Comparative study of communicative tasks in two Finnish EFL textbooks

Bachelor's thesis

Kare Ojasalo

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Kieltenopetus on 1970-luvulta alkaen ollut entistä enemmän keskittynyt suullisen vuorovaikutuksen merkitykseen sekä kommunikatiivisen kompetenssin harjoittelemiseen. Kyky selviytyä arkipäiväisestä elämästä ja pystyä keskustelemaan kohdekieltä käyttäen on siirtynyt yhdeksi suurimmista tavoitteista kielenopetusta suunniteltaessa. Vuorovaikutuksellisien tehtävien hyödyntäminen oppikirjoissa on edellä mainitun trendin johteessa yleistynyt, ja tehtävien sisältö sekä vuorovaikutukselliset kontekstit ovat muuttuneet. Kieltenopettaminen keskittyy entistä enemmän oppijan tarpeisiin, minkä takia on mielenkiintoista tutkia, mitkä aihealueet esiintyvät tärkeimpinä vuorovaikutuksellisissa harjoituksissa.

Koska opettaminen Suomessa suurelta määrin nojautuu oppikirjoihin ja niitä ohjaavaan opetussuunnitelmaan, oli tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena selvittää, miten kommunikatiivisten harjoituksien määrä sekä sisältö on muuttunut ajan kuluessa. Tarkoituksena oli vertailla kahta Suomessa käytettävää lukiotason kirjaa, joista yhtä käytettiin 1990-luvulla ja toista käytetään 2020-luvulla. Tutkittavat kirjat olivat *Passwords: Streamlined 1* (WSOY, 1994) ja *On Track 1* (Sanoma Pro, 2021), joista molemmat ovat tarkoitettuja lukion ensimmäiselle pakolliselle englanninkurssille. Näistä kirjoista valittiin kaikki tehtävät, jotka täyttivät tutkimuksessa asetetut vuorovaikutuksellisen harjoituksen kriteerit, minkä jälkeen niiden asiasisältöä tutkittiin. Tarkoituksena oli vertailla kirjasarjoja toisiinsa sekä niitä ohjaaviin opetussuunnitelmiin.

Tärkeimpinä huomioina nousi esiin kirjojen erilainen lähestymistapa vuorovaikutuksellisiin harjoituksiin. *Passwords* nojautui huomattavasti *On Trackia* enemmän valmiisiin rakenteisiin ja roolileikkeihin. Myös esimerkiksi kysymyksien hyödyntäminen tehtävissä erosi suuresti. *Passwordsissa* kysymyksiä ei hyödynnetty *On Trackin* tapaan keskusteluaiheina, vaan yksinkertaisina kysymysvastaus pareina, jolloin vapaa vuorovaikutus jää hyvin vähäiseksi. Vaikka vuorovaikutukseen on yritetty panostaa jo 90-luvun *Passwordsissa*, toteutustavan tarkoituksellisuutta voidaan kyseenalaistaa.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As of recently, the emphasis in language teaching has increasingly shifted towards the communicative aspects of language use. Since the 1970s, the focus in language teaching has tended to move towards languages' 'relevance-to-purpose' and therefore, the relevance of spoken language in both teaching and linguistics has increased (Howatt, 2009, p. 484). When it comes to second language teaching, training a language learner to become a fluent speaker of the language is often one of the most important goals, and the skill of speech is highly prioritized in teaching (Hughes, 2010, p. 15). Language teachers, especially in Finland, tend to follow publisher-made materials when planning their teaching, and the contents of these materials have changed significantly over the years due to different trends in language teaching (Hughes, 2010: Karjala, 2003, p. 50).

I am interested in examining to what extent the design of communicative tasks in textbooks has changed. There are a few studies that touch on the subject of communicative/oral tasks in Finnish English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching, (e.g. Holm, 2016). However, the exploration of content themes and topics in said communicative tasks has somewhat been neglected. The rise of authentic language use via communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) in EFL teaching has influenced the contexts in which communication happens inside a classroom (Hughes, 2010; Byram & Garcia, 2009, pp. 501-502; Kim & Keck, 2014, pp. 171-172). Therefore, I am interested to find out how this can be seen reflected in the materials provided in textbooks within a set time frame.

