



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

Early language teaching and its methods in Finnish primary school English

Suvi Saloniemi
Bachelor's Thesis

University of Jyväskylä
Department of Language and
Communication Studies
English
December 2019

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta	Laitos – Department Kielten ja viestintätieteiden laitos
Tekijä – Author Suvi Saloniemi	
Työn nimi – Title Early language teaching and its methods in Finnish primary school English	
Oppiaine – Subject Englannin kieli	Työn laji – Level Kandidaatintutkielma
Aika – Month and year Joulukuu 2019	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 26 + 2 (liitteet)
Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Varhennettu kielenopetus ja sen opetusmenetelmät ovat ajankohtaisia aiheita uuden perusopetuslain myötä (2018), jossa ensimmäisen vieraan kielen opetus siirtyy ala-asteen ensimmäiselle ja toiselle luokalle kaikissa Suomen peruskouluissa. Varhennettu kielenopetus perustuu lasten herkkyyteen ja valmiuksiin oppia vierasta kieltä ja tutkielma pyrkii arvioimaan, miten tämä näkyy käytännössä varhennetun kielenopetuksen luokkatilanteessa</p> <p>Tutkielman tarkoitus on selvittää, miten alaluokkien englanninopettajat opettavat varhennettua kieltä käytännössä ja mitä menetelmiä he käyttävät opetuksessaan. Tarkoituksena on myös selvittää, miten oppilaiden nuori ikä vaikuttaa opettajien metodien valintoihin opetuksessaan, perustuen aikaisempiin tutkimuksiin lasten oppimisesta. Myös opettajan näkemyksiä, ja kokemuksia varhennetusta kielenopetuksesta ja sen toimivuudesta tarkastellaan tutkielmassa. Käytetty aineisto koostuu kahdeksan toisen luokan englannin oppitunnin observoinneista, sekä yhden opettajan haastattelusta.</p> <p>Tulosten mukaan varhennetussa kielenopetuksessa käytettiin yleisesti suullisia opetusmetodeja, joita käytiin toiminnallisen oppimisen kautta. Opettaja otti lasten nuoren iän huomioon, ei ainoastaan metodologiassaan, mutta myös ottamalla lapsen kehityskauden huomioon tunnin kulussa ja tuntien jatkuvuudessa. Opettaja koki varhennetun kielenopetuksen erittäin positiivisena ja koki sen edistävän kielen oppimista merkittävästi, ja tarjoavan merkittäviä kokemuksia kielenoppimisesta oppilaille.</p> <p>Rajallisuudestaan huolimatta tutkielma esittää monipuolisia näkökulmia varhennettuun kielenopetukseen ja sen menetelmiin alakoulun englannin opetuksessa, sekä tarjoaa tietoa opettajien asenteista ja kokemuksista sen toimivuutta kohtaan.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords Early language teaching, varhennettu kielenopetus, observation, interview	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

Table of Contents

1	INTRODUCTION	3
2	EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING.....	4
2.1.	Process of early language learning	4
2.2.	Teaching methods for young learners	5
2.3.	Early language teaching	6
3	THE PRESENT STUDY.....	9
3.1.	The research plan and questions	9
3.2.	Data collection and methods of analysis	9
3.2.1.	Data collection	10
3.2.2.	Methods of Analysis.....	11
4	EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSES ..	12
4.1.	Teaching methods in early language learning lessons	12
4.2.	Pacing and materials in early language learning	15
4.2.1.	Pacing	15
4.2.2.	Materials	16
4.3.	Age of the learner in early language learning.....	17
4.4.	Difficulties and the future of early language learning	20
5	CONCLUSION.....	22
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	24
	APPENDIX 1: Interview questions (Finnish)	26
	APPENDIX 2: Interview questions (English)	27

List of Figures

Figure 1. Overall findings.....	13
Figure 2. Commonly used teaching methods	15
Figure 3. Teaching English in the second grade.....	17

1 INTRODUCTION

Early language teaching (ELT) of English has been implemented in Finnish primary schools in recent years. With the passing of the recent changes to the Finnish Core Curriculum, the teaching of the first foreign language (A1) will start in all Finnish primary schools from the first grade rather than the usual third grade by spring of 2020, adding at least two hours of English teaching per weekly lesson per year (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018). This is on par with the recent changes in Europe where the importance of multilingualism and cultural knowledge of learners has been on the rise and has also shown in the educational field (Goorhuis-Brouwer and de Bot 2010: 290).

The recent changes are based on previous research stating that children have very effective language acquisition, especially when they are young. The previous research has shown that early foreign language learning positively effects foreign language skills, especially speech and oral language skills (de Bot 2014; Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic 2014). The present research intends to study how ELT occurs in a Finnish classroom setting, based on previous research on how young learners learn foreign language and what is seen as effective teaching methods for young learners.

This topic is important to study due to the lack of previous research on the subject of foreign language teaching in an early age, and the social significance of the subject that will affect A1 teaching on a national level, especially classroom observational studies that have been lacking on the subject. This research intends to evaluate early language teaching in a Finnish primary school, through mixed methods research with both observations and interview. The research is done in Finnish primary school English classes and considering their foreign language teachers who teach ELT at the second grade level. The aim of this study is to better understand ELT and its teaching methods, as well as the teachers' views on the subject and its effectiveness.

2 EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING

This chapter introduces and highlights two topics relevant to early language teaching: the process of early language learning, and teaching methods for young learners. Lastly, early language learning will be addressed as its own topic, touching on the effectiveness of ELT as a linguistic experience for the teacher, and how primary school teachers have viewed and welcomed ELT in their local curriculums.

