ACTION-BASED LEARNING SUPPORTING STUDENT AGENCY –

Perspectives from Early EFL Classrooms

Master's Thesis

Karoliina Savo

JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty	Laitos – Department
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Tekijä – Author
Karoliina Savo

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Huoli suomalaisten kielitaidon yksipuolistumisesta sai Suomessa syksyllä 2019 aikaan tarpeen uudistaa vieraiden kielten opetusta peruskouluissa. Tätä varten kyseisenä ajankohtana laadittiin dokumentti, *Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteiden muutokset ja täydennykset koskien 1. ja 2. luokilla tapahtuvaa A1-kielen opetusta*, jossa on avattu varhennettua ensimmäisen vieraan kielen opetusta koskevat periaatteet ja tavoitteet kansallisella tasolla sekä selvennetty opetuksen luonnetta. Koska 1. ja 2. luokilla annettava opetus toimii perusopetussuunnitelman mukaan missä tahansa aineessa siirtymäkautena esiopetuksesta kouluopetukseen, sitä luonnehditaan opetussuunnitelman perusteissa muun muassa toiminnalliseksi ja leikilliseksi. Perusopetussuunnitelmassa mainitaan, että opetuksessa voidaan käyttää esimerkiksi draaman keinoja, pelejä ja lauluja, mikä on keskeinen osa toiminnallista oppimista (*action-based learning*).

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli kartoittaa sitä, miten ensimmäisellä luokalla tapahtuvaa englanninopetusta toteutetaan toiminnallisuuden saavuttamiseksi, millaisia toiminnallisia tehtäviä ja materiaaleja tunneilla käytetään ja miten nämä sekä opettajan toiminta tukevat oppilaiden toimijuutta kielenoppijana. Aineisto kerättiin havainnoimalla ensimmäisellä luokalla tapahtuvaa varhennetun englannin opetusta viiden eri opettajan oppitunneilla välillä lokakuu 2019 – helmikuu 2020.

Tutkimusten tulosten perusteella voidaan todeta, että opetus mukailee uusien linjausten mukaista toimintaa luokissa, ja että oppilaille on näin ollen tarjolla erilaisia, toiminnallisia ja kommunikatiivisia aktiviteetteja, kuten tehtäväratoja ja värien löytämistä luokasta, jotka kannustavat kielenkäyttöön ja harjoitteluun heti opintojen alusta alkaen. Tuloksia voidaan käyttää esimerkiksi antamaan yleiskuvaa varhennetun englannin opetuksen piirteistä Suomessa, ja tutkielmaa voidaan hyödyntää jatkossa lähtökohtana muihin aiheeseen liittyviin tutkimuksiin.

Asiasanat – Keywords
Early Language Learning, English as a Foreign Language, action-based learning, agency

Säilytyspaikka – Depository
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Muita tietoja – Additional information

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ABBREVIATIONS

FL	foreign language
FL1	first foreign language
FLL	foreign language learning
FLT	foreign language teaching
CBLT	content-based language instruction
CLIL	content and language integrated learning
CLT	communicative language teaching
CPH	critical period hypothesis
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELL	early language learning
ELT	early language teaching
L1	first language
L1A	first language acquisition
LA	language acquisition
NCC, the (POPS)	the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education
NCC for the ECEC, the (VASU)	the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care
TBLT	task-based language teaching
TL	target language
VOPS	the 2019 amendment to the National Core Curriculum
ZDP	zone of proximal development

1   INTRODUCTION

Within the Finnish school system, professionals in the field of education have awoken to a need to take action to encourage foreign language learning in the Finnish youth. As a response to the increasing worry about the declining linguistic resources of the nation compared to some Finland's European counterparts (Pyykkö 2017, Ministry of Culture and Education 2017), in fall 2019, an amendment to the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (the NCC) (POPS 2014) as added.

The amendment was designed to answer to the need of encouraging foreign language studies among students of different ages. In the amendment (VOPS 2019), it is stated that studies in each students' chosen first foreign language (FL1) will start earlier than before, but no later than the first grade, when most students are 7 years old (Ministry of Culture and Education 2018). This was decided in an attempt to maintain students' motivation and interest toward language learning longer (ibid.). Before the amendment was formulated and published and changes were made to the commencement of foreign language teaching, the majority of school children started studying their FL1 in the third grade at the latest (Ministry of Culture and Education 2019). On the other hand, the Ministry of Culture and Education (2018) further argued that the nationwide change of introducing FLs earlier would make foreign language learning (FLL) more equal for all students regardless of where they attend school: It was argued that after the new amendment, areal inequality would diminish. The reason for this is that generally speaking, smaller schools and schools in rural areas have less available funding that can be used for arranging additional or earlier language classes (Ministry of Culture and Education 2018). This had put them in an inferior position in comparison with schools in the capital area, for instance, where, in many cases, students have been free to choose to study more languages for more years (ibid.).

The introduction of FLs to younger learners on a broader, nationwide scale, has brought the need to change the way languages are taught and approached. Ever since the fairly recent, more conversational and action-based shift in foreign language (FL) instruction, which began already back in the 1970s (Jacobs & Farrell 2003: 3), textbooks and other older tools and approaches to FL teaching got reimagined. The latest NCC (POPS 2014) and its amendment (VOPS 2019) reflect this and other changes ignited by the increased need for early language learning (ELL). Besides ELL, another buzzword in the context of FL teaching in the Finnish context seems to be action-based learning based on the NCC. To make teaching more practical and hands-on, and in order to achieve educational goals stated in the NCC, FL teaching has seen an increased emphasis on task-based and communicative activities in classrooms compared to earlier years (POPS 2004, POPS 2014 & VOPS 2019).

The need for adding more and more elements that would make instruction more action-based in foreign language education clearly also stems from the needs of the surrounding, fast-moving and globalized world. Teaching, including that of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), follows certain trends, like everything else in modern, rapidly changing societies. One of the main tasks of education is to respond to the needs of the ever-progressing world, which is why there is a need to make sure that education is up to date. Moreover, both the European Commission and the Ministry of Culture and Education in Finland acknowledge the fact that citizens are expected to possess good communicative skills in more than just one language to open doors for mobility when it comes to relocating, or opportunities to study and work abroad, and working in multinational and multilingual companies even in their home countries (the European Commission 2020; the Ministry of Education 2017, 2018; see also e.g. Richards 2006). The reasons for FL teaching in Finland, as well as commencing it earlier than before, will be discussed in more detail later in Chapters 2 and 3.

The need to design new activities and come up with novel ways of teaching FLs has therefore increased and become a more essential part of an FL teacher's job as of fairly

recently. Approaches like task-based language teaching (TBLT) and communicative language teaching (CLT), discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, however, are still by no means completely new inventions, as Norris (2009: 579), Spada (2007: 271) and Richards (2006: 1) discuss. The foundations of said approaches and other similar methods date back to earlier decades when form-focused language teaching on its own was first deemed outdated and insufficient. After decades of speculation, criticism, and curiosity, however, action-based learning is slowly becoming more of a norm instead of having the status of a trend, at least in Finland, based on the direction of changes in the recent curricula (POPS 2004, POPS 2014).

The present study focuses on examining present, reformed early language learning (ELL) in EFL classrooms in the Finnish context. In other words, it examines how Finnish first graders are taught EFL now, after the latest changes to the curriculum. The aim is to examine what kinds of tasks early EFL teachers utilize to reach the goals stated in the NCC and, thus, how action-based learning is represented in said classrooms, to get a general view of what EFL teachers should take into account when designing lessons for their 7-year-old language learners. One important aspect of the study is to focus on documenting how these beginner EFL learners are supported in their humble first steps in their FL learning career, and if and how they are encouraged to use the language, with however rudimentary skills, right from the beginning. In this study, I refer to ELL when I mean FL education arranged for students of 7 years old or younger specifically. Otherwise, when discussing education provided in FLs generally, I will use the abbreviation EFL (when talking about teaching English as a foreign language) or talk about FL (foreign language) education.

The considerations around ELL are topical, and since the decision to start teaching the first foreign language (FL1) to all first graders nationwide is recent, previous studies on the topic are not extensive by any measure. However, those studies that do exist and that have been conducted earlier in pioneering Finnish schools that have longer traditions in ELL, have mainly focused on teachers' point of view. Previous research topics have

included teachers' readiness to teach foreign languages to even younger learners, teachers' opinions on ELL in bilingual education and immersion education settings (see e.g. Hallila 2018, Eskelinen & Tuupanen 2018). Besides being focused on teachers' experiences, previous studies have yielded mostly quantitative data using, for instance, interviews and questionnaires. Hence, the present study aims at filling a certain existing gap in the field, although the extent of the study is still quite modest. Besides nationwide EFL teaching for first graders being a new concept in Finnish elementary schools, Keck et al. (2006, cited in Norris 2009: 588) suggest that a research gap regarding task effectivity in action-based language learning exists also on a wider scale. This has to do with all FL education and is not only tied to what is happening in ELL, EFL, or in the Finnish context, but the study could possibly shed some light on this matter as well.

Implications wise, the results can help us get a better picture of what is going on in Finnish elementary schools and provide information and ideas to present and future first grade English teachers, as well as inspire EFL and other FL teachers of older students. The results can also be a beacon for textbook authors and those otherwise working in the field of education, such as anyone working with syllabus design. The results of the present study can help us see if the goals and suggestions in the NCC are helpful enough in functioning as a resource for teachers planning their lessons and courses, if what is going on in the early EFL classroom reflects what is stated in the syllabus, and if something should therefore be revised in the documents directing education in Finland. The revision is not for me to judge, but rather the findings of this study and other similar studies alike could indicate possible shortcomings in the NCC that could need fixing. Nationwide ELL education is a new concept, as discussed, and requires adjustment and the will to learn new from all parties to make it work as well as possible.

Lastly, the relevance to my possible future career path and my own interest towards action-based or hands-on learning, as well as the belief that learning should be engaging and fun, also played a role in the choice of this research topic.

This study consists of a total of 7 Chapters. In Chapter 2, I will explore the fundamentals of early FLL and explain how ELL differs from LA when people get older. The Chapter will also provide reasons that support the idea of the earlier start to language studies. Current action-based approaches to FL teaching are discussed in Chapter 3, while in Chapter 4, I will introduce and EFL education in Finland as it is presently portrayed in official documents like the NCC. In Chapter 5, I will introduce the present study, research questions, methodology, and data, in more detail. In Chapter 6, I will present the results in addition to analysis and discussion around them. Finally, I will evaluate the study and provide suggestions for future research along with my concluding remarks in the final Chapter, which is Chapter 7.

2 THEORETICAL CORNERSTONES IN EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Conceptualizing foreign language learning (FLL) has undergone transformations through the decades since researchers have developed theories describing different processes that take place when learning a foreign language. Perspectives and explanations vary, but they can generally be placed into one of the three main categories, as Saville-Troike and Barto (2017: 25-29) state: when it comes to theoretical frameworks, one can look at FLL from either a social, linguistic, or psychological perspective. These categories, however, overlap each other to an extent. For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to look at FLL from the social and psychological, mostly cognitive, perspectives. I will discuss theories related to age and the development of cognitive processes, which mainly pave the road for language studies and linguistic processing later. Regarding the social perspective, I will explore Vygotsky's socio-constructivist views (e.g. Beloglovsky & Daly 2015; Jarvis et al. 2003; McGregor 2007) and how they capture FLL as a social phenomenon, as well as briefly touch on Krashen's arguments on why the exposure to the TL in the social environment is crucial to language learning to further the discussion (Krashen 1985; Edelenbos & Kubanek 2009). Besides the links to cognitive development and processing capabilities, as well as social learning, feelings of competence and self-efficacy play an important on one's path to learning a FL. A learner's sense of control and autonomy is located somewhere in the crossroads of the two abovementioned standpoints to FL, psychological-cognitive and social factors, which is also something worth looking more into later in this Chapter.

