners with exams and future jobs in mind (Garton & Tekin, 2022; Li et al., 2019). Therefore, their enthusiasm to learn a new language is said to depend on how enjoyable they find language learning to be (Garton & Tekin, 2022) and how much the teachers offers opportunities to strengthen their sense of having a say in the language learning process (Li et al., 2019). Fulfilling the psychological needs, autonomy, competence and relatedness, make young learners feel more motivated (Li et al., 2019). Children are also said to lose enthusiasm rather quickly due to slow progress in teaching and learning (Mård-Miettinen & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2021) and are less able to keep themselves motivated if tasks get harder (Cameron, 2010, p.1). Thus, the need for motivating material and teacher is highlighted.

One of the reasons the age question in language learning is so inconclusive is because there are almost as many advantages as there are disadvantages to learning foreign languages young. One of the disadvantages is the fact that children cannot use metalanguage (Cameron, 2010, p.1). They do not have much knowledge how languages function which can cause difficulties when learning new concepts within language (Enever, 2015, p. 21). In relation to this, children also lack learning strategies, which may slow down the learning process compared to older learners (Enever, 2015,

p.22) Since younger children are illiterate, their language learning is limited in the form of spoken language (Cameron, 2010, p. 17). This creates extreme limitations for the methods used in teaching and asks for creativity in the teachers' part.

2.1.2 The early stages of language learning

Language learning is said to advance in stages (Concannon-Gibney, 2021) The first two stages are discussed here, and they are the silent period of language learning and the early production stage (Concannon-Gibney, 2021). According to Concannon-Gibney (2021), language learners who are in the silent period of language learning, do not yet speak the language, but enjoy being part of activities in the foreign language and actively listen what is being said around them. Although not speaking, they show understanding through gestures and other non-verbal cues (Concannon-Gibney, 2021). When children are in the silent period, they need a high amount of input without being pressured to produce language (Concannon-Gibney, 2021). Following the silent period is the early production stage, where young learners begin to try speaking the foreign language (Concannon-Gibney, 2021). According to Concannon-Gibney (2021) gestures also play a significant role at this stage supporting understanding both ways.

2.1.3 Vocabulary learning

Vocabulary learning is the starting point for any second language learning, and it continues throughout the language learning process (Ellis, 2005; Hestetraet, 2019). Mäntylä, Roiha, Dufva and Pakula (2024) agree that language learning is built on strong core vocabulary onto which learners add new vocabulary. They define core vocabulary to be "*words that are convenient for learners to know*" and to consist mostly of nouns. Kersten (2015, p.129) puts it a bit differently but with the same underlying idea, that second language development is sometimes seen as constituting of two elements: learning words and learning the rules to combine the words. According to Mäntylä et al. (2024), though, research concentrating on vocabulary learning in early foreign language classroom setting is scarce since most studies with this age group focus on learning results and learner perception and therefore the studies shown here focus on foreign language vocabulary learning in general. According to some studies

young language learners deem vocabulary learning important, since it gives them sense of accomplishment and affects their confidence (Mihaljevic Djigunovic & Lopriore, 2011).

2.1.4 Word knowledge

Nation (2022), Mäntylä et al. (2024) and Ghosn (2019) present what it means to actually learn a word. Ghosn (2019) divides vocabulary acquisition to include conceptual-, morphological-, grammatical-, semantic-, pragmatic-, and phonological knowledge. Nation (2022) simplifies the list and divides word knowledge between receptive and productive knowledge, where receptive knowledge includes understanding input through listening or reading and productive knowledge includes language production through speaking or writing. According to him knowing a word could also be divided into knowledge about form, meaning and use. What can be interpreted from these two perspectives, is that young learners mostly know the words on a surface level. They do not know many forms of the same word and cannot name all the different meanings of the same word and only recognize the words in familiar contexts (Mäntylä et al., 2024). To actually know a word, one would have to master all these word properties mentioned above and beyond (Nation, 2022; Mäntylä et al., 2024; Ghosn, 2019). To develop a full understanding of a word takes time and happens gradually through multiple encounters with the word (Ghosn, 2019). Therefore, when this thesis refers to vocabulary learning, it means the surface level knowledge mentioned earlier.

