"KUN PÄÄSEE IRTI PULPETISTA, NIIN KUMMASTI
ASIAT MENEVÄT PAREMMIN PERILLE":

Teachers' perspectives of effective teaching strategies
for students with foreign language learning difficulties

Bachelor's thesis
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Inklusiivinen opetus on yleistymässä suomalaisissa kouluissa myös vieraan kielen tunneilla. Oppilaiden hyvin erilaiset taitotasot luovat opettajalle haasteen toteuttaa kaikille sopivaa opetusta samassa tilassa. Lisäksi erilaiset oppimisvaikeudet tulisi ottaa huomioon opetusta suunniteltaessa ja toteuttaessa.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää laadullisen kyselytutkimuksen avulla suomalaisten vieraan kielen opettajien käyttämiä sekä tehokkaaksi kokemia opetusmenetelmiä. Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu kyselytutkimuksen vastauksista. Kyselyyn vastasi 32 vieraan kielen opettajaa eri puolilta Suomea. Tuloksia verrattiin muutamaan tutkimuskirjallisuudessa yleisesti tehokkaaksi todettuun opetusmenetelmään, joita olivat yhteistoiminnallinen oppiminen ja vertaistuutorointi, aistien käyttäminen, muististrategiat ja –säännöt sekä eriyttäminen.

Tuloksista löytyi kekseliäitä ja monipuolisia opetusmenetelmiä vieraan kielen tunneille. Tulokset kuitenkin osoittivat myös, että opettajat kokivat eri tasoisille oppilaille opettamisen ajoittain hankalaksi. Kaikki vastaajat kokivat, etteivät olleet saaneet opettajankoulutuksesta riittäviä valmiuksia kohdata oppimisvaikeuksia luokassa.

Tulokset kannustavat lisätutkimuksiin teorian ja käytännön menetelmien yhteydestä sekä inklusiiviseen vieraan kielen opetukseen sopivista menetelmistä. Tulokset saattavat myös kannustaa opettajia arvioimaan ja pohtimaan omia opetusmenetelmiään myös oppimisvaikeuksisten oppilaiden näkökulmasta.

Asiasanat – Keywords teaching methods, general learning difficulties, inclusive teaching
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Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1 INTRODUCTION

While classrooms are becoming more and more diverse as inclusive teaching has become popular, foreign language teaching methods have remained substantially the same for decades. Thus it would be useful to study the effectiveness of the currently used teaching methods from different perspectives. One perspective is to define the effectiveness of a teaching method by studying its suitability for students with learning difficulties. According to Westwood (2008a: 27), using effective teaching methods is crucial especially for students who struggle with foreign language learning difficulties, and some learning difficulties and their secondary consequences could be even prevented with effective tools and methods of foreign language teaching. However, many teachers feel incapable to meet the needs of students with learning difficulties, and thus might blame the students for their learning problems. Often the signs of these undiagnosed learning difficulties are misinterpreted and support is not given early enough. (Westwood 2008a: 1-4.)

Mitchell (2014: 2) states that there is a clear gap between what methods have been found effective and what is the practice among teachers. Mitchell believes that the gap exists because research of effective teaching practices is not easily available to educators. However, it is important that the teacher is able to take all individuals into account, which in turn requires knowledge of different learning difficulties and the most effective teaching practices. In Australia, the USA and the United Kingdom the law requires teaching methods to have evidence-based research (Westwood 2008b: 87-88), whereas The Finnish National Core Curriculum (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2004: 19) states that teachers choose suitable teaching methods themselves. Thus it is relevant to consider the effectiveness of the foreign language teaching methods in Finland.

While doing background research, I noticed that there is not much research done on effective teaching methods or learning difficulties from the teacher's perspective. For future needs as a foreign language teacher, I feel that it would be useful to have some practical suggestions and tools to help students with learning difficulties to follow the lesson and stay focused in the classroom. The present study aims to research both the currently used methods in Finnish schools and the correlation between the practice in schools and the research proven methods. One motive for the present study was the increasing amount of

inclusive teaching and decreasing special education in separate classes in Finnish schools, which leads to more heterogeneous and diverse classrooms with learners of different levels. Effective teaching methods for inclusive classrooms have not been widely researched in Finland, and there is clearly a need for further research of contemporary and effective teaching methods and the present study could motivate to examine the subject on a wider scale.

First, the present study introduces the previous studies of general learning difficulties and effective teaching methods in chapter two, and then moves on to chapter three to present the data and methods used in this study. In chapter four the results of the current study are presented and discussed and the results of the questionnaire are compared with those teaching practices that have been proven effective in previous research.

2 LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AND EFFECTIVE TEACHING METHODS

2.1 General learning difficulties in foreign language learning

Learning difficulties can be divided roughly into two parts: specific and general learning difficulties. According to Westwood (2008a: 2), learning difficulties may not result from specific physical impairments, but may be due to external factors, such as socio-cultural factors, lack of support from home, limited learning opportunities or insufficient teaching during the early years. These factors may lead to *general* learning difficulties, which means that the learners usually have difficulties in most subjects taught at school. Learners with *specific* learning difficulties are those who have some physical or neurological reason for their learning difficulties. General learning difficulties can occur due to numerous reasons. Westwood (2004: 54) has compiled a comprehensive list of possible reasons for general learning difficulties, which includes inadequate teaching, irrelevant curriculum, classroom environment, socioeconomic background, loss of self-confidence, poor relationship between student and teacher, and emotional or behavioural problems. For instance, Hart and Risley (1999, cited in Bradley et al. 2002: 224) revealed in their study that at the age of 5 economically advantaged children have vocabularies of approximately 500,000 words, while economically disadvantaged have vocabularies of only approximately 250,000 words. This supports Westwood's (2008a: 2) theory of the influence of socio-economical background in the development of a learning difficulty.

A study of Cheng (1998: 125) shows that teachers often tend to think that the problem is in the student, but very often learning difficulties are due to external reasons that have an effect on internal learning and motivation, which plays a great role in learning. Beliefs, feedback and experiences affect motivation, and thus parents' and teachers' reactions are extremely important for children. Learning difficulties can also arise because of poor perception of self-efficacy, which is the strength of one's ability to complete tasks. Low self-efficacy influences motivation and the willingness to do challenging tasks (Westwood 2004: 26). Frequent punishment and criticism are most prone to decrease self-efficacy, and thus children with learning difficulties in a foreign language classroom might suffer from low self-efficacy after struggling with tasks. An effective teacher can strengthen learners' self-esteem through providing versatile teaching methods and positive feedback.