Below, I will explain the two mentioned points of view to FL acquisition, cognitive and social processes, through a few theories, which capture and help understand the essence of and foundation for ELL and FLL. The cognitive side of FLL will be introduced in Section 2.1 through Piaget and Lenneberg's theories, and the socio-constructivist side in

Section 2.2, as it can be explained by using Vygotsky and Krashen's ideas and conclusions as a framework. Section 2.3 discusses and introduces the both psychological and social concepts that contribute to one's feelings of capability and, therefore, success, as a FL student.

2.1. FLL and cognitive processes

Language acquisition is a cognitively complex and challenging process, and the readiness, as well as the ability to process linguistic information, is in part tied to the development of the human brain and therefore also to capabilities related to thinking and linguistic processing (see e.g. Gillibrand et al. 2011: 37-39). However, research has shown rather consistently that the younger one is when they become exposed to and start learning a language, generally, the better the outcome, although no complete consensus prevails (see e.g. Lenneberg, 1967, cited in Granena & Long, 2013: 3-4). In this Chapter, I will discuss language acquisition and how maturational or age constraints affect our ability to learn languages and what advantages younger learners seem to have over those who start at an older age. This will give reasoning to the question why starting language education at an early age should be considered.

2.1.1 Piaget: the development of thinking

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget is perhaps most-well known thanks to his contributions to developmental and cognitive psychology. In his theory on the development of thinking, he found how people's cognitive processing changes as they age and made distinctions between, for instance, concrete and abstract thinking, and why one might not be able to grasp concepts that are less tangible (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 11). The significance of the theory to the field of education lies in his observations what comes to the thinking of school children and the youth; the theory has several implications for developmental psychology and therefore educators as well (Webb 1980).

When trying to pinpoint and explain how young FL learners process information, based on his research and observations, Piaget (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 10-13, 90-97; Gillibrand et al. 2011: 37-39) concludes in his theory that 7-year-olds are, first and foremost, active learners. The theory highlights the importance of agency in, for instance, young learners' language acquisition process: active participation, thinking and processing are key words in pedagogy aimed at younger students. According to Piaget, children at this age are at what he calls the concrete operational stage of development, which translates into the importance of active engagement with the students' immediate surroundings, as their thinking still happens on a concrete level, meaning that it is "restricted to what they can personally see, touch, and hear" (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 11). In other words, children at this stage of cognitive development learn best by being directly in contact with people and objects in their environment and being able to discover the world and its phenomena (ibid.). Since languages are highly abstract systems, despite their link to the real world through arbitrary word-object or word-phenomenon agreements, language should be molded into a more tangible form in the classroom for beginner learners to explore.

Piaget explains that as learners, children are everything but passive observers. Through their explorations and observations, they essentially build their knowledge and give meaning to objects and phenomena around them. In short, they construct their own reality - it is not passively acquired, copied, from anyone else. Children, while their brains are still developing and cognitive abilities expanding, have curious minds, as they actively gather and process information. For this reason, for example Beloglovsky and Daly (2015: 96) recommend tasks that facilitate kinesthetic learning, or in other words, learning by doing.

2.1.2 Lenneberg: the critical period hypothesis

The saying, what one learns in childhood carries into adulthood, seems to hold true especially in language learning. It is a well-established fact that language acquisition, just

like learning many other skills, often happens easier when practising starts young as opposed to at an older age. While it is not impossible to learn something new after becoming a bit more mature, when it comes to acquiring new languages, at least, previous research and several studies have shown that language learners have a better outlook at becoming fluent in a language the younger they are when they start (Granena & Long 2013: 5-6; Long & Spadaro, 1996, cited in Granena & Long 2013: 12). One of the earlier researchers who was intrigued by the topic and who has also pioneered in this area of study is German neurologist and linguist Eric Lenneberg, who, back in 1967, stated according to his research findings that when people are young, they can take advantage of something called sensitive and critical periods in their cognitive development – especially what comes to learning new words and grammar in any language (Lenneberg, 1967, cited in Granena & Long 2013: 3-4). Following the footsteps of Canadian theorists Penfield and Rogers, who first sketched the idea of sensitive periods in language learning, Lenneberg created a model known as the critical period hypothesis, or CPH for short, to explain how age is a constraint in language learning, and why, therefore, it is justified to start language education early.

Research related to CPH also shows that the later one starts studying a new language, the less likely one is to attain a native-like level in it (Granena & Long 2013: 5-6; Long & Spadaro, 1996, cited in Granena & Long 2013: 12). Still, individual differences in terms of factors such as aptitude should be taken into account, as like Johnson (2008: 7) states, there are those language learners who are slower to pick up even their first language, not to mention the problems they encounter when trying to acquire a second language. Other critique toward the hypothesis exists (for overviews, see e.g. Long 2005, Skinnari & Sjöberg 2018), as clear consensus about the age factor and the significance of the starting age has not been reached and if maturational constraints make FLL more challenging (Granena & Long, 2013: 6-7), but generally it seems that while adults may have a more matured, developed brain fit for problem-solving (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017: 88), in children, brain placidity still allows them to absorb information more effortlessly, sometimes without them even really noticing it (Herschensohn 2000: 38; DeKeyer 2003,

cited in Hummel 2014: 84). This is referred to as incidental learning. CPH is commonly accepted and recognized as a noteworthy theory and fundamental idea which is affecting the way FL education is viewed, approached, and planned today.

To summarize Piaget and Lenneberg's theories, the younger the learner, generally, the more suitable more spontaneous and practical language learning activities are. When dealing with younger learners, it is also important to ensure that the teaching methods one is using take into consideration the needs, skill level, and other constraints, such as cognitive capabilities, of the learner. What comes to younger learners of foreign languages, their learning, characteristically, resembles more play than conscious cognitive efforts (Johnson & Dinger 2012). Indeed, according to Krashen and Terrell (1983), whose theory of Naturalist Approach will be discussed below in Section 2.2.2, most LA in childhood happens incidentally, unconsciously, without drilling or actual attempts at learning aspects of a language, such as glossary items, by heart, which is in part due to the critical period in their cognitive development according to Piaget and Lenneberg (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 10-13, 90-97; Gillibrand et al. 2011: 37-39; Lenneberg, 1967, cited in Granena & Long 2013: 3-4).

2.2 FLL as a socio-constructivist process

Lightbown and Spada (2013: 6) argue that just like with cultures, one can argue that languages are learned through a process called socialization or social learning. Quite evidently, it makes a lot of sense to suggest that languages are learned best through exposure to the TL and communication simply because the fundamental reason for their existence is that they developed to fill a need to have a means for interaction, sharing knowledge and information. Due to their very basic nature, they are not meant to exist in vacuums. The following theories from Vygotsky and Krashen reflect this aspect of language learning and further explain what the role of social support in the FLL process is.

2.2.1 Vygotskyan ideals and socio-constructivist views

Vygotsky is perhaps best known for his socio-constructivist and interactionist ideology, which is reflected in his theories (Jarvis et al. 2003: 32). In the field of developmental psychology, arguably one of his biggest gifts is the theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD), a social learning theory applicable to a number of skills, including ELL and early FLL. As opposed to the zone of actual development, which corresponds to a learner's current development or skill level, what has actually been achieved, the zone of proximal development talks of learning potential that can be reached in social interaction with someone who is more knowledgeable and skilled, such as a parent, teacher, or an older peer. Vygotsky emphasizes the social aspect of learning, as well as its importance, in pushing a learner forward (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 17-19; Jarvis et al. 2003: 36-38; McGregor 2007: 28-29). The ZPD essentially explains what the difference is between the task that is a little more demanding than the one which they could tackle alone. In social interaction with a more experienced person, a learner can reach their potential and advance their skills and knowledge – or, to put it simply, learn something new.

While it is important to meet young learners on their level, for instance, in early FL education, and make sure that the teaching methods used are suitable and match their cognitive skills, according to Vygotsky, it is also important to challenge them and offer opportunities for constructing and negotiating meaning socially. 7-year-old children are endowed with placid brains, but as Piaget (Gillibrand et al. 2011: 39) remarks, their thinking is still mainly confined by what is concrete and observable; young learners' capability to reason in abstract terms is limited, and their schemas of the world are still developing not to mention metacognition or skills in assessing own learning and abilities.

The implications of Vygotsky's theory in the classroom include creating social learning opportunities where young learners can, through interaction with other learners and the teacher in particular, keep building their knowledge and skills in the TL. While the

teacher is arguably the most experienced one in the classroom when it comes to the use and linguistic knowledge of the TL, students can also learn a lot from each other when working together and helping classmates. The teacher's input, on the other hand, can provide the young language learners with the challenge, a bone to chew on, in order to more efficiently advance their learning process and to make new realizations and eureka-moments possible.

2.2.2   Input and output in LL

Krashen and Terrell (1983) are advocates for naturalism in second language acquisition and FLL, and they have argued that FLL does not greatly differ from the way a child acquires its L1. Later, Krashen, continued the work on second language acquisition and FLL by further emphasizing the importance of sufficient exposure to, or "comprehensible input" (Krashen 1985: 2) in the TL in any learning context. According to the hypothesis, language acquisition is dependent on both the quality and quantity of the input, and if the input is adequate, linguistic elements will naturally be provided without explicit explanations or teaching, just like in first language acquisition (L1A). Despite the fact that Krashen's theory has received criticism in the world of science, research that supports his views also exists. Edelenbos and Kubanek's (2009) findings regarding main principles in ELL seem to support Krashen's idea about the importance of exposure to the TL. Like Krashen, they also seem to agree that "comprehension precedes production" (Edelenbos & Kubanek 2009: 54), meaning that in order to be able to acquire the language and to produce it independently, a learner must first internalize the main aspects and functions of the TL. Without linguistic models and social influence, examples to follow, a learner cannot acquire a language.

The counterpart for input is *output,* a concept defined by Swain (2005) in the 1980s in response to Krashen's claim that input is "the only true cause of second language acquisition" (Krashen 1984: 61, cited in Swain 2005: 472). In comparison, where input is the language one is exposed to, output depicts one's progress in language learning by

showing what they can do (Swain 2005: 471). Whereas in Krashen's input hypothesis (Krashen 1985), learners passively receive linguistic input, Swain (2005: 471-483) argues that besides exposure, LA requires active involvement on the learner's part, and that acquisition also happens while producing the language, although the processes of comprehending versus producing are dissimilar. While during exposure to input, the learner is acquainted with different linguistic features, it has been noted that "output trigger[s] deeper and more elaborate processing" of different features (Izumi 2002, cited in Swain 2005: 475), as the learner aims at producing comprehensive output. Output seems to work as a more 'integrative' progress in LA by combining acquired linguistic knowledge and practical, conversational rules of a language (ibid.). The importance of active learner participation for LA will be discussed in greater detail in the next Chapter, 2.3.