2.1. Process of early language learning

The recent changes in the curriculum are based on the hypothesis that children have very effective language acquisition when they are young, especially before the age of puberty, due to the lateralization processes in the brain (Yule 2014: 188). This hypothesis is usually called the critical period (Yule 2014: 188). Previous research has partially shown that early foreign language learning does not diminish first language skills and positively affects foreign language skills, especially speech and oral language skills (de Bot 2014; Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic 2014). However, other studies have shown that “students in their early teens are quicker and more effective second language learners in the classroom than, for example, seven year olds” (Yule 2014: 188). The critical period hypothesis has been under heated debate on the accuracy of its characterization that early language acquisition is the limit for native-like proficiency, as later studies show that late learners can learn just as well or are more proficient in different types of language skills (Nikolov 2009; Muñoz and Singleton 2011). The more common terminology used for this period is the sensitive period, where the criticality of the period is not given such a large emphasis (Dufva 2018). Despite the differences in view and terminology, it has been proven that young children have a lot of potential for learning language effectively, especially in terms of oral skills. The Finnish educational board is not only attempting to utilize this ability of early language learning, but raising the opportunities for learning foreign languages equally for every learner, despite their gender, ethnic background, or region. This is of great importance in the reform of the education of young learners (Ministry of Education and Culture 2018).

Adding to the distinction accepted by cognitive science is the theory of second language acquisition reflecting on two different dimensions of cognitive skills that work side by side: a rule-based system that operates in computing well-formed sentences, and a declarative system

that uses memory for operating large chunks of information (Nikolov 2009: 2). Reflecting on this information, Nikolov (2009: 2) exclaims that “young language learners use memory-based processes, whereas adult language learners rely on rule-based learning”.

2.2. Teaching methods for young learners

Before discussing teaching methods, one has to know how to define a teaching method. The term *method* is defined by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011: 1) as “a coherent set of links between the actions of the teacher in a classroom and the thoughts that underline the actions.” They include that the teachers’ own understanding, beliefs, style and experiences form and shape different teaching methods, and they will not become standardized despite the imposing of different methods. In other words, the teacher’s own views on foreign language teaching shape how they implement defined teaching methods, and why they choose to use them. Furthermore, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) add that the teacher is not the only one affecting the implementation of the teaching method in the classroom, but the pupils have a role in it as well.

Young learners are still learning the most effective methods for holding and using new information so there are very different teaching methods in use when it comes to young learners versus older learners. Not only are young learners observed as better oral learners when young, but their literacy skills, such as reading and writing, are also not often capable enough to be effective in teaching based on those tasks (Huhta and Leontjev 2019). With young learners, it is suitable to use age appropriate teaching methods that are playful in nature and activate young learners’ interests and improve their social skills (Huhta and Leontjev 2019). Young children also have shorter attention spans, so it is usually more suitable to switch between multiple tasks during one lecture. Oksanen (2019) discusses that teaching in primary school should always be action-based, since the younger the pupils are, the shorter the time is for sitting still during a lesson. Action-based teaching is defined by Jaakkola, Liukkonen and Sääkslahti (2013: 668) as learning where problems, questions, and tasks are solved through physical actions.

From the teacher’s perspective, Inha (2018) concludes that there is not only an addition to the pupils’ work during lessons, but also more structural and pedagogical changes - with the new curriculum, early language teaching has changed to a more functional and student-oriented direction - where the students themselves can play an active role, and where teaching is based on students’ own motivation and enthusiasm. Van Lier (2007) has also noted that in recent

years the focus has shifted towards learner's active participation in meaningful activity. Inha (2018) also writes that functional learning methods for young children include games, songs, drama, and music, which are action-based teaching methods described both by Oksanen (2019) and Jaakkola et al. (2013). The teaching methods are constructed to be age appropriate and hold the interest of the learners for as long as possible. Young learners still have very limited literacy skills and therefore a big part of teaching is based on oral skills such as pronunciation or dialogue (Huhta and Leontjev 2019). This also ties into what Nikolov (2009: 2) explained above in how teaching young learners is mainly memory based in terms of songs and vocabulary instead of rules and grammar.

Teaching materials used with young learners are constantly evolving, and with early language learning it is fairly versatile. Huhta and Leontjev (2019) researched that many of the teachers do not use readily available teaching materials for teaching language for their pupils such as text- or exercise books, but lean more on the internet, social media, and their own exercises for the students, such as games, songs, or using physical examples. The teachers that use available teaching materials like textbooks use them together with the aforementioned teaching materials in conjunction with available digital materials and exercises. Digital materials and technology have been indeed constantly increasing in the language teaching of all age groups. According to Huhta and Leontjev (2019), most teachers see versatile teaching materials and methods effective for teaching young learners, especially if they lean on oral skills and playfulness. Oksanen (2019) also adds that the lesson is not usually functional if only exercises from the textbooks are in use, since children usually get excited from creative teaching methods, especially when they differ from the usual textbook approach.

2.3. Early language teaching

Early language teaching is an important part of the learner's experience as a student and as a person. Koivula et al. (2017) write that early language teaching not only affects the well-being of the student, but also gives the child meaningful experiences about their involvement, progress, and sense of community. The importance of early language learning has for a long time been a topic of discussion not only in the pedagogical community but also in politics and economic research.

With teaching young children, the role of the teacher gets more important with the methods and language proficiency (Dufva 2018). The teacher's role could be either leader of the young learners or as part of their communicative practices, as was introduced by Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic (2011). They also described that teachers in China saw learner-based teaching as effective and had positive effects in learner motivation. In Finland as well, a majority of the teachers, parents, and students saw early language learning as a positive thing (Huhta and Leontjev 2019). On the other hand, the teacher's perspective has been studied in Hungary with differing results:

“Many of them wished that they could teach older learners, insisted on streaming YLs into ability groups, and preferred teaching more able ones. They lacked not only proficiency and pedagogical skills, but also a desire to improve their practice. Many teachers perceived games and storytelling as a waste of time, and looked forward to what they perceived to be proper teaching in later years. (Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2011: 107).”