2.2 Identification of foreign language learning difficulties

Early identification helps teachers to adjust and differentiate teaching according to the level of the occurring learning difficulty, which is why it is important to be aware of the signs of foreign language learning difficulties. Finnish National Core Curriculum (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2004: 28) indicates that early identification and early support are essential in preventing negative developmental influences of learning difficulties. Also Westwood (2008a: 27) points out that it is possible to prevent secondary negative emotional consequences with early identification, which involves active observation and screening procedures. Additionally, accumulated problems can have a great impact on motivation.

Continuing evaluation is the most effective way to identify possible problems early. Continuing evaluation means evaluation on a day-to-day basis, throughout lessons. The traditional method of student evaluation is tests that are executed periodically, which might not give enough information of the problem. It is difficult to identify foreign language learning difficulties if one does not know what types of signs may indicate learning difficulties. Academic success in general should be one indicator, but sometimes difficulties can occur only in one subject.

Moilanen (2002: 18-25) has listed linguistic difficulties, which arise with a foreign language learning difficulty and which can easily be seen during the lessons. The main points discussed by Moilanen are the following:

- Vocabulary: difficulties in recognizing words, difficulties in remembering words, especially long ones.

- Listening: Working memory is weak, the student cannot remember what was said, the student has difficulties in identifying prosodic features, such as intonation and rhythm, noise in the background disturbs hearing significantly.

- Pronunciation: Cannot hear a difference in sounds, decoding sounds is slow and difficult.

- Reading: reading is slow, cannot recognize words, meaning of metalinguistic words is unclear and letters are moving or switching places.

- Grammar: difficult to find rules and regularities

- Writing: overusing grammatical forms, adding too many letters to a word, difficulties with syntax, unclear or big hand writing.

There are also other indicators, which are harder to identify clearly as signs of learning difficulties. Westwood (2008a: 4) has compiled a list of behavioral signs that might refer to problems in learning. They include for instance poor attention to task, low self-esteem and self-efficacy, negative behaviour, frustration, lack of motivation, depressive tendencies, lack of metacognitive strategies, avoidance of risk-taking and memory problems. Behavioral signs may be often falsely interpreted as class disturbance and might lead to critisism and punishment. Therefore it is essential to recognize the signs of foreign language learning difficulty in order to identify them early and to be able choose the most effective teaching strategies.

2.3 Effective foreign language teaching methods

Mitchell (2014: 2-3) presents evidence-based teaching strategies as "clearly specified teaching methods that have been shown in controlled research to be effective in bringing about desired outcomes in a delineated population of learners". In Australia, the USA and the United Kingdom the law requires teaching methods to have evidence-based research, in order to have the most effective teaching methods in use (Westwood 2008b: 87-88). Conversely, The Finnish National Core Curriculum (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2004: 19) states that teachers choose suitable teaching methods for the subject themselves. It is stated that teaching methods and ways of working should be chosen in a way that supports active learning, interaction between students, target-orientation in learning, learning different strategies and motivate students to learn. In addition, different learning styles and individual differences in development and backgrounds should also be taken into account. However, the decision is left for teachers to make. Sometimes it might lead to very creative and exciting

ways of working, but it might also enable teachers to adhere to their old habits of working instead of trying something new.

According to Westwood (2008a: 57), the most effective teaching methods are those that provide the maximum number of possibilities to learn, which is why it is important to use different techniques in the classroom, as one method may not suit all learners. In fact, Westwood (2008b: 66) states that an effective teacher uses a variety of methods during the lesson to suit all needs. Some of the effective teaching methods that frequently occurred in the background literature are discussed in the next chapters. Effect sizes that occurred in meta-analyses are mentioned in order to inform the reader about the research-proven effectiveness. They are quantitative measures of phenomena, which inform of the strength of correlation between two variables. Effect sizes below d=0.2 are considered low, but the effect sizes that are greater than d=0.5 are considered to have a strong effect and effect sizes that are greater than d=0.8 have a very strong effect (Cohen 1988). The following methods are especially suitable for students with special educational needs and they enhance effective whole class learning.

2.3.1 Cooperative learning and peer tutoring

Cooperative learning occurs frequently in the research literature considering effective teaching methods, and its benefits are studied extensively. In cooperative learning the learners are working together in smaller groups towards a learning goal. Cooperative learning allows learners to set a concrete goal, help each other and take responsibility for their own work. Additionally, Westwood (2008b: 66) states that cooperative learning increases learners' participation, social skills and problem-solving skills, when they have to negotiate within the group. This strategy is particularly effective in mixed-ability groups, which makes it suitable for inclusive education. However, Mitchell (2014: 38-39) reminds that teacher should form the groups for cooperative learning in order to create actual mixed-ability or ability groups: this is called flexible grouping.

In peer tutoring, one learner teaches another. It can be used as a revising method in order to apply gained knowledge. By working together, children can achieve greater results than the sum of their individual efforts. This idea is based on Vygotski's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, which suggested that with the help of others children could achieve better results. Cooperation can also improve the classroom climate. Cooperative learning and peer tutoring have been proven effective in multiple studies. For

instance Hattie (2009:186) showed peer tutoring to have the effect size of 0.55, which is notable.

2.3.2 Using senses and kinesthetic activities in teaching

It is stated in the new Finnish National Core Curriculum (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014:28) that experiential learning and using movement in teaching enhance motivation, which is why they should be utilized in teaching. Conversely, the older curriculum (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2004:17) does not mention experiential methods or learning through movement. This fact implies that experiential and perceptual methods are rather new in teaching and thus many teachers may not have adopted them yet to foreign language teaching.