2.3   Feelings of capability in FLL

Besides cognitive capabilities and social support, the individual learner's own initiative is a crucial part of FLL, for like any undertaking, learning languages is also a process that requires effort from the learner themselves: as discussed in the previous Chapter, both external input and the learner's own output are important. Realizing that one made something happen themselves is an empowering feeling that easily adds to feelings like confidence and capability. Feeling confident and in control of one's own doing, such as the process of learning a new language and being able to speak it, are important psychological parts of the process of learning a language.

In this Section, which is further divided into subSections, I will introduce and discuss three largely overlapping concepts describing feelings of competence and capability in students: learner autonomy, student agency, and self-efficacy. One of the reasons why these three concepts are important for FLL is that they can help teachers see how important support is for an individual student's progress in language learning. Through support and facilitating a safe atmosphere in a FL classroom, teachers can promote their

students' learning. This can also be done by increasing their feelings of capability, or autonomy, agency, or self-efficacy, and show students their potential. To meet the needs of younger learners, teachers need to offer different exercises than with, say, high school students. With teaching 7-year-old learners, who are not particularly self-directed to begin with, how to take charge of their learning process, teachers should consider more practical options and implications (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 11). As such, learner autonomy, agency, and self-efficacy are all socially constructed concepts that further describe the importance of social support as part of the learning process, along with socio-constructivist theories like Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and Krashen's input hypothesis.

Learner autonomy, agency, and self-efficacy are aspects that can be either supported or suppressed what comes to classroom activities, different types of tasks provided, and the general atmosphere. How tasks can promote feelings of self-efficacy, for instance, and open students' eyes to what and how much they actually know and can do, will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 6.

2.3.1 Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has a lot to do with teaching learners how to take charge of their own learning. The idea behind learner autonomy is that information cannot be poured into students' heads (Teng 2018: 2), but, rather, the learner should be given the opportunity to explore new concepts, process new information, and realize the implications themselves. The spark and inspiration, the motivation, essentially, to learn new should be ignited from within, and therefore the will to acquire new information should be intrinsic (ibid.).

With younger learners, teachers often need to focus on the basics and help support their students' independence. Promoting learner autonomy in the classroom, according to Bown (2009, cited in Teng 2018: 2), means helping students become more autonomous.

They should learn to take initiative and how to 'self-regulate'. With young learners, this can be achieved through practicing these skills during activities. No matter the learner's age and what they are studying, one of teachers' vital tasks is to help their students learn how to fish, instead of just handing them fish, as the saying goes. In other words, helping students learn how to solve a problem instead of offering them the solution will take them further. The main idea behind learner autonomy is that through taking charge of their own actions and being in charge of their own learning, learners get the feeling that they can make progress on their own and do not have to be helped and supervised all the time.

2.3.2   Agency

Closely related to learner autonomy is the term agency, which refers to action initiated by the learners themselves and not action taken by the learners because of an outside source, such as their teachers, pressuring them to do so (Teng 2018: 65). In short, it describes one's freedom of choice to take action or, conversely, inaction. Whereas learner autonomy reflects students' capability to take charge, agency is more about having the choice to do or not to do something, as Teng (2018: 65) described. Agency, therefore, refers to one's decision, something that is unobservable, and the observable result of participation or non-participation.

Defining agency is difficult due to its complexity and internalized nature, but like learner autonomy, it is related to concepts like motivation and self-regulation, and ideas like free will and the freedom of choice (Teng 2018: 65). Therefore, as stated, agency cannot be observed and is challenging to measure, but it is largely tied to the individual's beliefs and their emotional state among other psychological factors (Mercer 2011: 427-436). Consequently, agency is dynamic, like an individual's psychological state, and these two go hand in hand. Agency can also be defined as a socio-cultural construct in a way that agency promotes the learner's idea that they have a role and power as an agent in society, and that their actions are not only something affecting them individually, but they are part of a bigger picture in society, for instance, culturally (Teng 2018: 68). An individual

is, as Teng (2018: 71) states, bigger than themselves. We are all connected to bigger, vast levels of educational, political, cultural, and historical contexts, which also feed us expectations and ideals of, for instance, what it is to be a fluent FL speaker (ibid.). This further explains why agency is difficult to pinpoint and challenging to describe in a few simple words.

Because agency is dynamic, this aspect of it is also socially constructed and negotiated (Ahearn 2001). Thus, she argues that the feelings of capability and inadequacy can take turns depending on the support or competition and challenges of the environment, whether from immediate environment or society at large. The feelings of agency can therefore fluctuate, and how capable one feels, can vary greatly even on a day to day basis (Teng 2018: 69). Agency is therefore also cumulative, and previous and present experiences shape it all the time. One's notions of oneself as a learner can go through different phases (ibid.)

Discussing agency from a more practical perspective, one may ask how EFL teachers could support their students to feel more capable in the classroom. Ideally, in a supportive environment, Scardamalia (2002) suggests, autonomy and agency drive students to make a conscious, self-initiated efforts to reach the best possible outcomes, whether during an individual task or as part of their language studies in general. According to her, in a classroom this means that creating an atmosphere that feels both safe and inspirational gives room to progress. Making sure that all students have the same chances to show their abilities, regardless of their actual skill level, promotes equality among students. When the idea is to facilitate and strengthen student agency, the teacher is already on their way to providing the students equal opportunities to learn when different skill levels and speeds in progress are taken into account. According to Miskala (2019), when tasks are differentiated and meet students' varying levels, it can be concluded that this promotes learners' feelings of capability. False feelings of incompetence greatly interfere with one's capacity to take action and self-direct learning, and, consequently, appearing "stupid" can make someone an easy target (Mercer 2011:

435). However, when everyone is given space to progress in their own pace, this is less of an issue. Of course, students with learning disabilities should be made aware of their differences in learning styles and speed, as this can further help support their metacognitive capabilities (e.g. Mercer 2011, Miskala 2019). When students have a realistic image of their own skill level, this helps them understand their own agency, which then turn boosts learner autonomy (Scardamalia 2002, Mercer 2011, Teng 2018).

2.3.3 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a concept first introduced by Albert Bandura, a psychologist, back in the 1970s (Bandura 1977). Like learner autonomy and agency, it is also related to one's understanding of what one is capable of doing. While self-efficacy may perhaps be easier to describe as what it is not (Maddux 2012) rather than what it is due to its rather ubiquitous nature, just like the concepts discussed above, it is also about self-regulation and, ultimately, what one believes they can do and achieve through one's own actions. It is not the same as one's motivation to do something. As Maddux (2012) describes, it is simply one's cognitive assessment, sometimes more realistic, at times less realistic, of what one is capable of doing. It is about reflecting on one's abilities and making observations about them. Like with learner autonomy and agency, self-efficacy is also dynamic, and it is affected by both external and internal observations, such as previous experiences and success or failure, and one's emotional state. Just like people's emotions, one's feelings of self-efficacy can fluctuate. This simply reflects the cyclicality of the learning curve, which means that when learning foreign languages, for example, students sometimes get stuck in the figurative rut, and their learning process can be temporarily halted (Maddux 2012: 277-287).

Promoting self-efficacy in a foreign language classroom follows the same patterns as with autonomy and, in particular, agency. Like Maddux (2012) states, self-efficacy is about noticing that one's actions have an impact in the surrounding environment. Therefore, a setting or a situation where one has power to make learning happen, promotes the

feelings of capability. In a classroom, this essentially translates into giving students chances where they get to independently solve problems and use the TL to do it. Today's movement towards a student-centered classroom is therefore one way to support the students' learning process and promote their feelings of capability as language learners. When the students know that their input matters, they will be more motivated to take charge. By taking the initiative, they can perhaps learn something new about their own abilities and gain more trust in them (ibid.).

To summarize all three concepts, it can be stated that making progress and being supported promote the feeling that one is capable of learning a FL. Positive beliefs of oneself as a language learner are what essentially enable the entire learning process. Therefore, learner autonomy, agency, and self-efficacy are both all parts of FLL and what make it possible. It is important to meet students at their level (Ellis 2009b: 241). Therefore, besides selecting tasks that are appropriate to the students' age and their skill level, differentiation is just as important. No matter the group, in order to help all students achieve their greatest potential, teachers would be required to understand that in every classroom, the students' levels in the TL vary, as well as, consequently, their feelings of self-efficacy, or how they see themselves as a FL learner and learner in general. One ready-made mold will not fit everybody, and not all students in the classroom learn best the same way, for example, through listening.

3   EFL TEACHING TODAY: ACTION-BASED APPROACHES

Back in the latter half of the 1970s, in the wake of new language learning theories flowing into the area of FLL, action-based learning emerged for the first time for linguists' evaluation along with the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT) as a concept (Spada 2007: 271; Savignon 1991: 263). In an era where form-focused FL instruction was mainstream and essentially considered the ideal, different theorists' suggestion that there is more to a language than grammar and spelling (and that instead of these teachers should consequently also focus on other aspects such as language use in communicative contexts) received curiosity and questioning as a response (Savignon 1991). Instead of knowing how to correctly form coherent, grammatically immaculate sentences, the focus should rather be on communicational competence and what one can actually do with the TL.

This shift in the paradigm, which took place in the 1970s, can be seen as somewhat revolutionary in the field of education (Jacobs & Farrell 2003: 3). As Jacobs and Farrell (2003: 3) and Jeon (2005: 87) point out, this has changed the nature of FL instruction from teacher-centered to student-centered as well as 'product-oriented' to 'process-oriented', as the process learners made was assessed, instead of focusing merely on what they achieved and what their final 'products' were. Incidentally, around 40 years ago, these winds of change started to give rise to the ideas of learner autonomy, initiative, and choice (Savignon 1991: 264), which were reflected in learning materials. This action-based learning and communicativeness of the tasks used in FL instruction put learners in the front seat, giving them more options and the chance to take charge instead of being showed what to do and how to do it.

These changes also brought to our attention how important it is to understand languages not only as linguistic systems, but also as means for communication: languages are both part of and the reason for social interaction, which is why it is important to understand

this fundamental side of it (Jeon 2005: 87-88). Today, documents like the NCC (POPS 2014) and its amendment (VOPS 2019) echo the message that was brought to the attention of a wider audience: communication may well be the most important part of linguistic competence, and practicing it requires varied communicative activities and materials that were first discussed when CLT started to capture people's attention.

In the Finnish context, the most recent changes within action-based FL education has already taken place. As 7-year-olds all over the country are now, at the latest, getting acquainted with their first foreign language, which for most of them is English (SUKOL 2016), instruction should both succeed in being a comprehensive introduction to the basics of the TL as well as the first step towards establishing a courage and readiness to use the linguistic resources that students have even as beginners (VOPS 2019: 25-30). Based on the NCC and its amendment, this can be best achieved through increasing action-based learning and conversational instruction (POPS 2014, VOPS 2019). While teaching for 7-year-olds should also be varied and offer enough challenges, at the same time, it should be engaging and leave room for their own active participation and output, or agency, which is one of the main principles in action-based teaching (Ellis, 2009b: 223).