The results of this research shows that there is still a great deal of variation when it comes to the views of the teachers' in early language learning.

Effectiveness of early language teaching has been questioned due to the capability and resources that schools can provide. The amount of time contributed to foreign language learning is one of the aspects questioned in teaching, as the teaching should be consistent to be effective. According to Nikolov (2009: 6) early foreign language programs devote only a very limited amount of time for the sessions, where the time devoted to the program is recommended to be minimum of 30 minutes three times a week. However, there is still a lack of long-term research on the effectiveness of the program so far in Finland. A research conducted by Huhta and Leontjev (2019) gave the students participating in early language teaching an opportunity for self-reflection and resulted based on the answers that the students indeed felt like they improved in about half a year, both in oral skills and understanding. They also showed that the learners use and listen more English as they progress in grade and age, where the older learners use English considerably more than the younger learners. According to Huhta and Leontjev (2019) most of the learners in the first grade were just reaching the level A1.1 after half a year of studying English, but majority of the students could answer simple questions and understood these questions at least with help. This could be showing of the modest achievement targets in the foreign language acquisition that fits well with the level of language taught to the age group (Nikolov 2009: 7).

Even though early language learning is still surrounded by questions, excitement and mixed research, the aims in the program are compatible with the development of young learners and

their general curriculum. Even though the time frame for teaching is limited, the achievement targets tend to be realistic and modest to match the proficiency the age group gains from early language learning (Nikolov 2009: 10). Nikolov (2009: 10) mentions that the “reason why early language learning is a great initiative is that by early exposure children may enjoy the potential advantages of starting young, as well as profit from what they experience at later stages in their language learning”. In other words, children can profit from the information and skills they gather in the early point of their education such as pronunciation, motivation, the amount of background information, literacy, and learning skills and strategies that they can use in their future studies.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1. The research design and questions

This study attends to showcase what happens in the classroom of early language English education in a Finnish primary school, and how the teacher's methods correspond with the age of the young learners and previous research on ELT taken into account. Additional outcomes presented are also the teacher's views on the effectiveness on the teaching methods and their view of ELT. The study especially focuses on four different groups of second graders, and their teachers, where the present study will interview one of the foreign language teachers.

More specifically, the research questions in the present study are:

- What teaching methods are used in the classroom?
- How is the age of the young learners taken into account in teaching?
- What are the teacher's views on the effectiveness of the teaching methods, and ELT in general?

The young learners' language acquisition is not a simple subject and this research attempts to provide some answers in the subject of ELT, since previous research on early language learning in Finland is lacking. The information gathered from this study is hopefully beneficial for the future of foreign language education in Finland, especially motivating and helping foreign language teachers who adjust to the recent changes of ELT implemented across Finland.

3.2. Data collection and methods of analysis

The data for this study was collected through mixed methods research: classroom observations of Finnish second graders' English lessons, as well as interviewing the teacher of the foreign language class. The classroom observation and data collection were conducted in a Finnish primary school during the spring and fall semesters of 2019, through eight observational visits enacted there. The lessons were thirty-five minutes long, and had around ten to fifteen pupils at once. The observations were also done in four different groups and by two different teachers.

Data collection was chosen to be acquired and analyzed through mixed methods, since mixed methods potentially offer a depth of understanding with the acquired qualitative or quantitative data (Fielding 2012). Mixed methods analysis involves comparing data from different sources,

thus providing a link of comparison between them - in this case between the observational data from the classroom, and the interview with the teacher.

The ethical matters taken into account in this study were asking for the permits, though the primary school, where the study was conducted, did not need a permit from the parents when studying minors, since the school has a general research permit in place. The permits required were from the two second-grade teachers that were observed for this study, as well as for the interview from one of the teachers. Any personal information from these observations and the interview are not in the published study.

3.2.1. Data collection

The observational data collected in this study is through observations of different teaching methods used during the lessons, as well as exercises and teaching materials applied. The observations also focused on the age of the young learners taken into account by the teacher when using teaching methods or exercises during the lessons. The analysis converses observational data with other research on the subjects of ELT.

The data were also collected by interviewing the teacher on the subject of ELT. The interview questions were based to the questions presented by the study conducted by Huhta and Leontjev (2019), where multiple Finnish second language teachers were interviewed on their views, experiences and readiness on the subject of ELT and the recent changes in the national base curriculum.

For the detailed interview questions, see Appendix 1 and 2. In the present study, the teacher was interviewed if the school has made their local core curriculum for ELT, and if so, why did the school decide to center towards ELT, as well as what opportunities the teacher had for the establishing of the ELT curriculum. The following questions, on the other hand, focused more on the teacher's personal views about ELT: what is their view on the ELT according to their experience and why, how does the ELT differ from the usual starting age of third grade, and what is easier compared to what is harder. The teacher was also interviewed on their opinions on the emphasis points in teaching young learners, as well as their views or predictions on the future of ELT.

The interview also concentrated on the differences between the emphasis on oral skills, versus literary skills during the lessons, as well as the materials used normally in teaching. The emphasis on oral skills in ELT is considered to be the main focus in the subject of teaching of

young learners (Huhta and Leontjev 2009; Koivula et al. 2017; Inha 2008). All the aforementioned questions and their answers are compared with the observations from the lessons, and are in conversation with the previous research on the subject.

3.2.2. Methods of Analysis

The analysis is summarized by the compiled and organized data collected from the class observations, as well as from the interview with the teacher. The observations are analyzed through classification, and the interview through qualitative content analysis. The teacher gives insight to establishing ELT at an administrative level of the school, as well as the teacher's views of construction, and methodology of ELT. The observations, on the other hand, show what ELT is actually like in the classroom and how the aforementioned methodologies are demonstrated in the ELT environment.