Moilanen (2002:35) points out that offering stimuli for all senses, visual, auditive and kinesthetic, a teacher can make sure that the whole group benefits from the given intervention. Using different colors, shapes and drawings a teacher can activate visual sense, while intonation, stress and gestures activate a student with a strong auditive sense. Movement and acting in class are effective exercise types for kinesthetic learners. Hannaford (1997:148) reveals that 85 % of the people are kinesthetic learners. Moreover, this learner type is predominant especially among students with learning difficulties. These students learn by acting, by intuition, by moving and attaching words into their bodies, by doing something with their hands and by speaking. However, teachers use kinesthetic methods rather seldom in foreign language classrooms, even though Lengel and Kuczala (2010: 2) point out that physical activity in classrooms could improve both academic skills and important life skills. As mentioned above, it is possible that movement during lessons is a rather new phenomenon and some teachers are not familiar with it yet.

2.3.3 Memory techniques and mnemonics

Memory techniques and mnemonics enhance memory to store specific content. Even though memory techniques are not sufficient as an overall teaching method, they are very effective in helping learners to recall content that has already been learned. Foreign language learning requires an excessive amount of remembering, and thus memory techniques are useful to all students. Especially learners with learning difficulties may have problems in remembering information. Mnemonics help students to connect subject areas and link them to sounds or pictures. One mnemonics strategy is the letter strategy (Mitchell 2014:117), which helps to

remember lists of things. Simply, the first letters of the items in a list (word order etc.) are put together to create a word. It can be an acronym or a nonsensical word. Moilanen (2008: 42) suggests using memory techniques, mind maps and organizing to help students to see whole entities. According to Moilanen (2008: 43) and Mitchell (2014: 120) material can also be transformed into more memorable form with for instance colors, shapes and mapping.

Memory techniques and mnemonics have been proven very effective in previous research. For example, in the meta-analysis made by Forness (2001: 187) the effect size for memory strategies was 1.62. Similarly, Mitchell (2014: 122) reveals a recent result of a meta-analysis, which concentrated on children with mild disabilities at secondary school. The effect size for mnemonics was as high as 1.38.

2.3.4 Effective differentiation and Response to Intervention

Inclusive classrooms require differentiation. Differentiation is a teaching approach for students of different levels, skills and interests, and effective differentiation in a classroom includes more aspects than just differentiated material. Watts-Taffe et al. (2012:304-305) explain that instruction can be differentiated by focusing on the learning process, the products of learning, the environment or the content students are learning. However, these aspects are not mutually exclusive, for instance, grouping students according to their skill levels is differentiating the environment, and choosing appropriate texts for them is differentiating the content. Differentiation of the environment could be implemented via giving different amount of feedback, setting short-term goals, or arranging the seating according to skill levels (Westwood 2008b: 66). The teacher must know students' skills profiles in order to be able to match appropriate instruction. The teacher can identify students' skill profiles through ongoing assessment and observation.

Ongoing assessment is the key element of an evaluative method called Response to Intervention (RTI). The central parts of the Response to Intervention –method are problem identification, early support, continuing evaluation of the student and the intervention, evidence-based teaching methods and tiers of intensive teaching. Using evidence-based methods, such as the ones presented in the current study, will lead to better learning results. The strength of the RTI method is the evaluation that is done before, during and after the intervention. This method suits well the three-staged model in Finnish special education, in which the intensity of support increases from the stage of general support to the stage of special support.

The RTI method is based on continuing evaluation, which helps to identify problems early and give appropriate support. It also emphasizes the quality of the support instead of the severity of the learning difficulties. Mitchell (2014:249) reminds, that most of the research on RTI has been made in elementary schools, and less is known about the utilization in secondary schools. However, RTI is considered so effective, that it has been entered in educational law in the United States. (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004) Teachers should, however, have an adequate training in RTI before teaching, in order to have good skills in evaluating the students.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Research aims and questions

The present study sets out to survey the effective teaching methods for children with general learning difficulties and the methods in use in Finnish schools. Since the inclusive education in Finnish education system has become more common, the findings of the present study may trigger language teachers to consider and reflect the effectiveness of their teaching methods and encourage them to try new ways of teaching. Moreover, the result of the present study might not only prove some methods ineffective, but it might also enhance teaching efficiency in language classes and, therefore, result in better learning.

The focus of the present study is on general learning difficulties, i.e., foreign language learning difficulties that are not due to physical reasons, and the teaching methods that can be used in helping students in foreign language classroom. The present study concentrates on general learning difficulties, because not only can they exist due to insufficient teaching but also can be prevented with efficient teaching. Moreover, often the signs of these difficulties are misinterpreted and help is not given early enough.

Thus, the main aim of the present study is to find some effective teaching methods for students with foreign language learning difficulties. The topic was chosen in order to research the effectiveness of popular teaching methods and observe how up-to-date methods are used in real classrooms. The research questions are as follows:

1. What kinds of methods do teachers use for students with foreign language learning difficulties?
2. Are the methods in correlation with the research teaching methods that have been proven effective in previous research?

3.2 Data collection

The data was collected with a questionnaire, which was sent to foreign language teachers across Finland. A questionnaire was chosen instead of an interview in order to collect answers from a broader group of teachers instead of only a few teachers. Additionally, the reason for using a questionnaire as the primary method of collecting data was that it allowed collecting more data in the relatively short time frame set for the present study. After collecting the data, it was studied thoroughly with content analysis in order to find common patterns in the answers. The teaching methods mentioned in the answers were compared to those methods that have been proven effective by previous scientific research. The respondents are Finnish foreign language teachers, both male and female, from different Finnish schools. The sample group consists of 32 respondents, who reported their own opinions and experiences of learning difficulties and effective teaching methods.

The disadvantages of using a questionnaire may be unreliable or unmotivated respondents, as they fill out the questionnaire unsupervised. Due to the nature of the study, the respondents might be tempted to report what they believe to be the desirable answer, rather that what they actually practice in classrooms. The respondents might also leave out some questions, which reduces the number of answers. Because the questionnaire contains mostly open questions, the respondents interpret the questions subjectively and answer accordingly. (Dörnyei and Tagutchi 2010:7-9.)

However, in order to increase the level of honesty and decrease the temptation to exaggerate, the answers were given anonymously. The questionnaire was compiled together from background information (age, education, gender), open questions and questions with Likert scale (Alanen 2011: 150). Likert scale consists of statements which are related to the topic. The present study used a variation of the Likert scale and used potency (strong effect – weak effect) instead of agreement which is more common (Dörnyei and Tagutchi 2010: 27-30). The respondents were asked to answer according to their belief. A pilot study was executed before sending out the questionnaire and some of the questions were reformed in order to specify them further. The questionnaire can be found in the appendix of the present study.