2.1.5 Learning a word

Vocabulary learning can be intentional or incidental and for better learning outcomes it is suggested to be a combination of both (Mäntylä et al., 2024; Hestetraet, 2019), although intentional vocabulary learning is suggested at the early stages of learning (Hestetraet, 2019). According to Nation (2022) teaching plays a minor role in vocabulary learning and teachers should consider this when thinking about dividing time between intentional and incidental vocabulary learning. Mäntylä et al. (2024) state that 95-98 percent of the words that are being introduced incidentally should already be familiar to the learner. Therefore prior to incidental vocabulary

introduction some intentional introduction needs to occur. Intentional vocabulary learning is considered very slow to increase the size of vocabulary efficiently (Mäntylä et al., 2024). Nation (2022) reports about first language researchers who agree with Mäntylä et al. (2024) about the slow speed that in which learning occurs when words are taught intentionally. Nation (2022) reminds that there are substantial differences between first and second language learners, though, due to which some of the arguments about comparing first and second language learners are not usable. He mentions the biggest difference to be the amount of exposure to a language input and the opportunities for language production.

Mäntylä et al. (2024) state that in order to consolidate words into long term memory, these four points should be considered. First, exposure should be frequent and repeated enough. Some studies suggest that learners need to encounter words at least ten times, in a short period of time in order to actually learn the word (Mäntylä et al., 2024; Ghosn, 2019). The studies also highlight that it is crucial to encounter the word again after the initial introduction (Mäntylä et al., 2024; Ghosn, 2019). Second, words are explicitly defined and provided in meaningful contexts (Mäntylä et al., 2024). Children can be involved in the process of choosing meaningful vocabulary, which is said to promote motivation (Hestetraet, 2019). Concanon-Gibson (2021) also believes that learning words without meaningful context will not produce fluent speakers of a foreign language. Third, opportunities for interaction and discussion using the target words are provided (Mäntylä et al., 2024). According to Hestetraet (2019) interaction is a crucial step in vocabulary learning. She also states that it might be difficult to move from learning singular words intentionally to have children take part in interaction in the foreign language. And last, the target words are taught using multimodal methods (Mäntylä et al., 2024).

Some words are easier to learn than others. Nation (2022) provides a term learning burden for this issue. The learning burden of a word determines how easy or how hard it is to learn a certain word (Nation, 2022). Words themselves are not the only determiners for the learning burden, but the background of the learner also affects which words have bigger burden (Nation, 2022; Ellis, 2005). Concreteness is a word

property that affects the learning burden of a word: the more concrete the word is, the easier it is to learn (Ellis, 2005 p.4). The familiarity between first and the foreign language also affects the learning burden of different words (Nation, 2022). For instance, it is easier to learn words that are phonologically closer to the word in first language (Ellis, 2005 p.4) as well as words and phrases that share the spelling or grammatical patterns (Nation, 2022). Teachers can help ease the burden by making connections between the two languages (Nation, 2022).

There are 470 000 entries in the English language dictionary according to Merriam-Webster and with a volume this big it is hard to tell where to begin with young language learners. According to Kersten (2015) the first introduction to new vocabulary happens through nouns since they are easy to illustrate and explain. New words are often introduced by using flashcards or concrete materials from the environment, but they often lack a meaningful context (Kersten, 2015, p.137). Hestetraet (2019) also adds that basic level vocabulary is easier to learn first, followed by lower and higher-level words, such as a dog – an animal – a golden retriever. It is also important to select age-appropriate vocabulary that suits the cognitive development of a specific age group (Hestetraet, 2019). High frequency words are also said to be important to learn at the beginning of the learning process, since knowing these words help the understanding of spoken language (Hestetraet, 2019). High frequency words are said to be the 3000 words that occur in the English language most often such as “and”, “have” and “the” (Hestetraet, 2019).

2.1.6 Learning multiword units

Multiword units, chunks, prefabricated language, formulaic language or semi-preconstructed phrases are all synonyms for each other meaning recurring sequences of three or more words that typically occur together (Kersten, 2015; Hestetraet, 2019) but this thesis will refer to them as multiword units. They form a huge portion of any discourse, however, it is hard to define them, because they are so diverse in their appearance and purpose (Schmitt & Carter, 2004). Some of them are fixed and some of them have slots to fill with different words (Schmitt & Carter, 2004). This diversity explains why previous researchers have come up with different terminology to

express the different perspectives of multiword units (Schmitt & Carter, 2004). Both Schmitt & Carter (2004) and Kersten (2015) encourage learning languages through multiword units since it is considered to be the more economical way to process languages.

Very few studies cover the subject of acquiring multiword units with younger learners but the ones that do, indicate some benefits compared to single word learning (Kersten, 2015). According to Mäntylä et al. (2024) and Garton & Tekin (2022) young learners tend to rely on and learn through multiword units and are able to produce them even in new contexts. As was discussed earlier, children lack metalanguage skills, which is said to be fruitful for learning multiword units (Kersten, 2015, p. 134) According to Kersten (2015) multiword units speed up language production and facilitate communication. They also offer young learners full phrases to use to convey messages more easily (Hestetraet, 2019).