The data obtained from this study is in conversation with previous research on the subject of ELT, and the observational data from shows what teaching methods are in use during the lessons, and how these methodologies and exercises suit the age of the young learners. These observations are also backed and complemented by the interview, on what kind of exercises the teacher finds most effective for ELT and what kind of materials work well with the teaching, according to them.

4 EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSES

This analysis intends to showcase what teaching methods are used in an early language teaching classroom. It will also discuss what teaching exercises and materials are used in ELT, and how all of them correspond with the age of the young learners taken into account. The teacher's views on ELT and its effective methodology will back up and converse with the observational data and previous research throughout the analysis.

The primary school in question has started early language teaching in the second grade as part of their new curriculum and will also start teaching foreign languages to first graders at the end of the year 2019. This is also implemented in many other primary schools around Finland. The teacher interviewed has taken part in creating the school's early language teaching curriculum with other teachers of foreign languages.

4.1. Teaching methods in early language learning lessons

The most pronounced teaching method emerging in observational data is the emphasis on oral skills and exercises. Oral learning seems to be the most used teaching method in teaching young learners, since most of the exercises during the lessons were mainly focusing on oral skills and pupils repeating the theme-specific words in many different ways, such as repetition, games, or songs. This observation agrees with the points brought up by Inha (2018), who describes action-based exercises functional learning methods for young children. These exercises were one of the major methods on teaching English to young learners, especially focusing on the oral skills. The overall findings, including oral and action-based exercises, as shown on Figure 1, include various different, usually memory-based exercises with versatile teaching materials and fast paced switching between exercises, discussed later in the analysis.

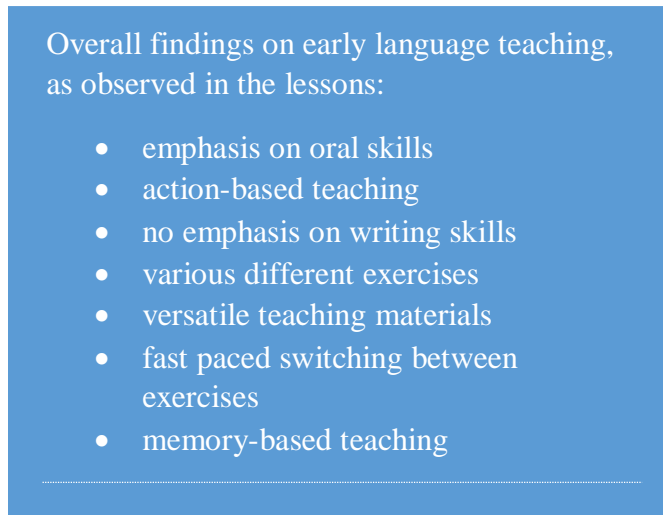


Figure 1. Overall findings

The teacher interviewed also supports the observational data; they emphasize oral skills, and action-based learning such as playing, singing, or games - as well as listening exercises in ELT. There are no writing exercises, since the teacher cannot trust that the pupils can read or write yet. This is also mentioned by Huhta and Leontjev (2019), who explain that young learners still have very limited literacy skills and therefore a big part of teaching is based on oral skills such as pronunciation or dialogue. The only writing exercises given to the young learners are copying example letters or words. These teaching methods are, according to the teacher, natural to the young learners.

An observation from the lesson clearly showcasing the division between oral and writing skills with young learners is during a game of broken telephone. The pupils were advised to divide into two lines and play the game of broken telephone competitively. The teacher would whisper a word to the last pupil's ear in each line, and they would carry it through the line. The last pupil in the line would then write it on the blackboard and go to the end of the line. The game was, however, interrupted when a pupil could not write the whispered word on the blackboard. The teacher resolved the situation by writing all the words on the blackboard and the pupils only had to circle it. This shows that the pupils have the needed competency to compete in a fast paced game based on oral skills, but lack skills in writing, which affects the functionality of the exercise.

Learning through oral exercises seems to be effective and corresponds well with young learners. As for the teacher, according to them the pronunciation of certain vocabulary themes in earlier grades is seen to help learning the same vocabulary themes later in the third grade. When the pupils are already familiar with the vocabulary in oral form, the only thing to train

is the written form. Reflecting on this information, the teaching methods correspond well with Nikolov's (2009: 2) exclamation that young learners use memory-based processes in language learning, rather than rule-based learning. The young learners are taught to recognize the pronounced form instead of the written one, and certain rules of memory and repeating exercises strengthen the memorization, as Oksanen (2019) explains that repetition, as well as songs help with remembering vocabulary intensely, and improve pronunciation.

During the observations it was clear that teachers generally did not require the children to read or write any of the vocabulary shown in the exercise book, just to repeat after them, or after the electronic material. The words were always presented with a picture of the word, and the words were also taught in other ways, such as showing the actual object in the classroom or doing the movement attached to the verb.

In the interview, the teacher explains that they intend to show the word form, but never assume that a young learner can read from that word form, as they want to make sure there is always a picture or a movement attached to it so the learner understands the meaning of the word. The teacher trusts that once the child sees the word form for two years, they know its written form in the third grade. Before that there is no rush to even practice writing.

Other skills, such as listening comprehension in the lessons, are executed mostly by the teacher's use of English as a classroom language in simple phrases, or through listening to the electronic teaching materials like vocabulary, songs, or small conversations.

One observational example of this is using questions in English. The teacher usually starts by giving a question in English for example: "Who wants to read the instructions?", and then repeats it in Finnish. They repeat it one more time in English, until many of the pupils have raised their hands and they pick a pupil to read the instructions. The instructions are in Finnish. This is also a rare example of a situation where young learners were encouraged to use reading skills in teaching, but in this case it is in their mother tongue.