3.3 Participants

The data consisted of 32 respondents of whom 97% (31) were women. It can be assumed that the majority of the respondents were experienced teachers, as 72% (n=23) of them were aged 40-60, 16% (5) were aged 30-40 and 13% (4) were aged 20-30. The data was collected from teachers who teach in all grades from elementary school to upper secondary school. The answers from teachers teaching in different grades divided quite evenly: 34% (11) teach in elementary school, 48 % (15) teach in secondary school and 18% (6) teach in upper secondary school. This information will be given when it is relevant for analysis. The respondents teach in different parts of Finland. Additionally, 25% (8) of the respondents had studied special education in addition to their major and subject teacher studies.

3.4 Methods of analysis

The answers were analysed with content based analysis (Dörnyei and Tagutchi 2010: 98) in order to study the frequency of occurrence in certain themes. Content based analysis is suitable for studying especially the open question answers which were chosen for this study in order to give the freedom of expression for the respondents. Each answer was studied and key elements were marked, which provided valuable information of the commonly occurring themes in the answers. Some quantitative analysis was used in analysing multiple choice questions.

The answers were divided into categories according to their type. Dörnyei and Tagutchi (2010: 99) point out that forming broader categories from the answers allows the comparison with other responses. Indeed, dividing answers into categories provided a great overview on the extent to which different methods were used in Finnish foreign language classrooms. Additionally, open questions provided some valuable information about the attitudes the respondents hold. Content based analysis was extremely suitable for studying these differences in tones.

4 TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING METHODS

The aim of Chapter 4 is to report the findings and to connect them to the background theory in Chapter 2. First, respondents' perceptions of learning difficulties are presented after which the chapter will move on to reporting and discussing the teaching methods that occurred in the answers.

4.1 Learning difficulties

The answers to the question "*Do you feel that you have received adequate skills from teacher education to encounter learning difficulties in class?*" were quite unanimous: 94% (30) of the respondents felt that they had not received adequate skills to encounter learning difficulties. However, 6% (2) of the respondents answered that they had learned to do so in teacher education. These two respondents had also studied special pedagogy, which covers learning difficulties in more detail than general pedagogical studies. Interestingly, there were altogether eight teachers who had studied special pedagogy, but only two of them reported that they had sufficient skills after their teacher training.

The aim of the question "*What kinds of symptoms occur in pursuance of foreign language learning difficulties?*" was to discover whether teachers considered any behavioral signs as symptoms. Indeed, in addition to the lists of exact linguistic difficulties, such as difficulties in audio-linguistic processing, spelling, reading and syntax, which were also covered in chapter 2.2, the teachers listed many behavioral signs. Additionally, one teacher described using a ruler to keep the letters from moving, which was one of the linguistic difficulties mentioned in chapter 2.2 by Moilanen (2002: 18-25). However, one important sign that was not mentioned was the difficulty in hearing the difference between sounds, such as /p/ and /b/.

Teachers considered difficulties in concentrating, poor motivation and disturbing behavior as signs of learning difficulties. In some of the answers no linguistic difficulties were mentioned, but, instead, only behavioral signs, as shown below in examples 1-5. [1]

> **1**. / 27. *Motivaation puute, keskittymisvaikeus, huono käytös, heikko itsetunto.*
>   Lack of motivation, concentrating difficulties, bad behavior, poor self-esteem.
>
> **2.** / 22. *Keskittymiskyvyn puutetta, puhelimen näpräämistä muussa kuin opiskelutarkoituksessa.*
>   Lack of concentrating skills, using phone during class for other than studying purposes.
>
> **3.** / 6. *Motivaation puute, asenneongelma, läksyt tekemättä, kirjat "unohtuvat".*
>   Lack of motivation, problems with attitude, homework undone, "forgetting" books.

4. / 5. *Keskittymisongelmat, eristäytyminen, huomion hakeminen muilla keinoilla kuin*
kielellisillä, toivottomuus, huono itseluottamus.
Problems in concentrating, withdrawal, seeking attention with other than linguistic means,
despair, poor self-esteem.

5. / 31. *Vetäytymistä, acting-out- toimintaa, kieltämistä, ylimielisyyttä, pelkoa, jännitystä -*
Withdrawal, acting-out, denial, arrogance, fear, anxiety, -

The answers included a variety of behavioral signs, but the most common themes were difficulties in concentrating (examples 2 and 4), poor motivation (example 1 and 3), withdrawal, lack of self-esteem, and class disturbance. These signs are in line with the behavioral signs mentioned by Westwood (2008a: 4). Interestingly, one teacher interpreted using the phone during class as a sign of a possible learning difficulty. Because these behavioral signs were mentioned this often in the answers, it can be concluded that they are quite common in foreign language classrooms and many teachers interpret them as signs of a learning difficulty instead of interpreting the behavior as deliberate class disturbance. Recognizing the behavioral signs is positive and is not in line with Westwood's (2004a: 4) prediction of teachers' misinterpretations.