Multiword units are also important in early language learning (Concannon-Gibson, 2021). In addition to vocabulary learning, multiword units are said to help develop syntactic and grammatical knowledge of language (Concannon-Gibson, 2021). Concannon-Gibson (2021) suggests that nursery rhymes offer an age-appropriate activity to introduce multiword units to young learners. The introduction of multiword units also offers an option for children who prefer learning different ways. Some children prefer naming things or activities tend to learn singular words, nouns especially, and children who focus more on the expressive side of language tend to learn full expressions (Schmitt & Carter, 2004). According to Schmitt and Carter (2004) it is also up to what a child thinks languages are learned for and what kind of language input the child has been receiving.

I have now discussed the different aspects of language learning with very young language learners and will continue with the different aspects to consider about teaching of very young language learners.

2.2 Early language teaching

In this chapter I will discuss the different conditions for optimal learning results as well as the nature of teaching very young learners. Lastly I have collected a few concrete examples of how to teach English to very young learners.

Early childhood classrooms (ECC) position themselves in between formal school environment and home language environments (Burke, Barnes, Wiernik, and Raghavan, 2022; Mourao, 2015). Early childhood language learning classrooms in Finland fall under the name of early childhood education and care, or ECEC, for short (National Core Curriculum for ECEC, 2022). Its purpose is to prepare and equip children with skills and attributes they will need in their future years of formal education (Mourao, 2015, p.51) ECC's fall between two philosophical traditions: teacher-led and education focused approach and child-directed, socio-pedagogic approach (Mourao, 2015, p.52).

2.2.1 Conditions for better learning

With the right circumstances, starting to learn foreign languages early can be beneficial, and according to Tragant Mestres and Lundberg (2011) teachers are the single most important factor affecting learning. Some studies show that there is potential to produce great learning outcomes with young learners (Enever, 2015). Enever (2015, p.18) believes, though, that for some reason classrooms all around the world are not able to produce the learning outcomes with younger learners that the studies mentioned previously indicate should be possible. According to Tragant Mestres & Lundberg (2011) the circumstances that foster better learning outcomes are varied. They argue that good learning outcomes can be achieved with very different conditions. Some common factors seem to occur, though (Tragant Mestres & Lundber, 2011; Enever, 2015). According to Tragant Mestres and Lundberg (2011) one of the factors is that teachers like the language they teach and/or believe that it is beneficial to begin learning languages early. They also add that one important factor is creating a positive learning environment with plenty of positive experiences while learning. Enever (2015) adds that teachers should have high expertise on the language and childhood pedagogy and there should be continuity in the learning process. Enever (2015) and

Tragant Mestres & Lundberg (2011) both agree that sustaining learner motivation over time is also a key factor. I have categorized these conditions into three categories: Teacher attributes, sustaining motivation and continuity in the language learning process.

First of the three conditions necessary for better learning outcomes with younger learners is teachers' attributes: expertise and interest towards the language and teaching. According to Rixon (2015), Tragant Mestres & Lundberg (2011) and Mourao (2015), teacher attributes are crucial to successful learning outcomes. Rixon (2015, p. 42) says: "If teachers are not capable of providing optimal conditions for language learning, the mere fact that the learners are young will not be enough for success."

Mourao (2015, p.53) highlights the fact that the younger the student learning a foreign language is, the more attention to teacher expertise is called for. Teacher expertise with young language learners is said to consist of two parts: advanced level of language proficiency and knowledge of age-appropriate methodological skills (Enever, 2015, p. 22; Mourao, 2015, p. 53). Appropriate level of language proficiency according to Mourao (2015, p. 53) is when teacher is confident to speak fluently and spontaneously to children in the foreign language. Enever (2015, p.22) and Mäntylä et al. (2024) highlight oral proficiency as well, due to children's illiteracy. Oral proficiency is also highlighted due to the fact that in many cases the time that children get exposed to the foreign language is limited and therefore that limited exposure should be of high quality (Johnstone, 2019). Teachers who have limitations in their fluency or confidence can still function well with young language learners if they are enthusiastic and develop children's language and cultural awareness by comparing first and second language and by introducing different songs, stories and games (Johnstone, 2019). The age-appropriate methodological skills include the understanding of the different developmental stages of childhood (Mourao, 2015, p.53). In addition to language proficiency and knowledge of age-appropriate methodological skills Tragant Mestres & Lundberg (2011) also add that it is necessary for a teacher to enjoy the foreign language they are teaching and to believe in the benefits of starting to learn languages early.