The present study is interested in examining the development of communicative tasks in Finnish EFL textbooks and the topics/content themes covered in them. The aim is to find out how the use of communicative tasks in Finnish EFL textbooks has changed in the last 30 years, as well as to examine what content themes are favored or deemed more important compared to others. The aim is also to report if and how the currently covered content themes in 2024 differ from ones deemed important in the 1990s.

2 BACKGROUND

In the following chapter, I will introduce background information about the history of communicative approaches to language teaching. As the current study is interested in examining changes that may have happened in EFL textbooks between the 1990s and 2020s, an overview of the developments that have occurred in the field during the latter part of the 20th century and onwards is essential. In addition, I will be presenting how authenticity and different content themes have occurred in EFL materials in previous years, as examining topics handled in communicative exercises is one of the goals of the present study.

2.1 Communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching

For the basis of the current study, it is essential to examine the currently used approaches to language teaching in Finland, these being communicative language teaching and its branch task-based language teaching. The communicative approach to language teaching started to arise in the 1980s, with the focus shifting from structure to meaning and natural dialogue (Hughes, 2010, p. 66). Before the rise of CLT, materials created for language teaching gave students a very limited number of opportunities to negotiate meaning and initiate unstructured dialogue in the classroom (Hughes, 2010, p. 64). It seems that meaningful dialogue and partaking in conversations can be seen as a current trend in language classrooms. Both Hughes (2010) and Howatt (2009) write about CLT's emphasis on fluent language use and its focus being less on grammatically correct utterances. Hughes (2010) argues that in theory, focusing on gaining fluency in the spoken mode of language, would then translate into gaining insight about the language's structure as well.

With the increasing interest in communication in language teaching during the 1980s, a development was bound to happen in the realm of CLT, this development being task-based language teaching. TBLT, also focusing on the spoken aspects of language, places emphasis on teaching via tasks that encourage authentic language use (Hughes, 2010, pp. 150-151). As a teaching approach, it places major importance on language's function in real life and is therefore heavily linked with authenticity and 'true' communication (Norris, 2009, as cited in Kim & Keck, 2014, p. 171; Yildiz, 2020). Howatt (2009, p. 485) argues moving on from the so-called 'theater principle' is one of the most important developments brought on by TBLT.

The theater principle was in use for a long time, and it essentially gave no room for genuine communication, rather opting for structured dialogue (Howatt, 2009, p. 485). The aim of the theater principle was to give students 'situational dialogues' in which the students were given a script to follow (Howatt, 2009, p. 485). The theater principle in one way or another can still be seen in EFL materials to this day, for example in AB exercises, in which students follow a structured conversation word for word. This, quite obviously, is completely the opposite of what TBLT tries to accomplish. One of the main characteristics of TBLT is to immerse learners in communicative contexts in which negotiating meaning can occur (Yildiz, 2020). For any negotiation of meaning to occur, co-operation must happen between the students working on any given task. Therefore, language learners play a major role in each other's language learning process, and everyone needs to play their part in completing a task (Kim & Keck, 2014, pp. 149-150).

TBLT has affected how classroom activities have changed over the years. There are numerous factors which are taken into consideration when designing tasks. The term 'task' has been defined in many differing ways by numerous researchers. Skehan (1998, as cited in Kim and Keck, 2019, p. 172) defines a task as an exercise where the focus is on meaning, a problem requiring communication is present, the activity can be related to real-world use, completing the activity is most of the time a requirement, and it can be assessed based on completion. According to Kim and Keck (2014, p. 172), most linguists agree with designing tasks as a process in which the learners' needs, as well as aspirations should be taken into consideration. Since TBLT focuses so much on what learners can use a language for, it makes sense that it has stayed as a central theme in syllabus design to this day.

2.2 Textbooks and curricula in language teaching

The importance of textbooks and other published materials in foreign language teaching, and teaching in Finnish schools in general, is hard to deny. According to Neuner (1994, as cited in Karjala, 2003, p. 50), of all the tools a teacher has, a textbook is the most influential factor in directing what happens on any given lesson. Much of the time the textbook provides the aim of the lesson, what should be emphasized, the materials needed, the stages of learning and how the topic should be practiced (Karjala, 2003, p. 50). Examining textbooks and materials used by teachers is therefore essential for further improvement in the realm of language teaching.