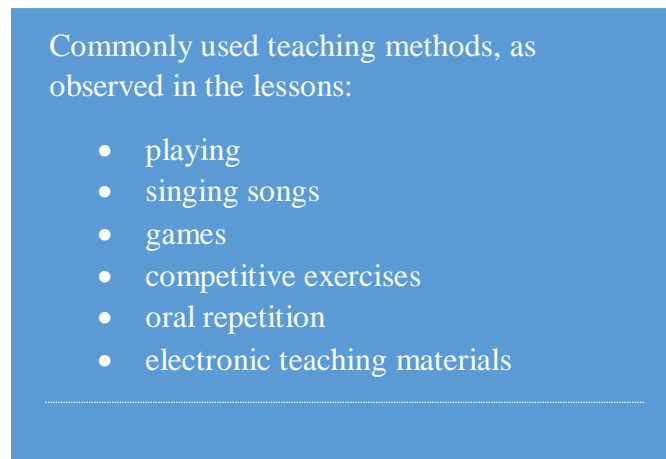


Figure 2. Commonly used teaching methods

Overall, the teaching methods used during the lessons correspond well with the notions brought up in the interview with the teacher. Exercises based on oral skills and active-based learning were used the most, while writing skills were the least included part of ELT. Other affecting contributors are also the pacing of the exercises, and the materials used for teaching.

4.2. Pacing and materials in early language learning

4.2.1. Pacing

Another observation made from the lessons were the use of various different teaching exercises, such as playing, singing, games, competitive exercises, oral repetition and electronic teaching materials. In one lesson there were, on average, around five different exercises included in thirty-five minutes. The teaching methods are constructed to be age appropriate and hold the interest of the learners for as long as possible.

According to the teacher, the younger the learner is, the shorter the switching should be with different exercises, or the learners will get tired or bored of the previous exercise. The theme will stay the same for multiple lessons, but the exercises themselves will differ. This opinion is in unison with Oksanen (2019), who states that teaching in primary school has to be action-based, since the younger the learner is, the less they can stay in place for long periods of time. Taking the pacing of the exercises into account is, actually, a crucial part of ELT when it comes to effectiveness of the learning during lessons, especially when taking the age of the learner into account.

4.2.2. Materials

Materials used in ELT vary, according to the observational data. The main material in English lessons is an exercise book, used both traditionally and electronically. The books have differing forms of exercises, most meant for action-based teaching and the vocabulary presented in each text is very short - eight to ten words. Alongside the books and exercises from them, the teachers also use games, simple worksheets, competitive exercises, or online learning environments, such as SanomaPro's Bingel. Bingel especially, which combines language exercises from the book with an aspect of a mobile game, is really popular with the pupils, where they sometimes ask the teacher if they could play with Bingel during this lesson. Oksanen (2019) does state that young learners always get excited when the exercises are something different than exercises in a book. Even though Bingel has exercises that correspond directly with the exercises in the English book, the learners are much more excited to play with the online environment.

In one of the observed lessons, the teacher started the lesson by mentioning that they are going to play with Bingel if the pupils would work well in that day's lesson. That motivated learners to not only behave and do their exercises, but also correct other pupils on their behavior in fears that they would not have time to play with Bingel during that lesson.

Though Huhta and Leontjev (2019) concluded through research that many of the teachers do not use readily available teaching materials for teaching language to their pupils, such as textbooks, the observational data and the interview strongly contradict this finding, since the exercise book meant for second and first graders seems to be the main teaching material used. Huhta and Leontjev (2019) did, however, mention that the teachers that used available teaching materials paired them often with exercises on the internet, social media, and their own action-based exercises for the pupils. This corresponds with data gathered and analyzed from both the observations and the interview.

According to the teacher, they see using the exercise book as the most effective teaching material, as they know that the book is made specifically ELT and action-based teaching in mind. The book has a minimal amount of writing exercises, though some of the exercises are done with pen and paper such as connecting lines or connecting pictures to the correct word forms. The teacher also does additional action-based exercises for the lessons, such as games, competitive exercises, or songs.

Overall, the materials seem to be chosen by the teachers specifically with the ELT in mind. The teacher interviewed chooses and executes many different, overall versatile, exercises based on what is seen as suitable for teaching young learners. This corresponds well with Huhta and Leontjev (2019), who discuss that most teachers see versatile teaching materials and methods effective for teaching young learners, especially if they lean on oral skills and playfulness. Also Oksanen (2019) states that creativity is important when teaching in primary schools, as the lessons are not necessarily the most functional with only the exercises from the book.

4.3. Age of the learner in early language learning

According to the interview with the teacher, teaching English in second grade differs majorly from the third grade, when it usually starts (see Figure 3). Not only is the age of young learners taken into account in teaching through different teaching methods, but thorough observations, another side of early language teaching also becomes apparent: the development period of the learners.