Second of the three conditions is sustaining motivation over time. Children are said to lose motivation easier than older learners when tasks get harder (Enever, 2015). As was presented earlier, children are also said to have very few external reasons to learn languages and their enthusiasm to learn depends on how enjoyable they find language learning classrooms and how well their psychological needs are met (Garton & Tekin, 2022; Li et al., 2019). Slowly progressing teaching is also said to be a demotivator with young learners (Mård-Miettinen & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2021). Therefore, it is important for the teacher to sustain motivation over time with ways that are engaging to young learners (Enever, 2015, p. 24). Children have a natural instinct for play and fun and it is part of their developmental process, which is why teachers should try to incorporate play and fun in the learning process to foster motivation that lasts through harder tasks (Enever, 2015, p.24). Tragant Mestres & Lundberg (2011) also add that it is important to provide positive learning experiences at the early stages of learning.

Last of the three conditions necessary for better learning outcomes is the continuous nature of the learning process. According to Enever (2015, p. 25), teachers and policy makers pay little attention to what has come in the past and what will come in the future. She also states that without the continuous nature of the learning process, it is highly unlikely that the early start will achieve the outcomes predicted. Children need repeated exposure to any unit in order to learn them (Kersten, 2015, p. 137). This is easily explained by the functioning of our brain: the more times we encounter something, the stronger the memory of it is and the easier it becomes to access (Kersten, 2015, p.137). This idea is also agreed by Nation (2022, p. 139): “Knowledge of a word can only accumulate if learners meet the word many times”. It is not a given that the exposure is repetitive enough in classroom settings compared to natural second language settings (Kerstin, 2015, p.138) and approximately 33% of language learning curriculums should revolve around re-visiting familiar material (Nation, 2022). Nation (2022) reminds that teachers should remember that learning vocabulary is a progressive process and not all the information about a singular word needs to be learned in one sitting.

Teachers have the biggest responsibility in offering opportunities to repeatedly meet and use the words that the learners are learning (Nation, 2022). According to Nation (2022) repetition in language learning can be done through verbatim repetition or varied repetition. Verbatim repetition means doing activities over and over again after some time in between, whereas varied repetition means doing similar activities with the same vocabulary (Nation, 2022). Nation (2022) also reports that repetition is needed for incidental vocabulary learning. Vocabulary acquisition requires recycling of vocabulary in different, meaningful contexts (Kersten, 2015).

2.2.2 The nature of teaching young learners

The teaching of early language learners should be based on communicative input and interaction when in later years additional focus is given for form (Ellis, 2005; Garton & Tekin, 2022). Language teaching with young learners also highlights spoken language due to young learners' illiteracy (Vahtola et al., 2022; Inha & Huhta, 2019; Huhta & Leontjev, 2019) but it should raise some interest towards written forms of communication (Mård-Miettinen et al., 2021, p.42). Rixon (2015, p. 42) highlights that in order to achieve the better learning outcomes children need to use the language rather than just get exposed to it. Children are said to have an instinct for interaction and talk and creating circumstances for this is the most important task for teachers of early language learners (Enever, 2015, p. 20). Although children have less experience with different forms of communication, the only way to learn how to talk is through talking (Enever, 2015). Some studies show positive learning results when children receive enough input and opportunities to use the language (Inha & Huhta, 2019, p. 80) Communicative input and interaction should be mediated through playful and nurturing interaction (Burke et. al, 2022) and the input should be in a meaningful context (Mourao, 2015, p. 54).

Cameron (2010, p. 5) introduces Vygotskian theory about children as social beings. In language learning and teaching context social view is vital. Especially in early language teaching, learning takes place in a social context, where teachers mediate the world for children (Cameron, 2010, p. 6). Teachers bring ideas to their attention, talk about playing and talk during playing, read stories and ask questions (Cameron, 2010,

p. 6). This helps children exceed their capabilities and understand more than they could on their own, which is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Cameron, 2010, p.6). This idea sits well with the teacher-led approach introduced by Mourao (2015, p.52).

When it comes to early language learning classrooms, it is a relevant question of how much foreign language should be used when teaching beginners. Research supports using both the first and the second language interchangeably by translanguaging (Garton & Tekin, 2022). Translanguaging is when languages are dynamically and flexibly used to utilize all linguistic resources one has on hand to negotiate meaning (Garton & Tekin, 2022; Copland & Ni, 2019). Garton and Tekin (2022) as well as Copland and Ni (2019) add that translanguaging is important since all languages contribute to the language learning process one way or another. Translanguaging is also useful when children connect new words to already known words in their native language (Concannon-Gibney, 2021; Nation, 2022). The decision relating classroom languages is an important one, since children have to be understood (Copland & Ni, 2019). According to Garton and Tekin (2022) there is no one model that fits all classrooms and all teachers and it should be up to the teacher to decide how to proceed. Factors that should be considered when planning how much translanguaging is needed are class size, teacher proficiency level and experience as well as learner motivation, age and proficiency level (Garton & Tekin, 2022).