Finnish EFL textbooks, and more precisely communicative tasks in said textbooks, have been previously studied focusing mainly on oral activities, which, unlike communicative tasks, do not necessarily require interaction between two or more language learners. For example, Hietala (2013) studied oral activities in two different Finnish upper secondary school textbook series, namely *Open Road* (2008-2010) and *ProFiles* (2011-2012). Hietala (2013) found that oral activities rarely include 'true' communication between students, rather opting for mechanical activities, meaning repetition in one form or another, often placing the emphasis on vocabulary or structure instead of communication strategies.

While textbooks generally guide teachers in what to include in any given lesson or how to go about teaching a certain topic, the contents of textbooks are guided by the National Curricula. According to the Finnish National Curriculum of Basic Education 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), when designing EFL teaching and choosing teaching materials, the target is to take students' interests into consideration. Language use in the students' free time, as well as future working environments should be integrated into EFL materials. As can be expected with the rising interest in CLT, the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 2019 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2019) stresses that the goal for students is not to acquire native-like competence, but rather to gain confidence in using the language as well as to develop communication skills and intelligibility (p. 176). Being able to handle everyday situations in the target language is something that the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 1994 (Finnish National Board of Education, 1994) also emphasized 25 years prior.

Since the current study focuses on the first course of upper secondary school English, taking a look at the curricula used as the basis for designing the course from each respective time period is essential. The National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 1994 (Finnish National Board of Education, 1994) does not include specific criteria for EFL teaching, and therefore detailed descriptions of the themes handled on courses are absent. However, a broad description addressing the contents of the first course of all A1 and A2 languages is included. The first course, called "Youth and their world" (Nuori ja hänen maailmansa) should focus on strengthening the use of vocabulary and basic structures, as well as oral practice, which is stated as essential (p. 63).

The sections of The National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 2019 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2019) addressing all foreign language learning as a whole, as well as the ones addressing the first course in upper secondary school English, focus heavily on examining students' identities, both as language learners and users (pp. 174-176 & 180). While the curriculum itself does not cover in detail what themes and topics each course/module includes, there is a broad description of essential themes. For the first module ENA1, the themes are: "building an individual language profile", "setting goals for language learning", "multilingualism as a resource", "becoming acquainted with different text types" and "becoming acquainted with fellow students and developing communication skills via conversation" (p. 181). Even though the National Curriculum does not include a specific theme for the first module, Sanoma Pro does in its description of *On Track 1*, which is the coursebook used for ENA1. Sanoma Pro describes the themes for the first module as being related to students' everyday life and focusing on oral communication and recapping fundamentals (Sanoma Pro, 2024).

2.3 Content themes and authenticity

As communicative teaching, especially TBLT, is heavily interested in providing learners with language practice that addresses the needs of the learners, introducing how authenticity and content themes have been handled over the years is essential, especially for the purpose of this study. The subject of authenticity in language teaching has had many elusive definitions over the years (Mishan, 2004, p. 1). The idea of authentic language use has shifted from the authenticity of the materials provided for the learner towards the central theme of focusing on the learner's needs (Mishan, 2004, pp. 16-17). As the goal had shifted to applying to learners' needs, so changed the contexts in which communication was to take place in a classroom (Hughes, 2010, pp. 66-67). However, change does not happen in an instant. As Hughes (2010) points out, when the idea of CLT began to make a difference in EFL materials in the 1980s, the materials often included scenarios which were either culturally loaded or had no relation to the needs of learners. The topics chosen to be handled in communicative tasks seemed to be quite artificially authentic. In other words, the content themes were not chosen because students might need to learn about them, but to create a scenario in which communication in the target language would occur.

Authenticity and its effects on EFL textbooks seem to be a less popular subject to cover in Finland. Research about authenticity in Finnish EFL materials seems to mostly cover additional materials outside textbooks. However, authenticity in textbooks has been researched elsewhere. Alshumaimeri (2015) conducted a content analysis on the Saudi EFL textbook *Flying High for Saudi Arabia*, which is meant for use on English classes in the last stage of Saudi general education. They analyzed the use of authentic materials as well as how the materials respond to learner needs. In the study, 112 female EFL teachers using the textbook analyzed to what extent the objectives, contents and activities focused on the authenticity of the materials. The results of the study showed that one of the objectives of the book was to prepare students for real world communication with the help of authentic language. Focusing on present real-world situations was not the only objective, however. The materials provided in the book also took future uses of the language, such as studying at a university or applying for a job, into account. As mentioned previously, applying real-world uses of the language into materials is something the Finnish Curriculum also emphasizes (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). In the study, however, the participants deemed the authentic activities provided in the book to quite heavily neglect the differences between learners and their language needs (Alshumaimeri, 2015).