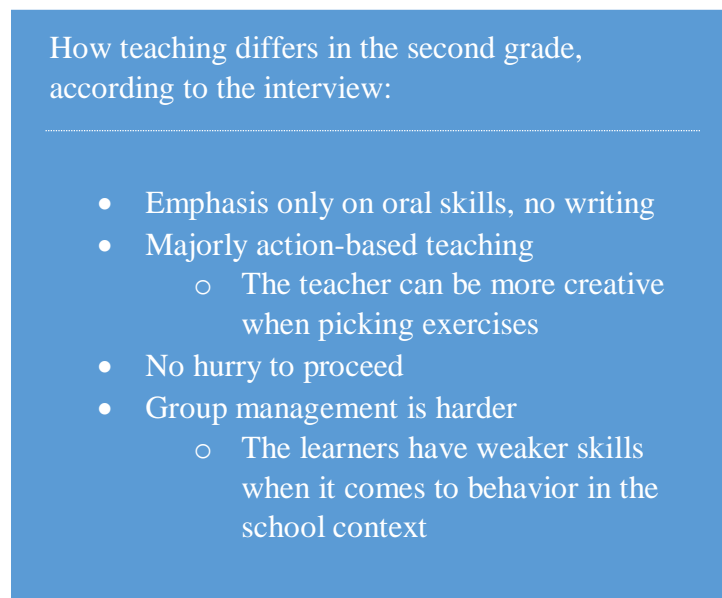


Figure 3. Teaching English in the second grade

In the lessons observed, the young learners were almost always really energetic and a part of the lesson was always spent achieving a peaceful environment for learning the language, as some of the pupils were disruptive in their behavior usually through speaking while the teacher was giving instructions, or not following the instructions but doing something that was not favorable or helpful during the exercise, such as sharpening their pencil when the exercise did not require the use of pencils. The young learners are usually, however, keen to take part in the

lesson and the exercises, and voice their own opinions and experiences even if it does not correspond with the theme of the lesson.

The teacher explains that the age of the learner is the most important aspect to take into account in ELT. The age of the learners affects greatly how the lesson does in practice, according to the teacher in Excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1

“Ei voida olettaa että jos mä syötän tiettyä asiaa niin mä en voi olettaa että ne tuottaa mulle ulos erilaisia juttuja... pitää hyväksyä se että vaikka olisi kuin hyvä suunnitelma tunnille niinku siellä on jollakin huono päivä niin saattaa mennä ihan syteen se koko tunti.”

“One cannot assume that if one feeds the learners one specific thing, the learners can return different things back... one has to accept that no matter how great lesson planned is, if someone in the class has a bad day it could derail the whole lesson.”

The teacher includes that after a disrupted lesson, they take into consideration that they can try again next time. They will also discuss with the pupil about their behavior during or after the current lesson, and the pupil usually has a “better day” and improved behavior the next time they are in class. Oksanen (2019) adds that one cannot expect that children have developed self-control, which corresponds well with the notions brought up in the interview.

One clear example of this type of behavior is observed on one of the lessons. While the teacher was giving instructions for a game focusing on remembering vocabulary, a couple of the pupils were not focusing on the teacher, but interrupting them with their own speech or general unrest, disturbing the lecture. The teacher made a decision that since the game was not going to succeed, the class would instead do exercises from the book, while the teacher would discuss with the pupils that were interrupting the class about their behavior. After talking with the pupils, the teacher speaks to the whole class about the event: why it happened, why this is unfair to the other pupils, and what she wishes would happen next time. Later during the class, they play the aforementioned game without problems, but only for a short time.

The teacher elaborates that with young learners, aspects of upbringing takes the majority of the time in English lessons, not the teaching. The teacher explains that it does not, however, bother them since they give themselves enough time to go through that one theme and with the group.

One peculiar detail touched upon in the interview with the teacher is also the learning skills of the young language learners. The teacher mentions that if the observations in their class were done in the spring term as well, there would be great improvement in language learning skills such as acknowledging how words are learned, how to memorize things, and what kind of rules of memory can exist. During the fall the learners are still developing in language learning skills.

The observational data from the other group in the spring term backs up this comment, the pupils observed during spring and fall terms seemed to differ in their classroom behavior, where they were much more organized when following instructions, and swap between exercises much more efficiently, even though some pupils were still not following the given instructions if they were distracted with something else.

The teacher's views on the effectiveness of the teaching methods overall intend to showcase that everything used will work, of course some exercises will work better than others. According to them, the success of the exercise is not necessarily tied to how good or bad the exercise is, but based on if one of the pupils or the group has a "bad day" or the pupils are over energetic. The teacher explains in the Excerpt 2 that they don't find all the disruption negative:

Excerpt 2

"kieli on viestinnän väline ja niin se on näille pienille ja sitten vaan niinku ymmärtää että siellä on ääntä ja siellä pitää olla ääntä ja siellä välillä tulee vähän liikaakin ääntä ja että sekin et joku homma ei menen niinku silleen ku sä oot ite aatellu ei tarkota sitä etteikö siitä jotain opittais, mun mielestä."

"In my opinion, language is a tool of communication and it is that also for these small learners. One has to understand that there will be noise and there is allowed to be noise, and sometimes there is a little bit too much noise, but when something does not work like you thought it would, it does not mean somebody could not learn something from that."

Oksanen (2019) agrees that to learn a language, children must be given a chance to use and speak in the foreign language. The effectiveness of the foreign language learning has been taken into account when teaching young learners, but it has also been recognized that the developmental period of the young learners can affect the lesson, sometimes majorly, but it is not seen as a negative thing, but as an essential part to take into account in early language teaching.

In various research, the teachers' views on ELT have been fairly divided. Some teachers saw ELT as a positive thing overall, whereas some teachers saw it as a waste of their resources (Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic, 2011; Huhta and Leontjev, 2019). According to the interview with the teacher, they saw ELT only as a positive experience. Even though early language teaching was a completely new experience for them, and surprisingly different from teaching the usual third grade, the teacher is excited about ELT as shown in Excerpt 3:

Excerpt 3

"kun mä nään miten nopeasti nuo pienet imee sitä kieltä ja ottaa sen omakseen niin mun asenne on se että mahtavaa että saatiin et se alkaa ensimmäisellä vuosiluokalla."

"When I see how quickly these young learners absorb that language, and take it as their own, my stance is that it is amazing that we could start this at the first grade."

Overall, the teacher's views early language learning as really effective in teaching young learners, not only the foreign language, but for behavioral skills and skills for learning language effectively as well.