Children rely heavily on gestures, movements and other non-verbal cues when trying to understand a foreign language. Therefore, it is important to utilize movements, gestures and expressions in teaching to support understanding and memory of a young learner (Concannon-Gibney, 2021). Due to the silent period young learners are in, the usage of non-communicative cues are important to enhance understanding since the main language learning happens through spoken language (Concannon-Gibney, 2021). To help young learners understand better, the teacher can also emphasize or over pronounce certain words (Kirkgöz, 2019). Using real life objects or demonstrations through gestures can also help young learners to understand the meanings of words better (Concannon-Gibson, 2021).

Although there is very little research about the relationship between the materials used for early language teaching and the ultimate results for learning with the material, the importance of quality material is acknowledged (Ghosn, 2019). The content chosen for teaching young learners should be interesting, concrete, personally and culturally relevant and relatable, motivating and should provide meaningful and natural contexts for language learning (Ghosn, 2019). According to Ghosn (2019), when the material has some personal relevance to the learner, the information gets processed in the working memory better, therefore leading to better learning. As was discussed earlier, children stay motivated and engaged in tasks when the tasks are enjoyable. Therefore, it is important that the materials used in early childhood classrooms are motivating enough, since motivation and interest are said to have great impact on learning (Ghosn, 2019). Proper materials also consider the need for repetitive input and provides possibilities to produce language (Ghosn, 2019)

Some concrete ways languages are being taught to young learners are songs, rhymes, riddles, chants, games, stories, drama, puppets and project work (Mourao, 2015, p. 55; Huhta & Leontjev 2019; Garton & Tekin, 2022). Topics that are introduced through these activities are typically greetings, colors, numbers, clothes, animals, family, days, months, seasons of the year and body parts (Mård-Miettinen & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2021). These activities and topics are considered age-appropriate for this age group (Garton & Tekin, 2022; Mård-Miettinen & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2021). The reason why these activities are used with young language learners is that they rely on oral, concrete language rather than written and abstract language (Garton & Tekin, 2022). They are also said to provide rich, authentic and entertaining language input, which is said to be highly motivating and engaging on top of contributing to the overall cognitive development of a child (Garton & Tekin, 2022). These kinds of materials also offer engaging repetition of vocabulary and structure (Ghosn, 2019).

Songs are considered to be the most beneficial activity to practice pronunciation, listening skills, vocabulary and language patterns (Garton & Tekin, 2022; Kirkgöz, 2019). Simple and repetitive language structures are the key factor with songs in language learning (Kirkgöz, 2019). Drama can be anything from short introductory

sessions to long performances that are practiced for weeks, and it is said to positively affect motivation, engagement and confidence (Garton & Tekin, 2022). Drama activities that require some imagination are said to entertain and motivate learners and the use of any physical realia or movement helps stories come to life bringing a communicative purposes to the tasks (Kirkgöz, 2019). Stories are said to develop reading and writing skills as well as vocabulary and some studies highlight the importance of reading to young language learners (Ghosn, 2019). Stories also offer natural repetition of language, which is important for vocabulary learning (Nation, 2022). Nursery rhymes attract young learners with rhyming patterns and naturally produce gestures and other meaning-inducing impressions which are said to help young learners learn (Concannon-Gibson, 2021). Nursery rhymes are also age-appropriate, familiar to children from their first language due to many of them having been translated to different languages and they offer meaningful context to learn vocabulary (Concannon-Gibson, 2021). Especially with songs, rhymes and stories children learn rhythm, intonation and pronunciation (Kirkgöz, 2019). It is also common to mix and combine different activities (Garton & Tekin, 2022).

3 EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING IN FINLAND

The last chapter covered early language learning and teaching in general, but this chapter will focus more on the Finnish context of early language teaching. In this chapter I will first introduce what is said in the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care about learning in general. Next I will discuss the different pedagogic principles for language learning in the Finnish context. In this section I will also introduce language showering, which is a main pedagogical framework for my material package, which I will introduce later.