Below, I will further explore and compare TBLT and other action-based and communicative approaches that function as alternatives for action-based FL teaching, evaluate their relevance in the context of ELL and reflect on the use of these methods in the ELL classroom. In the present study, the terms *task* and *activity* are used interchangeably to refer to communicational and action-based activities, whereas the term *exercise* refers to a more traditional, often more form-focused classroom assignment generally found in textbooks or distributed in the form of handouts.

3.1   Exploring action-based approaches

Presently, there are several action-based and communicational approaches that were originally derived from CLT, which ignited the paradigm shift in FL teaching (Shabani &

Ghasemi 2014: 1714). Of these, TBLT is perhaps one of the most versatile approach to action-based FL teaching, as it combines principles from CLT and a variety of other methods that came after it, such as Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT), sometimes also called Content-Based Instruction (CBI), which focuses more on content (Shabani & Ghasemi 2014). Norris (2009: 580) also argues that TBLT fixes the shortcomings of CLT, which, in his opinion has limitations due to the inclination to focus too much on aspects like grammatical accuracy and fluency. According to him, TBLT can offer learners more practice in other areas of linguistic competence, and not solely communication. Despite this criticism and while communicative approaches overlap each other to an extent, Norris (2009) implies that the aspect of the TL that different approaches focus on varies. Therefore, if following strictly just one approach in a classroom, this obviously affects how instruction and lessons are planned, how individual tasks are chosen, and what skills or areas of competence are emphasized. The ideologies of methods like CLT, TBLT and CBLT are in line with the goals and descriptions in the NCC, which makes them, or at least a combination of them, a good option for classroom use.

The main units in TBLT are tasks, which offer an alternative to what used to be more traditional classroom activities, generally referred to as exercises. A task, or several tasks, is basically what a task-based foreign language lesson is built around. The essence of a task, while difficult to define, has seen attempts to be captured and described by different theorists such as Long, Lee, Prabhu, and Skehan (Ellis 2003: 4-5). All have worded their explanations differently, but the basic idea of each description is essentially the same. CLT and CBLT have the same fundamental idea of getting 'hands-on' in the classroom, with their focuses being on developing *communicative competence*, which refers to a speaker's ability to use a language appropriately and effectively (Shabani & Ghasemi 2014: 1714; Jeon 2005: 88), or information, respectively.

Rather than trying to conceptualize a term that has to do with hands-on learning, it can be noted that tasks can also be distinguished from more traditional classroom exercises with the help of four criteria (Ellis 2009b: 223), which a task should meet in order to be

regarded as a task-based activity. Firstly, the main concern of a task should mainly be meaning in the TL: the meanings of words and how they are used in practice. Secondly, the task itself should be built around a problem that needs to be solved, also referred to as the gap of the task. For this gap, which is often related to or resembles a real-life problem, to be filled, students need to communicate or somehow else to use the TL in order to solve the task at hand, depending on whether they are working in a group or independently. Thirdly, tasks support agency, as students are encouraged to take charge and trust that their language skills carry them through the task to its completion, which is the last criterion. Fourthly, that is, working with a task, students should be aware of an end goal which they will need to achieve and work toward.

To further explain what a task is in any of the three approaches, a synthesis can be made that they are designed to activate students' cognitive processes, include authentic content and connections to situations one could encounter outside the FL classroom, practice one or more language skill and have a clear goal. Authenticity is an important aspect in all the three communicative or action-based approaches, CLT, TBLT, and CBLT. Generally speaking, tasks can be either unfocused or focused, with an emphasis either on communication and chance of using the TL, or they can use communicativeness as a way of practicing a "specific linguistic feature", as stated by Ellis (2009: 223). Ellis (2009: 221-243) also distinguishes between input- and output-prompting tasks, depending on whether the task requires students to focus on linguistic input, such as an excerpt or a video, or them to use the language themselves (output). Based on his and Duran and Ramaut's (2006: 47-75) descriptions, an example task in an action-based FL classroom could be one where the students are given a topic area and a related problem with real-life relevance. Some tasks may include elements of roleplay, such as cashier and customer; students could work in pairs or small groups where one of them is a shopkeeper and the rest are customers who are given shopping lists for the items that they need to buy. Depending on the approach used, aspects such as communicative competence or the content can be the main focus of the task according to Shabani & Ghasemi (2014) and Jeon (2005: 88). They state that CLT puts emphasis on practicing the

readiness to convey a message and bring the focus on information, such as what words and phrases students learn from the task and what they know about a certain topic.

Another aspect that the different action-based approaches to FL instruction have in common is the aim to make lessons and their content, such as the topics covered and the materials used, as authentic as possible (Ellis 2009b, Maina 2004). The ability to survive with the TL in real-world-like situations directs the choice of activities that lessons are built around, and like Norris (2009: 578) states, "tangible learning outcomes" which show "what learners are able to do with the language" are quintessential. Authenticity supports the idea of making instruction more action-based, and the other way round, as like stated in the amendment of the NCC (VOPS 2019: 25-30), ELL instruction in Finland includes the use of activities like games, songs, and drama, which enables role-play tasks resembling real life situations.

The nature of communicative and action-based approaches to FL teaching can be summarized by stating that they essentially move FLL from theory to practice. This trend started with the introduction of CLT, and different other approaches derived from it have evolved. As Long (2000, 2015: 8) discusses, perhaps one of the greater aspects and gifts to the world of FL teaching that TBLT, for instance, brings, is the fine combination of "implicit and explicit learning" that it offers, which is reflected in the way that tasks are planned. He also notes that the approach is learner-centered, as TBLT features student friendly contents and methods that are easy for the teacher to modify to better fit individual learners' needs and skill levels. Finally, as is quite evident, he lists practicality and authenticity as two of the core strengths of TBLT and other action-based and communicative approaches (Long 2005: 13-14). CBLT, on the other hand, has been praised as a method that facilitates a feeling of autonomy in students, helping them be active and self-regulate their own learning process (Stryker & Leaver 1997: 285-286), which would be important for younger learners to experience as well.

3.2   Action-based learning in ELL classrooms

Action-based learning and communicational aspects in ELT can take several forms. Endless possibilities within ELT can inspire teachers to design novel activities which make lessons interesting for both them and the students. Young learners are an auspicious group to implement learning through play and experimenting with different approaches, methods, and activities, for as Hummel (2014: 19) and Saville-Troike and Barto (2017: 88) discuss, children are more open as learners than teens and adults. They are often very acceptive of different and unique task types and will not question the pedagogy behind an activity if it resembles more play than work.

In some instances, action-based language teaching can be executed in a more ambitious, even visionary way. Since one of its cornerstones is student-centeredness, there are models that take this aspect of action-based learning to a new level. Concepts called role reversal (Barnes 2012) and flipped learning (Bergmann & Sams 2014) are recent, rather pioneering models for arranging teaching and ensuring that students are in the forefront, taking charge and responsibility for their own learning process. Both concepts are based on a similar idea: students are first expected to explore and familiarize themselves with a new topic, therefore in a way assuming the role of the teacher. This can be seen to offer students with great opportunities to strengthen their autonomy as learners, as well as their agency and self-efficacy. At the same time, the teacher shifts into the role of a guide, a facilitator, who helps students with grasping new themes, concepts, and their interconnectedness (Barnes 2012; Bergmann & Sams 2014). Both Barnes and Bergmann & Sam's ways of teaching are dependent on technology to a degree, as students are asked to, for instance, watch either pre-recorded lectures or look up information online. Even if the shift toward a more radically student-centered classrooms like these is slower, the role and importance of technology is likely to increase in action-based teaching as time goes on.

All in all, action-based ELT offers students opportunities for independent language use and practice, and hence, it supports their sense of agency. As Newman (1995: 1, cited in Maina 2004: 1) discusses, the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction is making the classroom an environment where learners are "actively constructing meaning, grounded in students' experiences in contrast with the student simply absorbing and producing knowledge transmitted from subject matters". In-task, teachers do not simply give students the right answer. Instead, they are helping them to find the answer to a question, therefore helping them strengthen their autonomy and self-efficacy, the notion that they are capable of managing to complete a task on their own. Activities characteristic to ELL encourage the use of the target language, and students are given the opportunity to step in and lead activities, for example, when quizzing colors from their peers, which promotes and supports social learning (Ahearn 2001). Students need to take initiative in order to learn, and so encouraging active participation is crucial (Teng 2018).

3.3   Rationale: Using action-based approaches in ELL classrooms

Several theorists, such as Beloglovsky and Daly (2015: 96) and Shintani (2016) have explained from different perspectives why teaching younger language learners by using action-based activities would be worth considering and utilizing in the classroom. Furthermore, conclusions from theorists in psychology and linguistics alike, like Piaget and Krashen, support the idea of learning by doing. What comes to the contributions of psychology, research related to FLL has been conducted especially within the fields of developmental and cognitive psychology (see e.g. Beloglovsky & Daly 2015; Granena & Long 2013). Saville-Troike and Barto (2017: 88), for instance, have compared young learners to their older peers. They concluded that what is essential about the differences between the two age groups is that children process and understand language in non-analytical, concrete terms as opposed to a more matured brain, endowed with analytic ability to a greater extent. This is in line with that Piaget, for instance, has theorized (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 10-13, 90-97, Gillibrand et al. 2011: 37). This means that children's metalinguistic awareness, the notion that language is essentially a tool, has not

yet developed to a point where they would find it easier to learn languages by adopting its grammatical rules. Instead, they instinctively prefer learning through exploring the concrete reality around them, like Hummell, (2014: 19) and Lightbown and Spada (2013: 156) have discussed. Children also, generally speaking, have less reserved and inhibited attitudes when it comes to experimenting with different ways and methods of teaching. In comparison, adults tend to have a rigid image of how learning should happen after years of experience in traditional language learning at school or other institutions and may therefor think of task-based or communicative tasks more as play than actual learning (Saville-Troike & Barto 2017: 88; Lightbown & Spada 2013: 156).

Further reasoning for choosing teaching materials, methods, and tasks that allow language acquisition to happen more spontaneously, through play in many instances, can also be found in the field of developmental psychology. As previously discussed (see Section 2.1.1), this branch of psychology and its theories have several implications for education (Webb 1980). According to Piaget (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 10-13, 90-97 and Gillibrand et al. 2011: 37-39) and his theory of cognitive development, the cognitive abilities and processing of first graders, who, in Finnish schools are generally 6-7-year-olds, are still defined in concrete rather than abstract and analytical terms. For this reason, Beloglovsky and Daly (2015: 96), among others, suggest utilizing tasks that facilitate kinesthetic learning, or in other words, learning by doing.

However, Norris (2009: 590) and Duran and Ramaut (2006: 47) report that according to previous research, teachers report teaching young students as one of the reasons why they do not utilize action-based methodology in the classroom. This is because they think that young learners do not have the language skills needed for task-based instruction to work, as it is based on active language use and requires the learner to use language as a tool to solve a task. In the light of arguments and models of a number of linguists and theorists (see e.g. Ellis 2009a, 2009b), however, a point can be made to support and encourage the use of action-based teaching techniques in the early FL classroom. Children's natural inclination for learning by doing is a prime opportunity for

experimenting, especially when reading and writing skills cannot be and are not required, as is implicitly stated in the amendment of the NCC as well (VOPS 2019). While hands-on activities may be better suited for adults as well in some instances, children are often more open to experimental learning. Furthermore, as Ellis (2009: 241) suggests, for action-based instruction to serve its purpose and work well with learners whose linguistic knowledge is still rather rudimental, it should simply be made sure that the tasks chosen meet the proficiency level of the students in question.