Content themes handled in textbooks have also been researched from the aspect of theme-based role-play. Waluyo (2019) conducted a study focusing on gaining communicative competence with the use of role-play in different contexts. The study involved 782 first-year university students, with differing majors and levels of proficiency in English. More than half of the participants were deemed to be beginner level learners, a third to be intermediate learners and only a small portion were deemed as advanced learners. The participants took part in four different role-play scenarios with different topics. The results showed that role-play as a TBLT method had a positive effect on improving learners' communicative competence. However, different topics had different effects on students' performances within tasks. According to Waluyo, students' performance improved from topic 1 (Airport) to topic 2 (Restaurants), but decreased when moving on to topic 3 (Living Abroad), as this was something many participants had no experience in. Role-play, relying heavily on the theater principle, can be seen as an artificial and structured method, which does not promote meaningful interaction between learners. However, when executed correctly it can be used as a tool for practicing and gaining communicative skills, as pointed out by Waluyo (2019), and therefore, it would be ignorant to dismiss completely. It should be noted that a significant

majority of the participants in the study were beginner to intermediate level learners, and therefore, it is possible that role-play may prove less beneficial for more advanced learners. In addition, the content themes and context should reflect the needs of students and give room for negotiation of meaning to occur to best benefit students, as this is an essential component of the TBLT approach (Yildiz, 2020).

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Aim & research questions

The focus of the present study is on comparing communicative tasks found in two Finnish upper secondary school textbooks from two different points in time both in quantity and quality. In terms of qualitative research, the main focus is on the topics/content themes handled in the communicative tasks presented. The research questions the present study will be looking to answer are:

1. What is the number of communicative tasks in the textbooks used in the 1990s and 2020s, and how does it compare to the number of exercises in total?
2. What are the content themes handled in the presented communicative tasks in the textbooks used in the 1990s and 2020s?
3. How have communicative tasks changed in quantity and quality between the 1990s and 2020s?

3.2 Data and collection

The data needed for research was collected from two Finnish upper secondary school EFL textbooks, *Passwords Streamlined Course 1* published in 1994 by WSOY, which would later become Sanoma Pro, and *On Track 1* published in 2021 by Sanoma Pro. Both books are intended for use in the first course of upper secondary school English. Both *Passwords* and *On Track* include sections for texts, exercises and grammar. In the books, exercises are either linked to the texts or the grammar portion of the book. The books examined were selected due to being from the same publisher and therefore more likely to be more comparable than two books from different publishers. The selection was quite limited in terms of older book

series, while the selection of new books presented a larger variety from different publishers. The older book *Passwords* follows the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 1994 (Finnish National Board of Education, 1994), and the newer book *On Track* follows the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 2019 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2019). Therefore, it is expected that the differences in the respective curricula can be seen in the contents of the exercises of each book.

The themes handled in the texts of both *Passwords* and *On Track* focus on young students and different aspects of their lives. *Passwords* focuses on British culture as well as students' free-time and residency, while *On Track* takes a broader perspective, focusing on many different cultures. *On Track*, like *Passwords*, focuses widely on young peoples' free-time, friends and family.

The data collected is the numerical amount of communicative tasks present in both books, as well as the contents of said tasks. For the purpose of this study, I will somewhat depart from the definition of a task given by Skehan (1998, as cited in Kim & Keck, 2014, p. 172) stated in chapter 2.3, as doing so will likely yield more hits for suitable exercises found in the two books. This also makes constructing a general view of communicative methods in the books more straightforward. Skehan (1998, as cited in Kim and Keck, 2019, p. 172) defines a task as an exercise where:

"1. Meaning is primary.
 2. There is a communication problem of some type to solve.
 3. The activity has some relationship to real-world activities.
 4. Task completion is usually required.
 5. Task performance can be assessed in terms of the outcome."

However, for the present study, I will be determining a communicative task as an exercise in which:

 1. Spoken communication using the target language with at least one peer is required.
 2. The communication required is at least partly free and unstructured.
 3. The activity has some relation to situations found in real life.