The presupposition was that answers in this section might vary according to the grade where teachers teach. However, behavioral signs were interpreted as signs of learning difficulties throughout all grades, which is positive as recognition of behavioral signs helps in early intervention. However, 15 teachers (48 %) listed only the occurrence of linguistic difficulties, which might be due to the interpretation of the question or because they did not interpret behavioral signs as a part of a learning difficulty.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, general learning difficulties can develop under the influence of the current environment. The aim of the questions *"How significant is the role of home/school environment in the development of a learning difficulty?"* was to examine the attitudes of the respondent teachers towards environmental effects, which is why no questions about neuro-linguistic learning difficulties were proposed. The respondents were asked about their opinion on the significance of school environment and home environment in the development of a learning difficulty. The opinions can be seen in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Significance of the school and home environment according to the respondents.
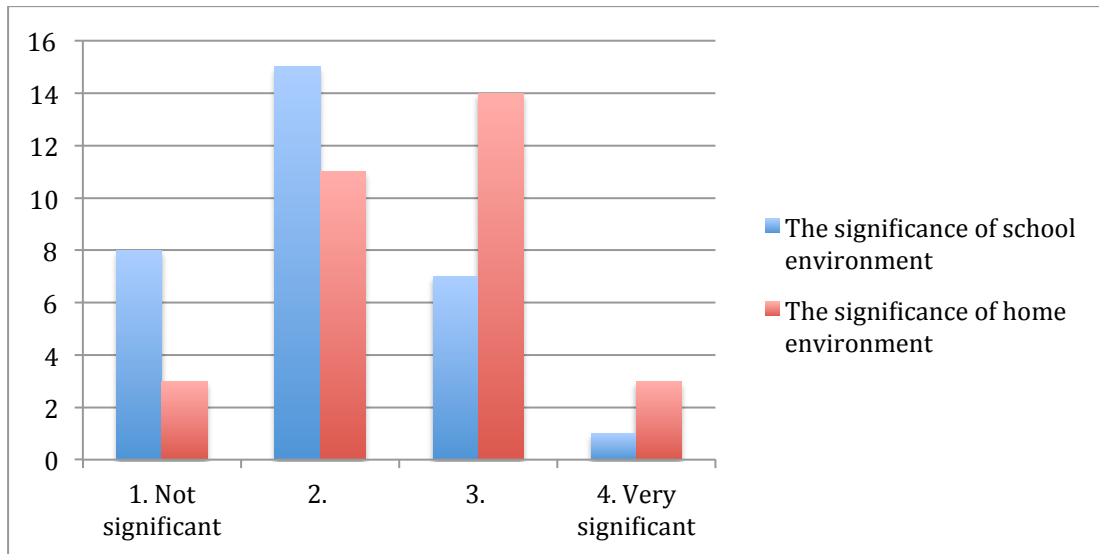
This question was presented to examine the opinions and experience of the respondents about the possible factors in the development of a general learning difficulty, because opinions and attitudes influence the decision-making process when choosing the most suitable teaching methods. As the present study focused on general learning difficulties, which are not due to physical or neurological impairments, the respondents were asked about the significance of home and school environments. As can be noted from Table 1, the respondents emphasized the significance of home environment, which is reasonable as many linguistic skills develop in early childhood. Altogether 53% (17 respondents) thought that home environment has a significant (14 respondents) or a very significant (3 respondents) role in the development of a learning difficulty. Westwood (2008a: 54) reports that teachers commonly connect learning difficulties to poor home environment, which is in line with the results of the present study. However, insufficient teaching or a bad learning environment can cause learning difficulties as well. Interestingly, only 3% (1) of the respondents answered that school environment has a very significant role in the development of a learning difficulty whereas 25% (8) reported that school environment has no significance in the matter. It would be interesting to know whether teachers' and parents' opinions differed in this matter. Naturally, no generalizations can be made based on this question, and thus further research should be done on teachers' attitudes towards and opinions about the development of a general learning difficulty in different environments.

4.2 Currently used teaching methods

The results about the currently used teaching methods fluctuated according to the grade. However, the most commonly occurred themes throughout all grades were repetition and differentiation, which were emphasized both in the used material and in the instruction. Ten teachers (32%) emphasized the importance of repetition with words, grammar and instructions. For instance, they gave repetitive instructions orally and visually to enhance understanding.

When asked about the most suitable method for a diverse foreign language classroom, the teachers had quite fluctuating answers. The teachers emphasized the importance of differentiation and diverse teaching through all senses. Seven respondents (22%) of 32 mentioned multi-sensory methods or perceptual teaching by name as effective teaching methods for learners with learning difficulties. Others referred to similar ways of teaching, but did not mention multi-sensory or perceptual teaching by name.

Even though the respondents had quite confident suggestions for effective teaching methods for the foreign language classroom, three teachers expressed uncertainty in their answers. They are presented as follows in examples 6-8:

> *Millainen opetusmetodi sopii mielestäsi vieraan kielen opetukseen luokalle, jossa on suuria eroja taitotasoissa?*
> What kind of a teaching method is the most suitable for foreign language teaching for a diverse classroom?
>
> **6.** / 4. *En ole vielä sellaista löytänyt! Aina on riittämättömyyden tunne, kun luokassa eri tasoisia oppilaita. Liian vähän aikaa/oppilas.*
> I haven't found one yet! There is always a feeling of insufficiency, when there are students of different levels in the classroom. There is too little time/student.
>
> **7.** / 15. *Kunpa tietäisinkin. Tehdään yhdessä tai pareittain, toinen oppilas neuvoo toista...*
> I wish I knew. Together or in pairs, other student gives advice to the other…
>
> **8.** / 6. *Joka luokassa on suuria eroja ja voi kun tietäisin tähän vastauksen! Mahdollisesti yksilöllinen?*
> Every class differs greatly and oh, how I wish I knew the answer to this! Possibly individual?

All of the respondents above (4, 15, and 6) also answered that they had not received adequate skills to encounter learning difficulties in classroom from teacher training. Additionally, respondent 4 stated that there is too little time per student. My interpretation is that she feels that the lack of time makes it more difficult to take individual needs into account. From this I concluded that additional training throughout the teaching career might provide additional

information about effective teaching practices and give confidence to confront learning difficulties in classrooms.

4.2.1 Cooperative learning and peer tutoring

Cooperative learning was used as a teaching method rather extensively. Pair work was one of the most common methods reported in the study: 20 teachers of 32 (64%) mentioned using pair work often. However, teachers did not mention selecting pairs themselves, for instance, according to skill levels. Pair work, which was very common, is not as effective as peer tutoring.

Peer tutoring, which is one of the effective methods examined in the theory section of the present study in chapter 2.3.1, was also used as a teaching method, but only rarely. It was used by only three teachers (10%). Respondents 16 and 23 teach in elementary school and respondent 15 teaches in secondary school. Peer tutoring was not used by upper secondary school teachers. Peer tutoring occurred in pursuance of different levels of skills, as shown below in examples 9-11:

Millainen opetustyyli sopii mielestäsi vieraan kielen opetukseen luokalle, jossa on suuria eroja taitotasossa?
What kind of a teaching method is the most suitable for foreign language teaching for a diverse classroom?

9. / 15. - *Tehdään yhdessä tai pareittain, toinen oppilas neuvoo toista.*
     Together or in pairs, one student gives advice to the other.

10. / 23. *Esim. parityö, jossa vahvempi osapuoli opettaa heikompaa.*
     For instance, pair work, where the stronger participant teaches the weaker one.