While education is a field among others following the trends of the rest of the world, the swift from form-focused teaching to task-based activities and authentic learning with real life relevance seems justifiable based on the reasoning in the latest NCC (POPS 2014) and its amendment (VOPS 2019). The structural changes in curriculums and syllabuses have not happened on a whim, but rather due to an actual need to update language education and its methodology. Whereas foreign language teaching used to focus on what one might even call nitpicking, meaning detecting and correcting errors in grammar, today a better sense of balance prevails (Kramsch, 2002: 59-61). In some ways, like Hummel (2014: 115) notes, favoring grammar in instruction in the past led to neglecting other aspects of language, and consequently areas such as oral skills and competence in communication did not get as much attention. Action-based and communicative teaching has been touted as something that helped rectify the situation (Ellis, 2009: 242). Nowadays, the divide between the generations can be seen quite readily: Speaking skills were not a current topic in language education a few decades ago, whereas younger, educated people and especially those still at school are getting considerably more practice for their practical skills in foreign languages (Savignon 1991), which positively affects their communicative competence and the readiness to produce spoken English as well as other FLs.

4 EARLY FL EDUCATION IN FINLAND

Language teaching, like everything else in schools, should follow its time and the needs of the surrounding society. When planning their lessons and individual tasks, it would be useful for teachers to ask themselves what their students should know and be able to do with a certain language within the framework provided by the NCC, which outlines the objectives for each grade in each subject. In Finland, matters related to education planning are distributed to authorities and professionals within the field of education, but the decrees formulated by the Ministry of Culture and Education as well as the Finnish National Agency for Education need to be followed by teachers and other qualified personnel, as abided by the Finnish law (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019c, Ministry Education and Culture 1998). In this Chapter, I will explain the current state of early FL education as well as the purposes of both FL and early FL education in Finland.

4.1 Current state of early FL education in Finland

Language education is perhaps more closely tied to language politics and societal needs than one think at first. Finland is an example of a country it is a statistical fact that fewer students choose to start studying or keep studying optional foreign languages (Skinnari & Sjöberg 2018: 29, SUKOL 2016). This almost inevitably paints a picture of a future where Finland is lagging behind what comes to linguistic resources compared to other countries in the multilingual European Union, despite the fact that in Finland, it is compulsory for all students to study at least two languages, Finnish and Swedish, from grade 1 until grade 9, when they leave compulsory school at age 15 or 16. It can be concluded that in the future, these decaying linguistic resources can adversely affect Finland's competitiveness in global markets, politics, and international relations (Pyykkö 2017). While it can be argued that globalization is already a cliché at this point, it is still a very

real phenomenon. The globalized world is prompting everyone from political leaders to teachers and students, the future leaders and teachers, to be prepared to work in a world that is multicultural and multilingual. As Pyykkö (2017) states, the declining interest towards foreign language study in Finland is a problem, and also one of the reasons to start language instruction earlier in Finnish compulsory schools.

According to the Ministry of Culture and Education (2018), further reasoning for starting FL education earlier is that the Finnish educational system now better acknowledges the critical period for language learning and the benefits of ELL, which, in theory may suggest a stronger foundation and skills in the TL (see Section 2.1.2). ELL is also expected to decrease inequality based in the regional and socio-economic differences and variables in how language education is arranged in different municipalities and regions, as schools in certain areas have had the benefit of more funding and therefore also the opportunity of offering a greater number of foreign languages for students to choose from, as well as FL education that started earlier (Ministry of Culture and Education 2018; Pyykkö 2017).

A point can also be made about teaching languages in order to educate the youth about different cultural practices and societies, as stated in the NCC (POPS 2014). The document reflects the idea that foreign language skills also enable students to be able to face the challenges of the globalized world, including the European Union that Finland is part of, where staying in the comfort and safety of the cocoon that is one's native language is not quite enough. If nothing else, mastering several languages opens new doors of opportunities both figuratively and quite literally later in one's studies and the working life (the European Commission 2020).

4.2   The National Core Curriculum and ELT

The Finnish National Agency for Education is the party responsible for formulating the learning objectives and desired outcomes as well as reforming the principles and ideals that should be taken into account when planning instruction in schools nationwide. For

compulsory schools, these goals and guidelines are outlined in a document called the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (NCC).

As discussed previously in Chapter 1, it is important for schools to follow their time and for language instruction, among others, to meet the requirements of the globalized society. To keep track of the advancement and new needs and challenges, the Finnish National Agency for Education reforms the NCC every ten years, either by reforming the entire curricula or by updating some parts of the existing curricula (Vitikka & Rissanen 2019). When it comes to foreign language education and its commencing in spring 2020 at the latest, the Finnish National Agency for Education published an amendment to a Section in the NCC describing the instruction in the first foreign language in the fall of 2019 in the first and second grade (VOPS 2019), and basically describe the nature of ELL as well as outline its objectives.

In the amendment of the NCC (VOPS 2019: 25-30), several goals toward early EFL teaching are presented. The most recent curriculum puts the idea of learning by doing in any subject as well as lifelong learning on a pedestal, and the same trend is reflected in Chapter 13 of its amendment. The Chapter discusses ELT (VOPS 2019: 25-30), and it is explicitly stated there that in early FL instruction, reading or writing are not required skills, as these are often still in progress even in the students' first language at the age of 7. Therefore, tasks where the ability to read and write are requirements, are mostly out of question in classroom instruction, which heavily leans on other mediums and particularly the world of experiences as a consequence. For the same reason, early FL instruction is described as 'action-based' (VOPS 2019: 25). This is supported by the prevailing, current understanding of children's cognitive development, as discussed by Piaget among others. Young learners' developing writing and reading skills are not the only reason for approaching languages through more concrete stimuli, for this notion is also matched by learning and development theories (see e.g. Beloglovsky & Daly 2015, Gillibrand et al. 2011). To help teachers to be better prepared for teaching English or another foreign language to young learners, ELT teachers had the opportunity to attend

special training sessions in the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020 (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019a).

To describe the nature of early foreign language instruction stated in the amendment of the NCC further, an observation can be made that one conscious effort toward building students' confidence to use the TL is exposing them to it from the very beginning (VOPS 2019: 25-30). The doors to the world of the foreign language, which in most cases for Finnish 7-year-olds is English (SUKOL 2016), are opened with an aim to piquing the students' interest toward the TL and the culture or cultures related to it (VOPS 2019: 25). Furthermore, action-based learning and communicativeness are evidently key words in the document. They are not however, only depicted as an objective, but rather as approaches of teaching in the amendment of the NCC. Combined with concepts like authenticity and agency, which are not explicitly mentioned yet clearly represented in the descriptions, it is mentioned that suitable tasks and techniques are engaging and meet the students' interests (VOPS 2019: 25-30). With links to real life and, for instance, the students' past time activities, authentic content that can be molded to fit a variety of teaching methods can be used to inspire and encourage learners to use the TL from the very beginning (Maina 2004). According to previous research and studies, as Maina (2004: 1) states, authentic materials and student-centered tasks have been proven to engage students in more active modes of learning. Consequently, authenticity and hands-on tasks have been reported to promote agency (Maina 2004: 2). Suitable example tasks mentioned in the amendment of the NCC include songs, games, stories, pictures, and drama (VOPS 2019: 28).

It is also worth mentioning that much like the rest of the subjects, foreign languages, such as English, are no longer seen as concepts separate from the real world in the NCC and its amendment (POPS 2014, VOPS 2019). In other words, in the documents, there is an attempt to blur lines between school subjects, making learning more multidisciplinary and therefore authentic, as subjects do not exist as separate entities outside classrooms (POPS 2014). To illustrate, solving a real-world problem can require knowledge in

English, Mathematics and Physics. Promoting the idea of interdisciplinary learning is related to action-based and authentic learning, as language classrooms are not students' only learning environments: It is explicitly stated in the amendment of the NCC (VOPS 2019: 29) that both school and its surrounding areas are noteworthy environments for learning, which has been proven through several studies focusing on informal learning (see e.g. Ala-Kyyny 2012, Eskelinen 2019, Sylvén & Sundqvist 2012). Therefore, teachers are encouraged to leave the classroom or let their students leave it whenever possible. This way, students can be made (more) conscious of the multiculturalism and multilingualism that are present all around and not just in the EFL and other FL classrooms. This awareness supposedly contributes to the learning that continues outside school hours when students are with their parents or other guardians and friends, therefore supporting informal and incidental learning. It is evident from the descriptions in the amendment of the NCC (VOPS 2019: 25-30) that through the engagement with their immediate surroundings, teachers have an opportunity to create concrete learning experiences for their students, therefore supporting the learning process of 7-year-olds, which is characterized by interaction with the surrounding world. Further, transcending the traditional notion of a learning environment supports the need for variety in tasks and young learners' inclination to learn by experiencing and making sense of the world around them.

In sum, it can be stated that teaching has indeed become more task-based on the descriptions in the NCC (POPS 2014) and its amendment (2019), and in this framework, the actual instruction implemented in classrooms can consist of novel ideas for activities. It can be pointed out, though, that no language instruction, no matter how early language education begins or how extraordinary teachers' ideas for new and exciting tasks are, does automatically make language instruction adequate or guarantee success in the TL. On the same token, language instruction that relies on explicitness and explaining rules, does not support "the natural processes involved in the internalization of grammatical form and syntactic rules [of a language]" (VanPatten 2002: 105-109). Instead, to internalize the understanding of the learned rules, meaningful use of language is needed.

Johnson (2008: 106-107) summarizes this discussion based on Krashen's distinction between *acquisition*, unconscious and incidental acquiring of a language, which happens when acquiring one's L1, and *learning*, a conscious effort to acquire a language, as often seen in schools. He states that language education which solely leans on increasing students' procedural knowledge about language, emphasizing that they learn how to use the language, and neglects the declarative side of it, the part where they learn about a language and its rules, is not balanced and does not provide students with an all-round understanding of the nature of the TL.

4.3   ELT versus forms of bilingual education in Finland

Different forms of bilingual education are one way to start acquainting children with foreign languages, even before they go to school. By comparing ELT to bilingual education, it is possible to put ELT in a wider societal perspective by examining its background as well as the development and progression of bilingual instruction in Finland.

Bergroth (2016: 14) notes that bilingual education has several names and therefore functions as an umbrella term to several forms of education arranged in more than just one language. Bilingual education, which means essentially teaching the content of a school subject primarily or at least partially through a TL, can be arranged in several different ways, as it can be called, for instance, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), content-based instruction (CBI), or language immersion. The reason why these concepts seem to lack boundaries and clear distinctions is, according to her, that univocal definitions of bilingual education do really not exist. Especially the terms 'bilingual education' and 'immersion education' seem to be used quite synonymously due to both describing instruction that mostly or partly happens in a SL.