3.3 Methods

The data is analyzed mainly through qualitative methods, with the use of content analysis. While comparing the numerical amount of exercises that fit the criteria is a part of the analysis, this study is more focused on the contents found within them. The content themes handled in the communicative exercises fitting the criteria are categorized, to allow for more straightforward analysis. Categorization as a method allows for easier comparisons to be made between the two books and the exercises within them and is common practice when conducting a content analysis (Julien, 2008). Categorization as a method includes grouping patterns into units which can be used in analysis (Chenail, 2008). The categorization is done inductively, meaning that categories emerge based on the data instead of applying pre-made categories to the data (Green, 2008; Julien, 2008). This removes the possibility of pre-made categories being unnecessary or inapplicable for the data of the present study (Green, 2008). Every exercise in both books was first compared to the criteria set for a communicative task found above, after which it was noted down as a communicative task. After exercises in both books had gone through this process, the exercises were examined one by one for every possible topic that could be gathered from the book itself, for example, the instructions or a list of conversation topics. The categories used in the analysis portion are based on the context in which the contents of the exercise can be utilized in the learner's real life language use, such as hobbies or school/work life.

4 RESULTS

A difference in the number of communicative exercises, as defined above, was found between the two books, which in turn affects the number of exercises viable for analysis. The difference is mostly due to the different approach taken regarding communication between the two eras but is also affected by the total number of exercises in each book. *Passwords* included a total of 120 exercises, out of which 88 were related to the texts and 32 to the grammar section of the book. *On track*, on the other hand, had a larger number of exercises, a total of 203, out of which 160 were linked with texts and 43 were related to the grammar section. Out of the 120 exercises in *Passwords*, 16 fulfilled the criteria set for a communicative task for the purpose of this study. *On Track*, however, included 40 exercises out of the 203 that met the criteria.

Table 1

The number of communicative exercises in Passwords (1994) and On Track (2021)

	Passwords	*On Track*
Total number of exercises	120	203
Number of oral pair/group exercises	39	75
Number of communicative tasks	16	40
Percentage of communicative tasks out of all exercises	13.3%	19.7%
Percentage of communicative tasks out of oral pair/group exercises	41.0%	53.3%

Note. Number of oral pair/group exercises refers to all exercises that include talking in the target language with another student, regardless of whether the exercise fills the criteria of a communicative task established for the current study. Number of communicative tasks refers to all exercises that fill the criteria for a communicative task.

Both book series used small icons in the texts section to differentiate the different exercise types, however, these icons were not used in the grammar portion. *Passwords* included 34 exercises marked as talking exercises, with 5 unmarked exercises in the grammar portion that included working in pairs or groups using the target language. *On Track* included 56 exercises marked as talking exercises in the texts section, with 8 unmarked exercises in the texts section and 11 in grammar that included working in pairs or groups using the target language. It should be noted that some exercises were marked as listening exercises but included talking with a pair in the instructions.

4.1 General differences between the exercises

The way in which the two book series handle communication in exercises is noticeably different. *Passwords'* exercises come across as quite structured, with less room for creative speech. Exercises often include a structure to follow, for example, an AB format, with one student reading from what is essentially a script, and the other student replying, or both students reading from a script. An example of this is *Passwords'* exercise 8.3 (Westlake et al., 1994, p. 93).

8.3 Harjoittele parisi kanssa virallisia keskusteluja. Valitkaa vuorosanoja eri sarakkeista. Vaihdelkaa osia. (Practice formal conversations with your partner. Choose lines from different columns. Switch roles.)

A:	Zenith International.	Harrods.	British Embassy.
B:	Hallo. I'd like to speak to Erica Fish, please.	Hallo. Could I speak to Deborah Winger, please?	Hallo. Is Judy Miles there, please?
A:	Hold the line, please.	I'll just check if she's in today.	Just a moment, please.
B:	All right.	Right.	OK.
A:	Sorry, but she doesn't seem to be here at the moment.	I'm afraid she's not here.	Sorry, she won't be here until Tuesday.
B:	Oh, I see.	Oh dear.	Right.
A:	…	…	…

Passwords, in many instances, also presents questions in exercises as something one student asks, and the other answers. For example, in exercise C2 the instructions clearly state that students should take turns asking and answering questions, instead of conversing about them. The instructions for the exercise C2 are as follows (Westlake et al., 1994, p. 103):

C2 "Lue teksti. Kysy ja vastaa parisi kanssa vuorotellen." (Read the text. Take turns asking and answering the questions.)