Early childhood language learning is executed in the context of Early Childhood Education and care, or ECEC for short. (National core curriculum for ECEC, 2022). The National Core Curriculum (NCC) for ECEC (2022) mentions foreign language learning relatively shortly. It is mentioned generally that language wise, the purpose of ECEC is to foster the development of language skills by encouraging curiosity and interest towards languages (National core curriculum for ECEC, 2022). It is also mentioned that languages are both the tool and the objective of learning (National core curriculum for ECEC, 2022). No other languages are named specifically other than the national languages Finnish, Swedish and Sami languages. According to Mäntylä et al. (2024) English language is holding the spot for the number one choice for language learning in the Finnish ECEC. The National core curriculum for ECEC (2022) mentions that languages are taught to Finnish children in a bilingual ECEC manner, where ECEC facilities have the option to choose between broader and less broad approach. The broader approach is defined as an approach with over 25 percent of the planned

activities to be operated in a foreign language and opposingly the less broad approach with less than 25 percent of the planned activities to be operated in a language that is not mentioned in the ECEC law (National core curriculum for ECEC, 2022, p.34). This paper will focus on the less broad approach with less than 25 percent of the activities being operated with a language that is not mentioned in the ECEC law.

The NCC for ECEC (2022) approves the theory of a sensitive or critical period for language learning and reports that the bilingual ECEC aims to take advantage of that period by offering versatile language education (The NCC for ECEC, 2022, p.33). Highlighting the age factor is partly in contradiction with results found in some studies (See for example Rixon, 2015 & Enever, 2015). The NCC for ECEC (2022) does not offer clear instructions how to take advantage of the sensitive period for language learning and it is up to the ECEC facilities to determine how to implement the teaching of foreign languages.

3.1 Play-based teaching

The saying “play is child’s work” is true when looking at different developmental approaches considering childhood (Enever, 2015). Play is said to develop children’s communication skills, vocabulary, storytelling skills and promote the development of attention and concentration (Ghosn, 2019). As was said earlier, ECCs stand between the two approaches: teacher-led and child-directed approaches (Mourao, 2015, p. 52). What was not said, is how challenging it is to find a balance between these two approaches (Mourao, 2015, p.57). According to Mourao (2015) more often activities are teacher-led due to lack of time. That is not necessarily a negative option. As was also stated earlier, sometimes young children need adults for mediating play to learn (Cameron, 2010). Adult-led, play-based activities include teachers interacting with the children and the content of learning in a playful matter (Mourao, 2015, p.57). In practice this is often executed in circle times or other kinds of whole group gatherings (Mourao, 2015, p.57). Circle time is considered a meeting where the whole group gathers for activities and it consists of several routines such as greetings, talking about the

day, weather, or other special news about the day (Mourao, 2015, p.59). Routines are extremely important for children since familiar structures that are repeated on daily basis are said to create predictability, which in turn makes children feel safe and relaxed (Mourao, 2015, p.59). This provides children opportunities to support their understanding and pick up language (Mourao, 2015, p.60). Therefore, play should have a significant role in the early language learning classrooms.

3.2 Functional language teaching

Language teaching in the Finnish ECEC's is based on functional language teaching (Vahtola et al., 2021; Mård-Miettinen & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2021; Huhta & Leontjev, 2019). Some studies show that functional language teaching is the kind of teaching method that young students like to participate in (Mård-Miettinen et al. 2021, p. 44) Since young learners are said to have high energy levels, they are said to enjoy learning through playing and by doing (Kirkgöz, 2019).

One of the ways to utilize functional language teaching in young learner classrooms is the total physical response method (TPR). The TPR method requires students to listen and to mime movements since it is believed that language learning is easier when learners are actively participating in understanding the language (Kirkgöz, 2019). Since children are in the silent period of language learning in the early years of starting to learn a language, TPR provides a way to express oneself without having to use the language.

One of the ways functional language teaching is carried out in Finland is through language showering. Language showering is a Finnish term for a method used in early language teaching (Bärlund, Nyman & Kajander, 2015 p. 78). The main idea in language showering is to introduce foreign languages and cultures little by little, leaving a good platform for later learning experiences (Pyykkö, 2017). Language showering can be done through language showering sessions one or two times a week, or here and there throughout the day (Kangasvieri, Lempel, Palojärvi & Moate, 2021; Bärlund, 2012). According to my personal references, sometimes Finnish ECEC facilities have

no time for once or twice a week sessions, therefore leaving the here and there method a better option for those facilities that cannot have planned sessions too often (Hänninen, 2023). Bärlund (2012) highlights that language showering is most beneficial when it is being given discreetly amid daily activities. The main advantage of language showering here and there is the fact that it can be done anywhere leaving room for spontaneity and themes that interest the children and rise on the occasion as well as keeping the sessions short so that children stay focused and motivated throughout (Kangasvieri et al., 2021). Another advantage of the here and there method is the repetition it allows to happen when the new language can be learned among the daily repeated activities instead of just the planned, once or twice a week, sessions (Kangasvieri et al., 2021). Finally, the here and there method allows teachers and other members of the ECEC facility to evaluate the alertness of the child at the given moment, which allows the sessions to happen when the child is more ready to receive it (Kangasvieri et al., 2021).