4.4. Difficulties and the future of early language learning

The observational data was collected in short lessons of thirty-five minutes. The teachers that were observed did mention that they felt that the lessons were often too short for teaching English effectively, especially when they met the group sometimes only once a week for less than forty minutes. According to Nikolov (2009: 6), this is often the case, since early foreign language programs devote only a very limited amount of time to the sessions, where the time devoted to the program is recommended to be a minimum of thirty minutes, three times a week. However, there is still a lack of long-term research on the effectiveness of the program so far in Finland.

In the interview, the teacher names creating a contact with the children as one of the difficulties in classroom activity. As there is only one weekly lesson per year for ELT in this primary school and if the teacher sees the group only once a week it is more difficult to build that relationship as the English teacher as the same authority as their usual classroom teacher. The short lessons, in practice, do not only affect the learning of the pupils, but also of the teacher's role to the pupil, which according to Dufva (2018) gets more important when teaching young children.

The interview also touches on the future of ELT, how the teacher foresaw and hoped it changed in the future years. The teacher sees the learning experience of the young learner as the most important thing to support in early language teaching, as mentioned in the Excerpt 4:

Excerpt 4

"Mä ainakin toivon, että se kirjoittaminen ei tule sinne ensimmäiselle ja toiselle vuosiluokalle mitenkään. Myöhemmissäkin vaiheissa vaan että sille lapselle rauha omaksua ja nauttia siitä kielen opiskelusta ja maistella sitä kieltä"

"At least, I hope that the writing skills will not become mandatory in first or second grade in any way, but they child is given the needed peace to enjoy the language learning, and savor the language, also in later stages"

This also paints a glowing picture of ELT as an enjoyable language learning experience for the pupils, which is also mentioned by Nikolov (2009: 10) as by the exposure to the foreign language, the young learner may get enjoyment and profit from their experiences in the later stages of their language learning as well.

The teacher also mentions that they foresee - and hope - that the second foreign language (A2) would drop to the third grade instead of the current fourth grade, since it has been researched that a child's ability to learn and absorb language is better the younger they are when they start learning the language. This comment also appears in other research on the subject, where it has been shown that early language learning positively affects oral skills, such as speech and pronunciation, in foreign languages (de Bot 2014; Nikolov and Mihaljevic Djigunovic 2014). The teacher sees a great deal of promise in the skills of these young learners when it comes to foreign language learning as shown on Excerpt 5:

Excerpt 5

"olisi ihanaa, kun se toinenkin kieli alkaisi aikaisemmin, kun ne pystyy oppimaan mitä vaan, oikeesti."

"It would be wonderful, if the second language would start earlier as well, since they [the pupils] can learn anything, seriously."

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to understand what teaching methods are used in the classroom, and how the age of the young learners is taken into account in early language teaching. The study intended to showcase the teacher's views on the effectiveness of the early language teaching and its methodology in general.

Findings in the observations, and the interview both suggest that ELT methodology has been applied and implemented in the Finnish primary school under analysis. The teachers acknowledge that emphasis on oral skills, action-based exercises, and variety in both exercises, as well as the teaching materials used during the lesson are effective teaching methods in early language learning and suits the young learners. Unlike on the research done by Huhta and Leontjev (2019), the teachers feel comfortable using the exercise book as their primary teaching material, and using other, more creative educational resources as their secondary learning tool. According to the interview with the teacher, there are no standard exercises, in their opinion, that will not work in early language teaching, but other outside contributors define its effectiveness in the end.

The teachers also recognize the other possibly influential aspects in ELL, such as the developmental period of the child as a contributing factor in the progress of the lesson, or the lack of reading or writing skills in a foreign language. Especially the aspects of upbringing of the young learners takes a majority of the time in the foreign language lessons, due to the disruptions or unnecessary activity in the class. It not seen necessarily as a problem, but as a necessary part of ELL. According to the interview, and the observations done in the spring term, both show that the children learn crucial skills in language learning, and classroom behavior during the year.

The teacher interviewed also notes that they are in no hurry when it comes to teaching the language, giving young learners plenty of time to enjoy and learn in an environment that is as stress free as possible. The vocabulary themes are repeated throughout various lessons as needed.

Overall, the teacher finds ELT extremely effective, and an absolutely positive experience that shows a lot of promise in the language learning skills and experiences of the young learners both currently, and possibly later, in their studies. It can be implicated, according to these notions, that ELT is an effective way to teach a young learner about language acquisition, and

five them meaningful experiences even if they would not choose to study the language later in their studies.

Problems for ELT seemed to be mostly in the administrative level – notably, in the time available for the foreign language lessons in the curriculum. The teachers saw the short and infrequent lessons as a contributing problematic factor when it came to creating a relationship between the teacher and the pupil, as well when it came to the efficient learning of the foreign language in terms of the memory of the learners.

Due to the limitations to the data collection methods in a Bachelor's Thesis, the findings of the present study cannot be generalized. They do, however, provide information about the early language teaching and how it shows in the context of this specific primary school's English lessons, especially when the teaching methods used in ELT have not been studied greatly before. The present study illustrates the ELT in practice, and illustrates the teachers' views and experiences on ELL, providing answers to its research question

Improvements on the present study would be suggested mainly to the methods of study. In order to achieve more generalizable results than a Bachelor's Thesis can provide, more data would be needed. Especially more quantitative data would be useful when investigating the use of ELT and especially its effect on young learners. Recording the observations would also be useful for enabling more specific analysis of what teaching methods are used during the lessons, and give the researcher, and perhaps the interviewed teacher as well, more accurate view of the use of ELT in the classroom.