11. / 16. *Oppilaat voivat auttaa ja opettaa toisiaan.*
     The students can help and teach each other.

Naturally, diverse, especially inclusive, classrooms have students with a stronger knowledge of the subject and students with a weaker knowledge of the subject. Respondent 23 mentioned using peer tutoring, in which a stronger student teaches the weaker one. This type of pair work is more effective than the one where students can choose their partners themselves, as the stronger students adopt information profoundly when they have to explain it in their own words, and the weaker students achieve better results than in individual work, according to Vygotski's (1978) zone of proximal development.

Group work and cooperative learning were also quite extensively used (44%, n=14), but teachers mentioned some of the problems that arise with using group work as a learning method. Difficulties included for instance poor time management, as in example 12 below:

> **12.** / 7. *En teetä juurikaan ryhmätöitä, koska niissä ajankäyttö on harvoin tehokasta ja tulokset huonoja verrattuna käytettyyn aikaan. Paritöitä, eritysesti suullisia, tehdään käytännössä jokaisella oppitunnilla. Harvoin, mutta kuitenkin joskus, teetän yhteistoiminnallista työtä.*
> I rarely use group work, because usually students' time management is seldom effective and results are relatively poor compared to the time used. We do pair work, practicing especially oral skills, in practically every lesson. Sometimes, but rather seldom, I use cooperative work.

Respondent 7 feels that group work takes too much time in relation to the achieved learning results. However, it is unclear whether these students have chosen their groups by themselves or whether the teacher has divided them according to their skills. Group work may also be less effective if the roles within the group are not clear. The roles should be divided for the group members at the beginning of the activity, so that everyone is aware of their responsibilities.

4.2.2 Memory strategies and mnemonics

Memory strategies and mnemonics were popular among language teachers, possibly because there are many items in language learning which have to be remembered by heart. The respondent teachers were very creative, and most of them had developed their own mnemonics and songs to improve remembering, for instance, word order. Teachers used rhythm, rhymes and sounds to help to remember items. Two teachers (6%) reported using themes from students' own lives when creating mnemonics, as personal themes improve motivation. Additionally, five teachers (16%) mentioned linking words or grammar rules to other languages. As 88% (n=28) of the respondents used memory strategies and mnemonics and carefully described how they develop their own mnemonics, it can be concluded that the respondent teachers consider these strategies effective.

However, four respondents (13%) reported using no memory strategies in their teaching. One upper secondary school teacher, who did not use mnemonics, reported that students have learned mnemonics in elementary school but do not know what they mean. It was concluded that she thinks mnemonics only confuse students, which is why she avoids using them.

4.2.3 Kinesthetic activities and teaching through senses

Lengel and Kuczala (2010: 4) suggest that movement in class can improve test results, academic skills and social skills. However, even tough the Finnish National Core Curriculum (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014: 28) states that movement should be used as one of the teaching practices, it is not yet very common. The results of the present study indicate that kinesthetic teaching is used throughout all grades. However, there were differences in the answers of teachers from different grades. The teachers from secondary school and upper secondary school reported using less movement and kinaesthetic methods than those in elementary school, as shown in the examples 13-15 below:

> **13.** / 15. - *kinesteettisyyttä ei niinkään.*
>   – Kinesthesia not so much.
>
> **14.** / 8. – *isommissa ryhmissä on usein vaikea järjestää liikkumista, mutta sitäkin yritän,*
>   – It is more difficult to arrange movement activities with a bigger group, but I try that
>   as well.

Respondent 15 teaches in secondary school and respondent 8 teaches in upper secondary school, and they reported using less movement in their classes. However, elementary school teachers clearly felt that movement is an efficient way of learning. Respondent 13, who teaches in elementary school, felt that sitting behind a desk is hindering the learning process, as she mentions in her comment below:

> **15.** / 13.- *kun pääsee irti pulpetista, niin kummasti asiat menevät paremmin perille.*
>   - the message gets through a lot better, when they get away from the desk.

In spite of the nine teachers (29%) from all grades who reported using movement and acting in class, the result is still rather low when compared to the answers to the question "*How effective do you consider teaching according to students' learning styles?",* in which all of the respondents considered teaching according to students' learning styles effective. The learning styles (*visual, auditive and kinesthetic*) were reported in the questionnaire next to the question, and all of the respondents answered that it is effective or very effective to take students' personal learning style into account when teaching (Table 2 below). However, this finding is inconsistent with the amount of kinesthetic activity used in classrooms according to the respodents (29%). It is only logical that all students learn in a different way. Some might adopt new information visually, some through hearing and some through doing something concrete. However, it is interesting that all respondents who answered this question (n=31)

answered that teaching through students' personal learning style is effective or very effective, as Landrum and McDuffie (2010: 15) point out that concentrating on learning styles is ineffective and does not bring any additional value to teaching. The results are presented in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2. Effectiveness of teaching according to a learning style. *(visual, auditive, kinesthetic)*
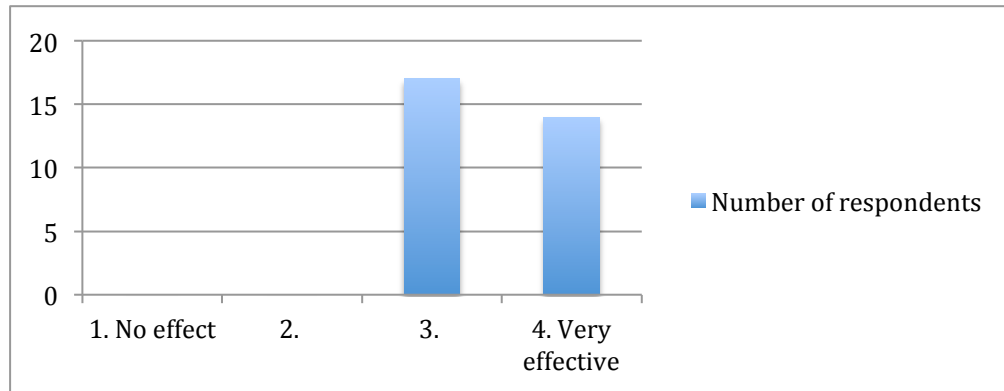
As indicated in table 2, altogether 31 teachers considered teaching according to students' learning styles effective. Interestingly, these results suggest that teachers try to take all learning styles into account when teaching. However, as mentioned earlier, only 29% of the teachers mentioned using movement in class.