Main goal for language showering in the learners' perspective is understanding the foreign language (Bärlund et. al, 2015 p.78). The teacher's main goal is to create a positive environment for different languages and cultures (Bärlund et. al, 2015 p.78; Pyykkö, 2017) and to encourage children to learn and use new languages through repetitive songs, games, and communal activities (Bärlund, 2012). First language is present in language showers (Bärlund, 2012).

Important factors for successful language showering are age-appropriate content, functionality in activities, repetition, and routines (Bärlund et. al, 2015 p.79). Through repetition and routines children can learn challenging content such as nursery rhymes and short stories (Bärlund et. al, 2015 p.78). It is also said to be easier to start with songs and games that the children are already familiar with from their first language so that they can fully focus on learning the new language instead of wasting energy on learning the rules for games or melodies for songs (Bärlund, 2012; Bärlund et. al, 2015 p. 80).

I have now discussed the main findings of early language learning and teaching, and these findings will be considered in the material package I will introduce below.

4 FRAMEWORK FOR THE MATERIAL PACKAGE

4.1 Starting point and aims

The NCC for ECEC leaves the execution of bilingual education up to the ECEC facilities with little or no concrete examples on how to take advantage of the sensitive period for language learning with young learners. There is also a clear shortage of educated teachers ready to provide language showers to children (Pyykkö, 2017). This material package aims to offer guidance for the personnel working in ECEC on how to provide versatile language learning opportunities for young language learners in the Finnish context. The material package aims to offer clear and easy to use activities to use during the daily activities of ECEC classrooms without having to schedule English language learning sessions per se. This material package also aims to provide guidance for repetition and routines with the English language.

4.2 Target group

The target group for this material package is the personnel working in the ECEC facilities that follow the less broad approach for bilingual education (NCC for ECEC, 2022, p. 33). The target group is further narrowed down to consider language learners between the ages 3-6, since 1-2-year-olds have barely acquired their first language and 7-year-olds have already started primary education in Finland, which is a different language learning context.

4.3 Pedagogical framework

This material package follows the pedagogical framework set in the NCC of ECEC (2022), where foreign language learning is mentioned only briefly but other learning goals are explained more thoroughly. Teachers are responsible for both the development of a language as well as the overall development of a child (Copland & Ni, 2019).

First and perhaps most important framework is play as a method for learning. The NCC for ECEC (2022) acknowledges play to have a central role in children's

overall development and wellbeing. It is stated that play is an excellent tool for learning, but children do not play to consciously learn (The NCC for ECEC, 2022, p. 25). The NCC for ECEC (2022, p.25) also highlights that play is versatile and can be used to enrich various different activities.

Second framework is the language showering framework, where language is most beneficially taught discreetly amid daily activities (Bärlund, 2012). When languages are taught amid daily activities, it provides opportunities for repetition and routines (Bärlund et al., 2015, p. 79), which is extremely important for language learning (Kersten, 2015, p.137). Just like play, language showering can be used to enrich various different activities that aim for the overall development of children.

Third framework is vocabulary learning, which is said to be at the center of language learning (Mäntylä et al., 2024; Ellis, 2005; Hestetraet, 2019). The aim is to build core vocabularies for the children, which consist mostly of nouns (Mäntylä et al., 2024; Kersten, 2015) and concrete words that have a lighter learning burden (Ellis, 2005). Since it is believed that the combination of incidental and intentional vocabulary teaching is the best way to learn vocabulary (Hestetraet, 2019), this material package aims to follow that. It is also important to introduce multiword units, since it is believed to be the way we learn languages (Garton & Tekin, 2022).

Final framework is the importance of repetition and progression of language learning. According to Nation (2022) and Kersten (2015), words need to be repeated in different, meaningful contexts in order for them to be learned. Repetition can happen through verbatim repetition, where same activity is repeated after a while, or through varied repetition, where similar yet somehow different activity is repeated with the same vocabulary (Nation, 2022).