Using a foreign language when teaching young learners is by no means a new invention in the Finnish context. The planning and arranging of bilingual education have been

rather scattered in the recent past without any official, uniform guidelines about how to organize education in more than just one language. Despite the fact that bilingual education has been offered in school since 1991 (Peltoniemi et al. 2018: 18), it has only fairly recently gained a legitimate status in Finland, when it was finally recognized by Finnish officials in the NCC in 2004. It should be a noted, however, that there are no conclusive or official numbers revealing how widespread the practice was in the 1990s, only estimates (ibid.). Nearly a decade later, in 2012, the government's decision to "promote positive attitudes" toward other languages finally led to a two-year path, during which nationwide goals for bilingual education were finally officially set and defined (Bergroth 2016: 6, 14).

Much like with other bilingual education models, CLIL instruction is also about teaching contents of school subjects using a TL as one language of the instruction, students' L1 being the other (Nikula & Mård-Miettinen 2014: 4). In such settings, the TL is mainly a means for instruction: While students learn compulsory content in a number of subjects, they also acquire the language of instruction incidentally to a certain degree, as more of a byproduct, although some terminology or other vocabulary items needs to be explicitly introduced or discussed either in the TL or with the help of the students' L1 (Nikula 2015). Overall, students participating in bilingual education learn to master the TL in different contexts and related to a variety of subjects from terminology in Biology to explaining different phenomena in Physics. As they are exposed to the TL daily, they acquire vocabulary from the instruction they receive, when the TL is in authentic use. One might argue that since students in CLIL study school subjects in the TL, this is suggestive of a large vocabulary that they will acquire over the years (Nikula 2015). Still, like Nikula and Mård-Miettinen (2014: 14) point out in the light of previous studies, students who have participated in bilingual education still do not reach native speaker level lexicon. While they may otherwise be fluent in their spoken production, their vocabularies seem to be lacking especially when talking about themes that are not related to school.

While immersion students have been found to be more proficient in the TL than their peers who studied the language through traditional language instruction (Cummins and Swain 1986, cited in Nikula & Mård-Miettinen 2014: 8), a point can be made to argue that traditional FLL instruction has its place in classrooms. Previous studies have also revealed that students participating in CLIL education were advanced in their receptive skills when it comes to the TL, namely listening and reading comprehension, but compared to their peers who study the same language in traditional, monolingual classrooms, CLIL students did not outperform others when the two groups' accuracy in grammar and pronunciation was compared (for an overview, see Nikula & Mård-Miettinen 2014: 7). What this clearly reflects is the amount of practice CLIL and other students in bilingual education get, as well as the benefits of more regular exposure to the TL.

Even though bilingual education is rather all-encompassing what comes to the introduction and acquisition of a foreign language, traditional FL classroom instruction does not have to – and cannot – become as immersive. Bilingual education obviously strives to be and provide more than non-bilingual education, as different goals have been set for it compared to regular FL classroom instruction (Bergroth 2016: 14, 21). What could be adopted from different forms of bilingual education, such as CLIL, to regular classroom FL education, however, are ways to introduce a variety of topics and content matter to promote interdisciplinary learning, which is one of the main goals in the Finnish NCC (POPS 2014).

4.4 ELT versus FLT

By reviewing the NCC (POPS 2014) and its amendment (VOPS 2019) side by side, it can be concluded that ELL differs from FL instruction aimed for older students. Besides bilingual education, early FL instruction draws some inspiration from early childhood education, which has its own directive document, referred to as the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (NCC for ECEC, or VASU 2018).

Language education both in early childhood education (where it mostly revolves around children's native language, unless the kindergarten or preschool is based on immersion) and in the first grade are experience or phenomenon based, where waking children's curiosity toward languages is where it all begins. The methodology or approach in both documents is similar, and in a few words, it can be described as action-based, authentic, and communicational. In short, the instruction is designed to promote children's agency. Through drama, dance, and songs, learners practice their expression through musical and kinesthetic tasks, and curiosity and the joy of learning are strongly present.

As first graders, 7-year-olds are, by and large, learning how a student behaves and what is expected of them. In the NCC (POPS 2014: 98), the first and second grade are described as a transition period from kindergarten and preschool years to the world of older children. This explains why instruction in the first two grades follows objectives that are different from those in grades three to six (POPS 2014: 98-153, VOPS 2019). In the latest version of the NCC, it is even explicitly stated that this transition period exists, and that adopting the behavioral models that schools reinforce are essential, meaning, that the first two years of elementary school work as sort of a socialization process while students also attain educational goals set for their respective age group. Therefore, the nature of ELL is different than FL learning in later years.

In both directive documents (VOPS 2019: 25, VASU 2018: 40-42), it is stated that languages are tied to the surrounding environment, hence developing the childrens' readiness to observe linguistic stimuli around them. This brings a degree of authenticity to learning, as does the fact that the importance of culture is also emphasized. In the classroom, connections between teaching materials and real-world objects or phenomena can be made, or the materials used can be authentic and from the world outside the classroom. Getting to know the culture of English-speaking countries, for instance, can offer other interesting experiences for young learners while keeping also them interested in the language.

Besides the importance of offering children experiences in the TL, including becoming acquainted with the culture and offering them real-world connections exemplifying the use of languages in everyday environments, oral skills are emphasized in early language instruction, be it in early childhood education or elementary school. The ability to make use of an FL, or, in preschools, the children's native language, is important, and even rudimentary skills are celebrated. The development of children's linguistic identities, meaning what languages mean to them, is mentioned in both documents (VOPS 2019: 26, VASU 2018: 40-41), and helping learners understand that languages are essentially tools, means for communicating and interacting with others, seems to be crucial. Besides practicing oral skills, instruction on both levels also aims at piquing young learners' interest toward the written language, both reading and writing, even though it is stated that children at this age cannot be expected or required to read or write yet (VOPS 2019: 25, VASU 2018: 42).

The difference in the instruction in the first grade compared to early childhood education is that elementary instruction is more reflective and aims at developing students' linguistic awareness further on different levels. For this, the NCC for Basic Education states clear goals that FL education should aim at attaining (VOPS 2019: 26-28). While the word 'analytical' is hardly suitable for describing the nature of FL instruction in the first grade, it is noticeably more structured and encourages students to reflect on the TL, their skills and relationship to the language. Further, children are recognized as active learners, actors, who need to exercise their agency over their own learning process. In other words, or those of Piaget, Beloglovsky and Daly, children are essentially the "'protagonists' of their own learning", who, through exploration and direct engagement, make sense of the world around them (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 12-13).

4.5   Previous research on ELL and EFL instruction in Finland

In the Finnish context, previous research related to ELL and early SL education has revolved around immersion education, providing both studies on the use of Finnish, Swedish, and English (see e.g. Aalto et al. 2009, Nikula & Mård-Miettinen 2014, Jakonen et al. 2018, and Savijärvi 2016) and reports on the status and functions of immersion education (see e.g. Huhta & Leontjev 2019 and Sjöberg et al. 2018). Regarding the more traditional classroom setting, it should be noted that earlier FL education has become a topic of interest nationwide after the recent reform of the curriculum for basic education. Therefore, a foundation for research that is strictly related to early EFL education, rather than immersion or any other form of bilingual education, has been lacking. Granted, some schools in Finland have been providing FL lessons before the third grade until the reform (Peltoniemi et al. 2018: 18-19), but since the representation of ELL has been rather scarce until recently and especially until the commencement of spring semester 2020, the interest toward the topic has increased only over the past years. Previous research on earlier ELL in Finnish compulsory schools, while generally almost nonexistent, has so far focused on covering teachers' point of view and their competence and role in the classroom (Hallila 2018), and the same goes for CLIL education (Eskelinen and Tuupanen 2018). Action-based teaching methods have recently been researched (see e.g. Mönkkönen 2019), although not a great extent. As mentioned by those who have conducted ELL previously (e.g. Hallila 2018; Mönkkönen 2019), further research on the topic is needed. This seems to be true especially what comes to the students' point of view. Finnish research on early EFL in classrooms is, however, still in its beginnings in general, so there are several areas that are yet to be examined.

5   THE PRESENT STUDY

In this Chapter, I will introduce the present study in Section 5.1 by presenting its aims and the research questions to which it is attempting to find answers. Further, I will discuss the data collection process and the methods used for data collection and analyzing the findings in Sections 5.2 and 5.3. In Chapter 5.2., I will also explain the relevance of another project at the University of Jyväskylä with which the present study is in part associated.

5.1.   Aims and research questions

The focus of the present study is to especially consider the extent to which action-based learning is present in ELL and what its role seems to be in FLL. The study aims at examining how English is presently taught as a foreign language to 7-year-old compulsory school children in Finland. These aspects will be studied with reference to the 2019 amendment to the NCC to compare how, through the activities and materials being used, the early EFL lessons follow the goals and suggestions outlined in the directive document.

The research questions which the study will focus on covering are as follows:

1. How does action-based learning show in Finnish early EFL classrooms?
   1.1. What kinds of tasks and activities are used to attain the goals stated in the amendment of the latest NCC?
   1.2. How do the teacher and different tasks used support student agency, and what kinds of opportunities for language use and practice do they provide?
2. Could existing tasks or activities possibly be improved, and if so, how?

The present study simply aims at providing examples of how foreign language education is presently arranged in Finland and what are some of the basic components of ELL and the activities and task types that it entails. One of the goals is also to further examine action-based learning in EFL education and examine the extent to which it is present in the classroom and how it helps young learners to learn the TL, in this case, English, and supports their agency or the notion they have of themselves as foreign language learners.

5.2. Collecting the data

In this section, I will explain how the data were collected. In Section 5.2.1, I will introduce a University of Jyväskylä project, with which the present study is associated. After that, in Section 5.2.2, I will introduce observation as a qualitative data collection method and provide reasons for choosing it for this study.

5.2.1. The IKI project

The present study was conducted in association with the IKI project (shortened from the Finnish words, *Innovatiivisen Kielenoppimisen Kompassi,* which translates into "map of and compass for innovative language education" in English), which is a University of Jyväskylä project, funded by the Ministry of Culture and Education. It is focused on discovering the different, inventive methods that are used, for example, in early foreign language instruction. Research extends beyond early childhood education, all the way until the end of primary and secondary education even among older learners. Its ultimate aim is to help foreign language teachers and other professionals working in the field of Education to improve and support their work and "pedagogical practices" (University of Jyväskylä 2020).

The present study is relevant to the project because it yields data that can help educators detect novel ways of teaching English in the context of ELL or, at least, recognize the

methods and principles that seem to be present in a novel situation within FL instruction, namely, early FL instruction in English to 7-year-old elementary school students.

Conducting research in association with the project, the process of obtaining permits for classroom observing was relatively easy. For the project's purposes, IKI already had permissions for conducting research in certain cities and regions, which affected my decision-making process about where to collect data. I decided to stick to the regions where IKI was already recognized as a project, and contact schools in these areas. The teachers who agreed to participate in the study with their groups knew both about the present study and its aims, as well as the goals and purpose of the IKI project.