In *On Track*, however, questions are often meant as a starting point for a conversation between two students, like in exercise 10K. The instructions for 10K read as follows (Daffue-Karsten et al., 2021, p. 114):

10K Work in pairs. Discuss the use of mobile phones in schools.
● Do you use your mobile phone for study purposes? In what ways?
● Has your teacher ever collected students' phones during a lesson? Why?
● What are pros and cons of using the phone in class?

It should be stated that both book series include instances of both examples, with *Passwords* favoring the prior and *On Track* the latter. *On Track* in general seems to have more

conversational exercises, and when comparing the two book series, *On Track* includes more exercises with a chance for unstructured communication, being less reliant on role-play as a whole.

4.2 The topics/content themes found in the exercises

The content themes found in eligible exercises were categorized based on similarities found within them. A total of 13 broader categories were created that correspond to the themes that came up in the communicative exercises. Each exercise was included within at least one category. The most frequent themes that came up in the exercises were family and friends, traveling or going on exchange, how to act in certain situations or when visiting a country, social media and other forms of communication, school and work, and what students do in their free time.

Table 2

The content themes handled in communicative exercises in Passwords (1994) and On Track (2021) categorized thematically

Themes	*Passwords*	*On Track*
Family/Friends	1	19
Traveling/exchange	4	8
Manners/Cultural differences	3	7
Social media/ Forms of communication	0	11
School/Work life	2	8
Hobbies/Free time	1	9
Describing a person/ Telling about oneself	5	3
Wealth	0	6
Emergencies/Crime	2	3
Role models/Famous people	0	4
Health	1	2
Weather	2	1
Stories/Fables	0	2

Note. Themes are organized based on frequency. Each exercise was categorized into one or more themes, meaning an exercise may be included in multiple categories.

As seen in Table 2, exercises in both book series cover similar themes, with some noticeable differences. Exercises in *On Track* are included in every category and are overall more broadly represented in different categories when compared to the exercises found in *Passwords*. This, as mentioned earlier, is mostly due to the difference in the amount of eligible communicative exercises, and the total number of exercises in the books as a whole. Four out of the thirteen themes, however, are completely absent from communicative exercises in *Passwords,* these being 'social media/forms of communication', 'wealth', 'role models/famous people' and 'stories/fables'.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Exercises

As mentioned in 4.1, the two book series approach communicative exercises differently due to when they were published. The effects of the era can be seen in both the topics within exercises, as well as how said exercises are handled. For example, when examining exercises in *Passwords* as a whole, the effects of the trend towards a more communicative approach to language teaching can be seen. There is a noticeable effort to put emphasis on communicative aspects of the language in the book, which had not been the case before the 1980s (Hughes, 2010, p. 64). This is influenced by the increasing interest in CLT, which in the 1990s had already had time to establish itself in the realm of language teaching (Hughes, 2010, p. 66). However, the way communication is approached at this stage in the rise of CLT heavily relies on structure and situational dialogues as a way to practice communicative skills. These characteristics, being a part of the 'theater principle', which has been a part of language teaching for decades (Howatt, 2009, p. 485), can be seen in numerous exercises requiring communication in *Passwords*. Exercise 8.3 is a great example of this. It includes a clearly defined structure with pre-made lines and roles for each student.

Situational dialogues and role-play in general seem to be quite prominent in *Passwords*, which in many cases results in the absence of negotiation of meaning and therefore also 'true' communication, both of which are essential in CLT and TBLT (Yildiz, 2020). As addressed by Waluyo (2019), role-play in itself is not the sole reason for the absence of meaningful communication, but more so the way in which it is executed. Role-play can provide students

with communicative contexts that give room for unstructured conversations and negotiation of meaning (Waluyo, 2019). However, exercise 8.3 is essentially more a reading exercise than a communicative one. The use of situational dialogues and role-play also somewhat plays into the idea of materials in the early stages of CLT often including scenarios with little to no relation to the needs of the learners (Hughes, 2010). The reliance on structured communication, as well as not having a connection to the real-life needs of learners is a substantial part of the reason why the exercises in *Passwords* are less represented in the categorization than the ones in *On Track*.

5.2 Themes

The themes covered in both *Passwords* and *On Track* seem to be mostly quite similar, however some differences can be noticed. As seen in Table 2, themes covered in communicative tasks mostly revolve around the life of young students, which is not unexpected as this is something both books focus on thematically as a whole. However, it is interesting to see topics such as 'family/friends' and 'hobbies/free time' each only being mentioned once in *Passwords'* communicative tasks. Especially because these topics feel quite relevant with the larger theme in mind. It seems *On Track* is thematically more interested in connections between people, and therefore these specific categories appear more often than others, both in relation to *Passwords* and *On Track* itself.