4.4 Structure and content

This material package presents opportunities to enrich daily activities with English language. The material package aims to consider all learning objectives mentioned in the NCC for ECEC (2022), where the aim is to provide opportunities to develop musical, graphical, artisanal, verbal and bodily skills (NCC for ECEC, 2022, p. 28). The

material package is constructed on a Google Sites platform for easy access. The link for the site is as follows:

<https://sites.google.com/view/kielisuihkutustaenglanniksi/etusivu>

The site begins with an introduction to the topic of what the site consists of and how it is built. It introduces the different color codes for easy access. The first category is the pink category for daily routines such as morning circles, transitions, lunch time and getting dressed. The second category is the blue category for musical skills, including songs, rhythm and dance. The third category is the light green category for creative skills, including arts and crafts. The fourth category is the red category for oral skills, including drama, storytelling and play. The fifth category is the yellow category for bodily skills including activities for movement. The sixth category is the turquoise category for emotional and social skills. The seventh category is the dark green category for societal skills. The final category is the rose category for repetition and revision, where instructions for vocabulary revision is given.

Each category includes tips for different activities to incorporate English in, with the different linguistic content mentioned in the beginning. After each section of tips there is a section for materials for each category for easy access.

The limitations this material package has is that there is no forum for feedback. Therefore, getting feedback on whether this material package works or not and to improve it based on feedback is difficult. The contact information at the end of the material package could pave the way for some feedback, though.

5 CONCLUSION

Previous research acknowledges that countries around the world suggest foreign language learning to begin early on in life (Enever, 2015; Rixon, 2015; Mourao, 2015; Vahtola, Lintunen & Maijala, 2022). Yet there is very little previous research done with the age group that language learning usually begins with (ages 3-6). That is why this thesis relies heavily on previous research conducted on 6-8-year-olds. Due to this more studies should focus on that specific age group to get a full understanding of language learning and teaching opportunities and challenges.

In this thesis I have discussed the benefits of starting young, highlighting the enthusiasm and motivation of young learners (Mihaljevic Djigunovic & Lopriore, 2011). Debate about the sensitive period is still inconclusive, but some studies say that it is the contextual elements that affect the outcomes of starting young rather than the young age itself (See for instance Rixon, 2015; Inha & Huhta, 2019). Some mentionable contextual factors are teacher expertise (Tragant Mestres & Lundberg, 2011; Rixon, 2015; Enever, 2015; Mourao, 2015) and language input that is repeated enough (Mäntylä et al., 2024).

The Finnish context of young language learners is no exception to the rest of Europe, highlighting English language as the first language to be introduced (Mäntylä et al., 2024). The National Core Curriculum (NCC) for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) does not mention English per se, but some indication to foreign language introduction is mentioned. The NCC for ECEC recognizes the sensitive period for language learning (See for instance Long, 2013) but does not give any physical examples how to take advantage of that period. The most used teaching method in the Finnish context with very young language learners is the language showering method (See for instance Bärlund et al., 2015). This material package aims to add something new to the existing field of language showering material packages with the focus on overall development of a child rather than focusing on separate language learning themes that are considered age appropriate.

The material package focuses on activities that introduce English vocabulary through play and everyday activities. It introduces vocabulary, that consists mostly of concrete nouns that are easy to illustrate through concrete examples (Ellis, 2005) or through multiword units that are learned as a unit rather than consisting of singular words. The material package also relies entirely on oral skills on the teachers part but does not require students to produce oral language if they are not ready, since there are plenty of opportunities to indicate understanding, such as actions from input (Concannon-Gibney, 2021).

The material package offers ideas how to incorporate English language through sports, arts, music and oral skills, social and societal skills and themes as mentioned

in the NCC for ECEC. This way language learning does not happen intentionally but incidentally, as was mentioned by as the ideological way to teach languages by Mäntylä et al. (2024) and Hesteraet (2019). The material package works best if advice for repetition and revision is followed. This advice is given at the end of the material package, where repetition can be varied or verbatim as introduced by Nation (2022) . The first introductions of the materials in the material package are more intentional and after the initial introductions, incidental language learning should occur.

The material package works, if teachers are ready to engage in English with the children. As was discussed earlier, teacher expertise is one of the key contributors to better learning outcomes (Tragant Mestres & Lundberg, 2011; Rixon, 2015; Enever, 2015; Mourao, 2015). According to Enever (2015) and Mourao (2015) teacher expertise consist of two parts: language proficiency and knowledge of age appropriate methodological skills. As the teachers in the ECEC facilities are experts in early childhood education and care, they should focus on building confidence in their language proficiency, since according to Johnstone (2019) limitations do not prohibit language teaching with very young learners. Enthusiasms towards the language covers what is lost in proficiency (Johnstone, 2019). Therefore, the outcomes of this material package is also at the hands of teachers utilizing this material package.

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