If future studies were done in the subject, a research could focus on the learners' point of view on ELT as well, in comparison to only the teachers' point of view in the present study. Especially the effectiveness of ELT in the young learners' foreign language proficiency, or their views on learning language in the future, in example at the third grade when writing is implemented to the learning. The present study also focused only on the ELT in point of view of English, which can be described as a lingua franca (Yule, 2014), thus it can be widely acquired even among young learners. It would be intriguing to see if ELT is used in the same way in teaching other foreign languages as well, and how effective it is in that context.

Overall, it is acknowledged that more research is needed in the subject of early language teaching and its methods, especially its benefits or effectiveness in learning foreign language. This could be motivational and helpful to foreign language teachers to apply methods and understand methodology in early language teaching.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- de Bot, K. (2014). The effectiveness of early foreign language learning in the Netherlands. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching* 4 (3), 409-418.
doi: 10.14746/ssl.2014.4.3.2.
- Dufva, H. (2018). Oppijan näkökulma: Kuinka oppijan ikä vaikuttaa oppimiseen? [lecture]. Jyväskylän Yliopisto, 19.9.2018, Jyväskylä.
- Fielding, N. (2012). Triangulation and Mixed Methods Designs: Data Integration With New Research Technologies. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 6 (2), 124-136.
doi: 10.1177/1558689812437101
- Goorhuis-Brouwer, S. and de Bot, K. (2010). Impact of early English language teaching on L1 and L2 development in children in Dutch schools, *International Journal of Bilingualism* 14 (3), 289-302.
doi: 10.1177/1367006910367846
- Huhta, A. and Leontjev D. (2019). *Kielenopetuksen varhentamisen kärkihankkeen seurantapilotti*, Final Report. University of Jyväskylä, Centre for Applied Language Studies.
- Inha, K. (2018). Vuosi kärkihanketta takana, Kieliverkoston verkkolehden teemanumero, [online].
<https://www.kieliverkosto.fi/fi/journals/kieli-koulutus-ja-yhteiskunta-kesakuu-2018/vuosi-karkihanketta-takana> (13 June, 2019)
- Jaakkola, T., Liukkonen, J. and Sääkslahti, A. (Eds.) (2013). *Liikuntapedagogiikka*. Opetus 2000. Jyväskylä: PS-kustannus.
- Koivula, M., Siippainen, A. & Eerola-Pennanen, P. (toim.) (2017). *Valloittava varhaiskasvatus*. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. and Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques & Principles in Language Teaching* (3rd edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Muñoz, C., and Singleton, D. (2011). A critical review of age-related research on L2 ultimate attainment. *Language Teaching* 44 (1), 1-35.
doi: 10.1017/S0261444810000327
- Nikolov, M. (2009). *The Age Factor and Early Language Learning*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Nikolov, M. and Mihaljevic Djigunovic, J. (2011). All shades of every color: An overview of early teaching and learning of foreign languages. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 31, 95-119.
- Oksanen, P. (2019). Alakoululainen kielenoppijana. [lecture]. University of Jyväskylä. 26.9.2019. Jyväskylä.

Ministry of Education and Culture (2018). Asetusluonnokset lausuntokierrokselle: Kielten oppiminen varhaistuu alkamaan jo ensimmäisellä luokalla [online]. https://minedu.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/kielten-oppiminen-varhaistuu-alkamaan-jo-ensimmaisella-luokalla (26. June 2019).

Teresa C. and Soren W. E. (2018). The younger, the better?: A usage-based approach to learning and teaching of English in Danish primary schools. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics* 6 (1), 171-182.
doi: 10.1515/eujal-2017-0018

van Lier, L. (2007). Action-based Teaching. Autonomy and Identity. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 1 (1), 46–56.
doi: 10.2167/illt42.0

Yule, G. (2014). *The study of Language* (5th Edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

APPENDIX 1: Interview questions (Finnish)

Koulun opetussuunnitelma

Onko koulu tehnyt paikallisen opetussuunnitelman varhennetulle kielenopetukselle?

Miksi koulu päätti järjestää varhennettua kielenopetusta (omien tietojen mukaan)?

Mitä mahdollisuuksia sinulla on ollut varhennetun kielenopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perustamiseen/vahvistamiseen?

Omat kokemukset

Mikä on käsityksesi varhennetusta kielenopetuksesta tähänastisten kokemuksiesi perusteella (todella negatiivisesta todella positiiviseen)? Miksi?

Mitä pitäisi ottaa huomioon varhennetussa kielenopetuksessa? Miksi?

Miten varhennettu kielenopetus eroaa yleisesti aloitetusta 3-luokan kielenopetuksesta? Mikä on helpompaa, mikä vaikeampaa?

Mikä tuntuu toimivan, mikä taas ei ollenkaan?

Miten suulliset ja kirjalliset taidot on painotettu opetuksessa?

Mitä opintomateriaaleja varhennetun kielenopetuksen tunneilla käytetään?

Olen huomannut observoinneissani, että useimmat opetusmenetelmät ovat toiminnallista ja painopiste on suullisessa osaamisessa ja sanastossa. Onko jotain mitä en ole huomannut?

Tulevaisuus

Miten näet varhennetun kielenopetuksen muuttuvan koulussasi?

APPENDIX 2: Interview questions (English)

School curricula

Has the school made their local core curriculum for ELT?

Why did the school decide to center towards ELT (according to their knowledge)?

What opportunities the teacher had for the establishing of the ELT curricula?

Personal experience

What is your view on the ELT according to your experience (very negative to really positive) and why?

What needs to be considered in early language teaching? Why?

How does the ELT differ from the usual starting age of 3rd grade, and what is easier compared to what is harder?

What seems to work well and what seems to not work at all?

How are verbal versus writing skills emphasized in teaching?

What teaching materials are used in teaching?

I have noticed in my observations that most of the teaching methods used are action-based, and the emphasis is placed on oral skills and vocabulary. Is there something I have missed?

Future

How do you see the ELT changing in the future (in the school)?