As seen in Table 2, there are four themes that appear in *On Track*, but are absent in *Passwords*, these being 'social media/forms of communication', 'wealth', 'role models/famous people' and 'stories/fables'. Both the absence of 'social media/forms of communication' in *Passwords*, as well as it being the second most common theme in *On Track*, can mostly be explained with the advancements made in technology. With social media and communicative technologies being such a substantial part of daily life in the 2020s, arguably even more so with younger generations, it is no surprise that it is included so heavily in *On Track*'s communicative exercises. The absence of 'stories/fables' as a topic in *Passwords* can most likely be explained with it being quite a specific topic to cover. The same could be speculated about 'role models/famous people' as well. Therefore, it is not surprising that they do not make an appearance in *Passwords*, especially when the number of exercises eligible for the present study from the book was quite limited. More interesting however is the topic of 'wealth' not appearing in *Passwords'* communicative exercises. This

could be due to money and income having been a more taboo topic in the 1990s. It should be mentioned, however, that 'wealth' did not have a substantial role in *On Track*'s exercises either, with it only being the central topic in two exercises and only mentioned briefly in four others.

5.3 Correspondence with the curricula

Passwords follows the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 1994 (Finnish National Board of Education, 1994). As explored in 2.2, in its section for foreign language learning, the curriculum places emphasis on being able to communicate in the target language for everyday life as well as work environments (p. 60). As stated in section 5.1, there is definitely an effort to include communication in the exercises of *Passwords*, which makes sense as it is emphasized in the curriculum. However, it can be questioned to what extent the exercises intended as communicative really promote useful and meaningful language use. The National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 1994 (Finnish National Board of Education, 1994) states that the first course for A1 and A2 languages should include the use of basic vocabulary and structures as well as oral practice as the focal point (p. 63). While *Passwords* includes many oral exercises, only a small portion of them are communicative in nature and fill the criteria for the current study.

On Track follows the National Core Curriculum for General Upper Secondary Education 2019 (Finnish National Board of Education, 2019), which emphasizes the development of communication skills and intelligibility as well as general confidence as a language user (p. 176). This can be noticed in *On Track* as a lack of emphasis on structure and pre-made lines for students to practice, not to say that these do not exist within the book. Most communicative exercises, however, focus on expressing one's thoughts and ideas freely in the target language.

Developing critical thinking and analytical skills with diverse exercises is also emphasized in the 2019 curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2019). This more than likely lends its hand to *On Track* utilizing questions in exercises as starting points for conversations, rather than something one student asks and the other answers, the approach which was found to be more common in *Passwords*. This allows students to take part in unstructured and meaningful conversations, which develops the skills mentioned.

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6 CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to examine communicative exercises in upper secondary school textbooks, the content themes covered in them, as well as how these have changed from the 1990s to the 2020s. As can be expected with the increasing interest in communicative language teaching, the focus on form and structured communication in textbooks has decreased (Howatt, 2009, p. 484). Exercises in books seem to favor discussion with a larger emphasis on self-reflection, rather than drilling and repeating certain ways to start a conversation or ask and answer questions. Most differences in the way exercises are handled can be attributed to the trends in teaching and changes made in the curricula.

It should be noted that as a small-scale study, the results cannot be generalized. The subject covered in the present study would greatly benefit from examining a larger quantity of books from a larger time frame. The study examined only textbooks meant for the first course of upper secondary school English, and therefore no insight on most of the upper secondary school English teaching was gained. Different courses cover different topics, and as the first course is somewhat of an introductory period for studying English at the upper secondary school level, analyzing the contents of other courses could prove beneficial. It could also be interesting to study what students themselves deem the most important topics to be able to converse about and see whether their thoughts align with what EFL materials currently provide.

Nevertheless, this small-scale study could prove beneficial for teachers and teaching material publishers alike when developing communicative exercises. Figuring out which topics may be neglected in communicative teaching materials, as well as which topics seem to be deemed important, could benefit planning tasks for classes or designing future teaching materials. The present study can also be used as an overview of communicative language teaching and its developments. As language teaching in Finland relies heavily on textbooks, examining the quality and content of the currently used EFL materials is always essential to keep improving the quality of education.

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