The data for this study were collected through observing ELL instruction. Preparing for observing, I had my hypotheses of what ELL would most likely look like. After having read the amendment of the NCC, articles on ELL and having ELL lessons during my teaching practica before, I already had a foundation or a basic understanding of what the instruction comprises. To support my notetaking, I had written down questions to help me focus on the most important aspects of each lesson, which I had defined largely based on my research questions. I made sure to carefully describe different activities featured during the lessons. At times, where applicable, I had also left room for teachers' or students' comments. Essentially, on my laptop, I had an electronic spreadsheet where I had questions to which I was trying to find answers but where I could also collect observations more freely if need be and write down additional points. I did not ask teachers any formal interview questions but decided to write down anything useful they might freely mention before or after class, for instance, about the challenges of ELL. To make sure that my spreadsheet would be as useful and detailed as possible, I piloted my research by gathering observations while watching a recording made in an ELL class. This recording was provided to me by IKI.

The data were collected in two elementary schools, in Central Finland in Central Ostrobothnia, between November 2019 and February 2020 through observing early

English as a foreign language classes for first graders. In total, four teachers' teaching was being observed, and the data consist of five different English classes, the duration of which ranged from 39 to 45 minutes depending on the school. As mentioned above, observations were written down as fieldnotes during said classes using a laptop. Due to ethical considerations, I told the participating teachers what I would be doing. I explained that I would document classroom activity by writing down my observations on my laptop and that I would keep the data completely anonymous to ensure that individual students, teachers, or the schools in question from could not be identified based on the descriptions. Despite the data being anonymous, I kept it in a safe, untitled folder.

The four teachers whose lessons were being observed had different backgrounds when it comes to experience or years in education, not to mention teaching young language learners. Two of the teachers were taking their first steps in their careers, while the third teacher was an experienced EFL teacher, but had just started teaching EFL to first graders. The fourth teacher, on the other hand, was the most experienced with young learners, as the school they worked in had had a rather long tradition in providing ELL to their students even before the decision to commence EFL instruction in the first grade.

Besides teachers, students were also being observed. The groups did not differ when it came to the number of students in each of them, for each group's size was 10 students. However, a few students were absent on three of the five days, so there were instances where the size of one group could be as few as 8 students.

The data were later analyzed through content analysis. In the following Section, I will discuss theoretical considerations behind qualitative data collection and analysis methods and explain and motivate these choices for handling the data.

5.2.2. Observation as a qualitative data collection method

This Chapter will discuss observational research as a method and offer a rationale for my decision to choose to collect data for the purposes of this particular study and why matching the two makes sense.

Observing is one of the many ways to conduct qualitative research (Hirsjärvi et al. 2000: 162). It can come in especially handy in studies where there is a need to analyze and report on data that is somehow multifaceted and consists of several different elements, and therefore cannot be handled in quantitative measures (Angrosino 2007, LeCompte et al. 2010: 41). The extent to which numbers can describe and explain data can be somewhat limited. While it can be argued that to a point, quantitative research can be seen as a more objective way of conducting research due to leaving less room for interpretation, it has its limitations. Observing, on the other hand, is an example of an ethnographic method for collecting data, as Angrosino 2007 and LeCompte et al. (2010: 41) state, noting that observation is fit for working in a number of social settings and institutions, such as schools, and is a useful tool for examining interaction, which is also usually complex and occurs on multiple levels.

Being a qualitative method, observing can, in some ways, offer more detailed data than its quantitative counterparts, such as collecting data by using questionnaires. Patton (2002: 49) discusses an example case of Edna Shapiro who, back in 1973, was focused on studying young students' behavior in classrooms. In her experience, by going into the field, she got the chance to see more than quantitative methods could have revealed to her in this case. It can be therefore argued that sometimes witnessing phenomena with one's own eyes is a viable option for conducting research. This is especially the case with my study, where language learning is seen as a socially constructed process, and where observing interactions in the classroom, both between the teacher and students, students among themselves, and students with the materials and tasks provided, is an important

part of coming to understand how ELL is conducted in Finnish elementary schools and what kinds of aspects it entails.

Observational research can be approached from a few different perspectives. Whereas Patton (2002: 265-267) uses terms onlooker and participant to measure observer involvement, Angrosino (2007: 54-56) categorizes these differences by using the labels complete observer, observer-as-participant, participant-as-observer, and complete participant, which basically refers to the observer going undercover to collect their data. In this study, I engaged in the role of an onlooker or a complete observer, where, ideally, the observer is "neither seen nor noticed" (Angrosino 2007: 54) and therefore will not change the behavior of those being observed. This is what happens in an ideal situation. If successful, this can be argued to increase objectivity, but at the same time being less integrated into the environment, situation or social setting that is under scrutiny can provide less insight. This is because it is presumably more difficult to empathize with the situation at hand or with the people in it, compared to, for example, a situation where the observer takes role as a participant to some degree. What is also problematic about trying to conduct research as a complete observer, however, is that being completely unnoticed may not necessarily be possible. When I sat at the back of the classrooms, for example, students did notice me, even though they did not necessarily think much of my presence. The teachers were, of course, also aware of the fact that they were being observed, which makes it difficult not to question whether I genuinely did not affect their behavior in any way.

Like Angrosino (2007), Patton (2002: 269) also discusses the difference between overt and covert observations. He notes that in order to gather more reliable information, one would rely on covert observation so that the people being observed do not, in fact, know that they are being observed. While it is a good idea, per se, to make sure one draws as little attention to oneself as possible at the study site, especially in a classroom full of young students who get easily distracted by a visitor, this inevitably raises certain ethical considerations about people's privacy. As Angrosino (2007) and Patton (2002) note,

collecting data about people without their consent can, in some situations, be unethical. In any case, anonymity should always be guaranteed to the greatest extent possible, and one should always have obtained permission to conduct research, for example, in institutions like schools (Angrosino 2007: 6). Simply put, disclosing sensitive and personal information violates ethical research practices.

What comes to the skills of the observer, they are obviously a subjective human being with individual characteristics and personality traits affecting their ability to take notes without bringing their own, personal bias into the picture. To illustrate, one's own life experiences affect the way everyone understands and interprets what they see (Patton 2000: 260). Furthermore, some are more tuned into details, while others see the bigger picture and patterns more readily. Since previous experiences, worldview, and values are what make people who they are, they cannot be fully switched off. Considering one's strengths, weaknesses, and previous knowledge on the topic and the study site is a good idea before going to the field. It is a fact that my previous knowledge and experiences of teaching English affected my mindset and expectations to a certain point. Having studied the theoretical side of ELT and what it would look like in a classroom, had painted a picture, a hypothesis, of what I was personally expecting to see in the field. I was trying to minimize the effects of my own thoughts and bias by going to the lessons prepared. I will discuss this in greater detail below.

As observational research is completely dependent on the observer, considering reliability and validity can raise concerns. Without reliability or validity, any study and findings are invalid and, essentially, meaningless (Angrosino 2007: 58-59). It is evident that working in the field and collecting data is considerably more personal than analyzing numbers or hard facts (Patton 2002: 47), and in some ways, more complex as well, as a lot can happen in the time span of just one minute. In the present study, having research questions which I was trying to answer, naturally steered focus to certain patterns and behaviors and in some ways, standardized the way I collected data. I kept focusing on similar situations and activities and paying attention to certain aspects of instruction.

Further, ways to deal with issues regarding validity include being joined by one or more other observers to decrease the chance of validating one's own biased conclusions and judgements and describing the data in a vivid, yet cohesive and conceivable manner. Personally, because I was alone in the field and could not turn to a colleague for a different point of view, I tried to minimize the risk of collecting data haphazardly and avoid personal biases by creating the spreadsheet, which I mentioned earlier, and questions, which helped me adjust my focus while observing.

Despite preparation, it is still possible for an observer to miss something, as discussed previously. People have limited, and individually varied, capacity when it comes to focusing on several things at a given moment (Patton 2002: 47). When observing, the problem is that while taking notes and documenting an important event in a classroom, for instance, the observer is unfortunately quite likely to miss something else. Another potential problem related to this, as Patton (2002: 227) points out, is that people only see what they expect or want to see. He also adds that the duration of observation is crucial in terms of data collecting, since observing more and for longer periods of time would yield more accurate information, as the observer gets used to shifting their focus. Then again, it can be argued that most people cannot hold their focus for extended periods of time, so sometimes less can be more when it comes to the length of one observation session. In my own experience, having prior experiences in observing classroom activities and interaction, mostly thanks to teacher training, made collecting data easier. Having prepared a spreadsheet with questions to which I was specifically trying to find answer also helped.

On the same token, an observer would benefit from having a good memory and effective note-taking skills and the ability to filter distractions and focus on what is relevant (Angrosino 2007: 57), and whether I had had enough prior practice to do this despite not being a complete beginner at observing, can be questioned. While it is still possible to notice several things at once, the human working memory would have to outdo itself in order for the observer to remember everything seen and heard while taking notes.

Writing down observations can easily interfere with the trials to keep occurrences in mind, and at the same time, while focused on writing, one can easily miss more pieces of action. An observer also needs to know how to write descriptively in order to take accurate notes (Patton 2002: 260) and be able to discriminate between trivial and important details and determine what in each fleeting moment is relevant to the present study and about which aspects one should probably not bother worrying.

5.3.   Qualitative content analysis

As Angrosino (2007: 70-72) and LeCompte et al. (2010: 161-162) discuss, one starting point for organizing one's notes is to pay attention to emerging patterns and regularities and then grouping these observations thematically. It is also possible to look for cause-and-effect relationships, compare and evaluate, and pay attention to details that are connected. According to Angrosino (2007: 70-72), analysis of the data can be divided into descriptive analysis that is based on thematic organization, and theoretical analysis, which focuses on explaining different patterns. Further, he explains that the data can be presented in the form of tables and other figures, hypotheses, and even metaphors.

Schreier (2012: 80) states that, above all else, qualitative content analysis (QCA) is a way to reduce data when there is a lot to from which to choose. She suggests the data to be categorized according to a theme or a topic, or, alternatively, a source. For the purposes of this study and because of the nature of the data, I decided to break down the data by using themes to help categorize observations. I wanted to bring up repeating patterns that were relevant and would provide insight into my research questions and covering the aim of this study. For making these decisions, she mentions that having a research team or a colleague who could help filter the data is one option. This would also add to the objectivity of the process. Alternatively, one could use predetermined criteria or a coding frame to decide on the relevancy of different observations. I ended up doing a combination of both, as I discussed the data and the relevance of emergent themes with

my instructor and created a list of criteria for relevant content. Based on this, I selected which aspects to focus on in my analysis and discussion.

Essentially, LeCompte et al. (2010: 161) note that working with ethnographic data like that gathered by observing, one has to connect several dots, and structuring and generating analysis and synthesis can, again, ask for one to use their imagination in order to make sense of the vast amount of data that has been collected. They have an analogy to offer when it comes to handling data of this nature: It is like building a puzzle. One has to simply start somewhere and later assess the pieces that have been put together and ask oneself what everything means. Schreier (2012: 84-87), on the other hand, approaches the question of structuring data and findings in the realm of QCA from a less vague and evasive point of view, and she explains that in order to make sense of the collected data, one can approach it from either a concept-driven or a data-driven perspective, or a combination of these two. She goes on to clarify that taking a concept-driven approach to structuring data means using deductive strategies to categorize themes and patterns, essentially classifying phenomena based on previous knowledge, such as a theory or previous research. For this study, this could mean consciously looking for different task types that have previously been detected in action-based FL classrooms. The data-driven approach is essentially the polar opposite of this. An inductive strategy, it allows for feeling out the data and "letting categories – and subcategories – emerge from materials" themselves (Schreier 2012: 84-87).