Ten respondents (32%) throughout all grades reported using visual aids to support teaching and especially those learners who have learning difficulties. As discussed in chapter 2.3.2, visual aids, such as drawings, shapes or pictures, activate students' visual sense and help to remember items. Additionally, ten teachers (32%) relied on giving multisensory instructions orally and visually and felt that it helped students to understand the given orders.

4.2.4 Differentiation

Differentiation and individualized instruction play an important role in education, because diverse classrooms have become more common. According to Watts-Taffe et al. (2012: 305) differentiation can focus on multiple aspects, such as the process, the product, the environment or the content (see chapter 2.3.4). However, the respondent teachers tended to focus the differentiation on the content only. The respondents mentioned differentiation by name as an effective teaching method in 32% (10) of the answers. The respondents reported mostly using easier tasks with those students who struggle with the subject and giving extra tasks to those students who complete tasks faster. However, many respondents only

mentioned that differentiation is effective, but did not describe in more detail how they conduct it in practice.

The results indicated that 38% (12) of the respondents give versatile instructions orally, visually and in writing, so that everyone knows what should be done. However, lack of time affects the implementation of differentiation as well, as shown below in examples 16-17:

> **16.** / 1. *Mahdollisimman eriyttävä. Onneksi käyttämässämme kirjasarjassa on näitä jo mietitty valmiiksi - opettajalta kuluu melkoisesti aikaa tunnin suunnitteluun ja materiaalin kokoamiseen.*
> As differentiated as possible. Luckily our material has already included and thought these things – it takes a great deal of time to plan the lessons and collect material.

> **17.** / 5. *– Käytännössä eriyttäminen on erittäin haastavaa aikarajoitteiden takia.*
> In practice differentiation is extremely challenging due to limited time.

Respondent 1 explains that it takes a great deal of time to plan differentiated lessons and she is pleased that the series of books they use have already included some differentiated material which she is able to use. Respondent 5 indicated that in practice it is difficult to differentiate, because the time is so limited. It can be concluded that the respondents 1 and 5 feel that they have to build a separate curriculum for the students who struggle in class. However, with flexible grouping and choosing different levels of material it could be easier to differentiate within a big group. Interestingly, only one teacher (example 18 below) described how she uses flexible grouping in teaching:

> **18.** / 32. *Yhteistoiminnalliset ryhmät, oppilaiden jakaminen toisinaan taitotasoltaan homogeenisiin ryhmiin, toisinaan heterogeenisiin ryhmiin*
> Cooperative groups, dividing students sometimes into homogeneous and sometimes into heterogeneous groups.

Varying the group formation the teacher can have different kinds of activities. Respondent 32 uses skill levels in forming groups of either heterogeneous students or homogeneous students. As discussed in chapters 2.3.1 and 2.3.5, in heterogeneous groups the stronger students can help the weaker ones, and in homogeneous groups the teacher can effectively differentiate content and choose suitable material for different levels of groups.

4.3 Comparison of the popularity of teaching methods

In summary, the teachers used a variety of methods in foreign language classrooms. To compare the popularity of teaching practices, the currently used teaching methods are presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3. A comparative table of the teaching methods occurred in the answers.
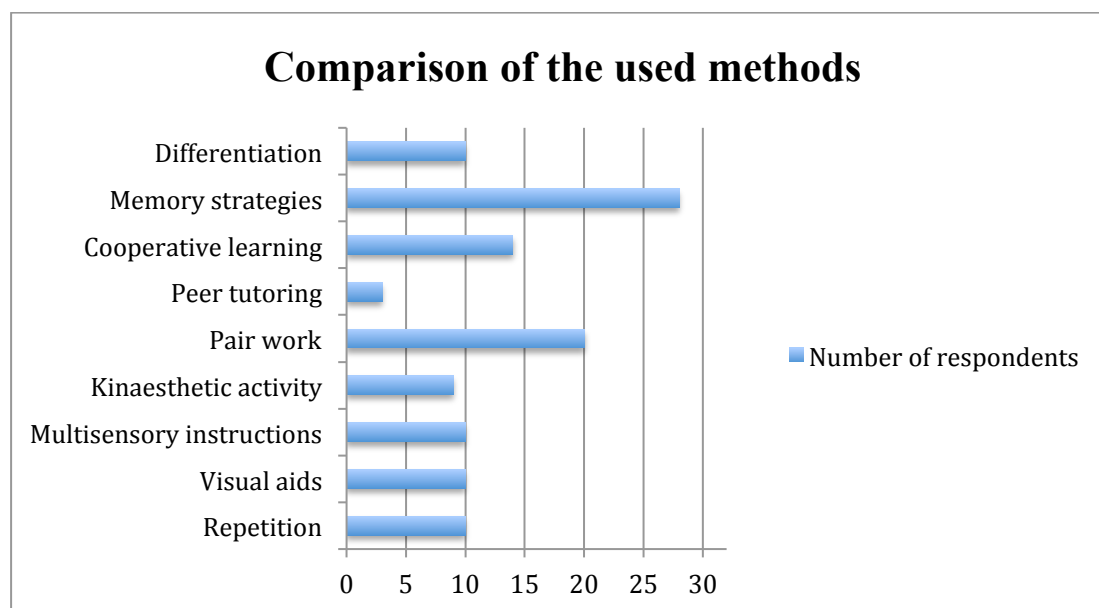
As can be seen in Table 3, the foreign language teachers considered memory strategies most effective (n=28). The popularity of peer tutoring (n=3) was surprisingly low compared to pair work, which had 20 occurrences. Either the respondents considered these two as the same thing and in fact chose the partners for pair work according to the skill levels, or they have not actually used peer tutoring. Further studies should be conducted in order to be able to draw conclusions. Cooperative learning was the third popular teaching method with 14 occurrences. However, only around a third of the respondents mentioned using differentiation, kinesthetic activities, visual aids, multisensory instructions and repetition. It is possible that the respondents did not mention all the methods they use. The results of the comparison show that effective teaching practices should be paid more attention to, as not all evidence-based teaching practices were widely used among the respondents.

5 CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at answering the questions about methods teachers use for students with foreign language learning difficulties and whether they are in correlation with the methods that have been proven effective by previous research. Additionally, one of the purposes of the present study was to improve awareness of effective teaching methods and signs of general learning difficulties among educators and peer students.

A great variety of teaching methods were present in the answers of the respondent teachers, and it was positive to note that there were, indeed, strong connections to the methods that have been proven effective by research. The respondent teachers reported that they use mnemonics, cooperative learning, peer tutoring and kinaesthetic activities, which were all introduced in the background section as effective teaching practices. The result suggests that the respondents were well aware of the effectiveness of certain methods. However, there are some aspects that could be made more effective with small improvements. For instance, only one teacher reported using flexible grouping as a method of differentiation. According to Watts-Taffe et al. (2012: 305) flexible grouping makes it possible to differentiate content, environment and instruction concurrently. Additionally, instead of traditional pair work, teachers could make the most of using peer tutoring, as it could result in greater achievements than pair work.

The results indicate that kinaesthetic teaching is used by teachers in schools throughout all grades. However, only 29% of the respondents mentioned using kinaesthetic teaching, which is a rather low result. Even though kinaesthetic teaching is a reasonably new phenomenon, it has already proven itself so effective that it has been entered in the Finnish National Core Curriculum (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014: 28.) However, further research is required.

While the present study gave some valuable insights to the contemporary foreign language classrooms in Finnish schools, it should be noted that there are some limitations to it. The sample group was outlined to 32 respondents and thus only tentative conclusions can be drawn. Additionally, the questionnaire was compiled of open questions in order to give the respondents freedom of expression to describe their experiences and opinions. Even though open questions may not give reliable answers as the interpretation of the questions is always subjective, the questionnaire succeeded in producing almost interview-like, detailed explanations. Because the questionnaire was voluntary and no reward was offered, it can be assumed that the respondents had real interest in the subject. The

anonymity of the answers increased the level of honesty in the descriptions, as the respondents could not be recognized from their answers. However, as the questionnaire targeted to study the respondents' experiences of effectiveness of teaching methods, it is possible that the respondents aimed to answer according to their beliefs about an effective teacher. Also, teachers may not have remembered to include every method or activity they use in their answers. Thus, it would be useful in further studies to also observe classrooms and teacher activity and combine the results of the observation and the questionnaires. Within the framework of the present study it was not possible to observe classrooms, because it would have required more time. The questionnaire could be improved by remodelling some of the open questions into statements to be answered on the Likert scale. This would lead to increased consistency in the answers and it would be easier for the respondents to answer.

Further research on effective methods in foreign language teaching is needed, as it has been a while since similar studies have been conducted, and in order to generate good-quality teaching in inclusive education, teachers have to have tools for effective teaching. It would also be interesting to find out teachers' opinion on teaching methods and learning difficulties with a wider sample group. Additionally, as the present study focused only on general learning difficulties, it would be useful to include all learning difficulties, both specific and general, and research the most effective methods for these. Teachers should also reflect, evaluate and adjust their own teaching, which in turn requires efficient tools for student evaluation. It would be interesting to study the variety and amount of evaluation that teachers conduct. I presume that inclusive education and teaching practices will be researched more extensively in the following years and the present study provides important research topics for further study.

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APPENDIX

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The original questionnaire was implemented via Google Forms, and only the questions are listed below:

1. Ikä?
   a. 20-30
   b. 30-40
   c. 40-60

2. Sukupuoli?
   a. Nainen
   b. Mies

3. Koulutus?
   a. Aineenopettajakoulutus
   b. Aineenopettajakoulutus + erityispedagogisia opintoja
   c. Erityisopettajan koulutus
   d. Muu, mikä?

4. Millä asteella opetat?
   a. Alakoulu
   b. Yläkoulu
   c. Lukio
   d. Korkeakoulu
   e. Muu oppilaitos

5. Millä alueella opetat?
   a. Etelä-Suomi
   b. Länsi-Suomi
   c. Itä-Suomi
   d. Keski-Suomi
   e. Pohjois-Suomi

6. Osallistutko lisäkoulutuksiin?
   a. Kyllä
   b. Ei

7. Koetko saaneesi opettajankoulutuksesta valmiudet kohdata oppimisvaikeuksia luokassa?
   a. Kyllä
   b. Ei

8. Luetko opetusalan tai kielentutkimuksen julkaisuja?
   a. Kyllä
   b. Ei

9. Millaisia oireita omien havaintojesi mukaan ilmenee vieraan kielen oppimisvaikeuksien yhteydessä?

10. Millaiset opetustyylit olet huomannut tehokkaimmiksi erityisesti oppimisvaikeuksisten oppilaiden kohdalla? Kuvaile mahdollisimman tarkasti.

11. Asteikolla 1-4: Kuinka suuri merkitys kouluympäristöllä on oppimisvaikeuden synnyssä?

1   2   3   4
Hyvin pieni merkitys   Hyvin suuri merkitys

12. Asteikolla 1-4: Kuinka suuri merkitys kotiympäristöllä on vieraan kielen oppimisvaikeuksien synnyssä?

1   2   3   4
Hyvin pieni merkitys   Hyvin suuri merkitys

13. Nimeä konkreettisia keinoja, joita käytät luokassa oppimisen helpottamiseksi. (Esim. materiaali, ohjeistus ym. Kuvaile mahdollisimman tarkasti)

14. Käytätkö eri aistikanavien kautta tapahtuvaa oppimista? Kuvaile esimerkein.

15. Asteikolla 1-4: Kuinka tehokkaaksi koet eri oppimistyylien mukaisesti opettamisen? (Visuaalinen, auditiivinen, kinesteettinen)

1   2   3   4
Vähäinen vaikutus   Erittäin tehokas

16. Millainen opetusmetodi sopii mielestäsi vieraan kielen opetukseen luokalle, jossa on suuria eroja taitotasoissa?

17. Millaisia erilaisia toiminnallisia työtapoja käytät oppilaiden kanssa? Esim. ryhmätyö.

18. Käytätkö muistisääntöjä tietyn asian opettamisessa?
    a. Kyllä
    b. En

19. Jos käytät muistisääntöjä, kuvaile millaisia ja minkä asioiden opettelussa.