In this study, I decided to use a combination of both Schreier (2012) and LeCompte et al.'s (2010) approaches for structuring my data. In LeCompte and other's (2010) words, the qualitative data collected for this study indeed appeared like a puzzle. Like many people know, puzzles can also be approached both deductively and inductively: it can be a good idea to try and find the corner pieces first while also getting an overall image, notion, of what is going on, and then continue to let the puzzle lead the way to the solution to an extent. To structure my data, I started by going through my notes, lesson by lesson, to get an idea of what kind of a picture the notes painted of the nature of ELT and detect features

and patterns that kept emerging time and again. Like Schreier (2012) suggests, I used a thematic strategy to make sense of my observations: to make distinctions between different task types, I focused on the activities that were used during each lesson and started grouping those that appeared similar. First, a rough division between teacher-centered and student-centered tasks was made, and then tasks in both categories were further divided into smaller subcategories. From the vastness of observations, details, and descriptions, I finally managed to map not only different, what appeared to be typical task types in ELT based on my data, but also other features characteristic to FLT for young learners. After this, the actual analysis of the observations became easier.

Indeed, to summarize, qualitative data can appear somewhat hazy at first, but like Hirsjärvi et al. (2000: 164) put it, this is its natural state; qualitative research, as a whole, is, first and foremost, subjective, holistic, and inductive. It is also comprehensive and directly based in the real world, for that is where the data is also collected. The researcher is an individual who makes sense, observes and analyzes the world around them based on their beliefs and worldview (Krippendorff 2019: 22). QCA is arguably interpretive but adhering to certain criteria helps make it more objective, therefore yielding more legitimate observations. Having a guideline or a framework to work with prevented me from becoming too distracted amidst all the analyzing, as it brought a certain degree of concreteness to the otherwise rather elusive process. Having theories and other source information onto which fall back is also important in anchoring the discussion somewhere and making it more valid. However, there is certain beauty to it: the basic nature of qualitative research, as Hirsjärvi and colleagues (2000: 164) state, can still allow for a lot of good, for something that cannot be attained in quantitative research alone. This is in accordance to what Patton (2002: 49) also stated about Edna Shapiro's experiences after collecting data in a classroom, in real time.

6   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this Chapter, I will present the findings from five different English lessons for first graders. Both the general characteristics of ELL teaching in Finnish elementary schools as of now will be discussed, as well as in more detail, patterns and themes that emerged from the observations. Throughout the discussion of the findings, I will bring the focus on the research questions, which were listed and described in Section 5.1, and provide answers to them.

In this Chapter, Section 6.1. will serve as an overview of the collected data. Section 6.2 explains the importance of a level of concreteness in ELT and the materials and activities used to execute it. Section 6.3, on the other hand, will go into more detail about emergent themes, repeating patterns, as well as describing ELT, as it presently appears in Finnish elementary schools based on my data. In this Section, different types of classroom tasks and materials will be introduced and analyzed based on how they support student agency and offer affordances, or in other words, opportunities for language use and practice. In the final Section of this Chapter, 6.4, will discuss the role of the teacher as the facilitator of FLL.

6.1   General description of data

In the classrooms where my data was collected, there were certain quite distinct similarities between how different teachers approach early EFL teaching. While each teacher is an individual when it comes to their preferences and style in teaching, as well as interpreting the guidelines in the NCC, it was possible to pinpoint aspects that seem to have become cornerstones of ELL in the observed classrooms. Granted, as stated in Section 4.2, the fact that language teachers nationwide have participated in trainings and have received guidance and access to resources prior to the commencement of ELL in the

first grade may have affected this by somehow unifying teachers' views on how teaching could be arranged and lessons planned. In this country, there are teachers to whom teaching foreign languages for 7-year-olds is not breaking news, and who have already established their unique way of teaching the TL. One of the teachers observed belonged to this group, and she reported on their teaching like it was more routine-like and commonplace compared to the other teachers. Still, teachers' ways of teaching did not differ markedly from each other in terms of the nature of the tasks used in the short period of time that I observed their teaching.

Based on my observations, ELL education, when it comes to teaching English, follows the suggestions stated in the amendment of the NCC (VOPS 2019: 25-30), which I discussed in Chapter 3. In the document, action-based learning and communicativeness are strongly and explicitly present in the description of what FL1 learning for first graders would ideally look like. Without activities that require active participation, students' own engagement and output, the goals that the Finnish National Agency for Education in the amendment of the NCC (VOPS 2019: 25-30) has set for the first school year would be difficult to attain. One can ask how teachers could improve their students' teamwork skills, build their courage to use the linguistic resources they have from the very beginning, or acquaint them with the culture of the TL, if not through task-based activities and the students' own initiative. I saw tasks and methods supporting goals like these being implemented in the classroom even in the short period of time that I was observing lessons, which, if not a solid ground for major generalizations, still proves the presence of action-based learning in early EFL classrooms. It is, in fact, not a suggestion; it is a requirement.

6.2 Concreteness

As discussed, Piaget, as well as Beloglovsky and Daly (2015: 96) based on his theory on cognitive development, called for concreteness when dealing with children, whose thinking can chiefly be characterized as processes that rely on the information, stimuli,

that is readily available and accessible in their immediate environment. Based on my observations, this has obviously been taken into account when planning ELL instruction, and it is clear that activities should incorporate concrete examples or objects, where possible, to support children's understanding of a topic. Besides this, instruction is also supported by clear demonstrations and examples. To illustrate, before doing something creative, such as drawing and coloring numbers, children are shown that they are going to get a piece of paper and crayons: the teacher presents the materials that are going to be used. Similarly, since 7-year-old students are at the concrete operative stage of cognitive processing, according to Piaget (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 11, 96), this also means that they are active learners, which means that they learn through direct involvement with their surroundings, such as observation, touch, and movement, as discussed above in Section 6.2.2. They also learn best when tasks and themes are close to what they deal with in their everyday lives, making them easier to grasp. These themes are also the ones that interest them the most for these very reasons.

Because learning at this stage of cognitive development happens best through active participation, concreteness is present not only in instructions but also the activities themselves. This can be clearly seen in some of the tasks that were introduced in Sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2. Bringing objects, such as Angry Birds plushies, is one way to reach a level of concreteness in the classroom and therefore help students understand different concepts better. Even though languages are complex and rather abstract systems, they most often have a real-life correspondence. This can be seen in the example where students were asked to find objects of certain colors around them. Colors were also learned with the help of colored pieces of paper, and verbs through movement. Concrete examples and simplifications are an integral part of ELL to also ensure students' interest and engagement: make it too vague and the teacher will most likely lose their interest as their attention drifts elsewhere (Gillibrand et al. 2011: 39).

6.3 Support for action-based learning and agency

As stated above, action-based tasks are a vital part of ELL. In the rather humble beginnings of early FL1 education, this calls for some level of creativity from teachers, as they are expected to bring the classroom, as it were, alive somehow. One of the main aims of this study was to explore the ways that teachers are doing this, and below I will present how this seems to be happening in EFL education by first exploring different activity types, then, the role that textbooks still have in student-centered ELL classrooms, and finally, the teacher's role in increasingly student-centered classrooms.

Despite talking about how action-based and communicative FL instruction is mostly student-centered, it should be noted that there are exceptions to this ideal. Especially with younger learners, the reality is that sometimes teachers are in charge. Letting the learners take the lead is always simply not convenient or for their best, but they can and should still be engaged in the activity at hand. The first step I took when categorizing the data was classifying the different modes of learning I had distinguished, dividing them into two categories: those that build on both teacher-centered activities (ones where teachers are in lead during the activity) and those that build on student-centered activities (ones where students are expected to take charge and complete tasks more independently). While this division is broad and only tells us so much, it was the first emerging pattern above anything else.

6.3.1 Teacher-centered activities

The most frequently used teacher-centered activities were drills, which were used for learning new words. Although arguably rather mechanic, drills expose students to a significant amount of linguistic TL input and output through repetition, which Krashen (1985), among some others, argues to be a key factor in acquiring a new language. Jacobs and Farrell (2003: 4) accuse drilling of being just another form of, as they put it, "rote learning" or routine-like and repetitive, which is certainly a reputation it has gained over

the years after CLT changed people's views on language learning. It, however, does not have to be simply mechanic, based on the behavioristic views of viewing learners as passive recipients of information. In the situations where drills were used in the observed classrooms, I observed that often, students were not simply expected to repeat after the teacher. Instead, often something was added: when students were learning new verbs, such as *run*, *jump*, and *walk*, the teacher, upon saying the words, paired it with the corresponding movement, which students had to copy along with repeating the verb. In another example, when one of the four teachers was teaching their students colors in English, she showed the class a piece of paper, said the color corresponding to it and expected the class to repeat it out loud. Instead of movement, in this case, a visual aid was used to accompany the oral activity. What is more, while still drilling new words, they were taken into actual use instead of keeping them as separate elements without a context. Following the first step where the words were introduced simply as just words, separate linguistic elements, teachers encouraged their students to use the words in a phrase that somehow described them in the most basic of ways, for example, each student saying what they can do (e.g. *I am x, I can run*). This way, it can be interpreted that students got a better grip on the practiced words by taking them to their own use, which, along with activating other senses like sight and touch, makes drills more meaningful and communicational. This seems to suggest that while some perhaps more traditional activities can be deemed necessary in a group where the learners are beginners dealing with linguistic basics, they can be made more action-based and therefore also more interesting and authentic, so that they are in line with what has been stated in the amendment of the NCC (VOPS 2019: 25-30).

Drills can also serve an important purpose in recapping what the students have learned and testing what they still remember from previous classes, as I saw in classrooms. Such exercises are a handy tool for teachers to map out where they are at a certain point, whether they should revise something, and who or how many students have understood and what. In ELL in particular, it is kind of a given that because learners are so young (Welsh & Pennington 1988), the teacher has to assume responsibility over certain areas of

language learning, one of them being initiating recapping exercises. Teacher-centered activities can therefore be justified with groups that consist of younger learners who still mostly lack the ability to take full responsibility of their learning, just like other actions due to parts of their brain still developing (Welsh & Pennington 1988).

Another example of a less mechanic teacher-centered activity meant for rehearsing words and thematic areas studied earlier was provided by the teacher who is more experienced in ELL instruction. She decided to revise both numbers and colors with their students by using Angry Birds plushies. The dolls where in a bag, where the teacher picked them up one by one, introducing each of them while speaking English, and asking the students to name the color of each doll. Later, when all the plushies were taken out of the bag, introduced, and colors repeated, the plushies were also counted and then put back in the bag.

I noticed quite early on that in order for the teachers to keep their students at bay and the lessons structured, they appeared trying to maintain some sort of a balance between the power they gave away to their students and that they kept for themselves. This is quite evidently required in a classroom where the language learners are still young, for their autonomy and the capability to responsibly take charge of their own work is somewhat limited (Welsh & Pennington 1988): children at the age of seven get sidetracked easily due to their short attention spans, and tasks that activate them can easily get out of hand. Another reason for this is obviously the fact that these students, or at least most of them who do not have prior experience with foreign languages from, for instance, immersion, are taking their first steps in learning the TL. The teacher's role is increasingly more important the younger their students are or the newer they are to the language.

The above examples show how teachers can activate their students while still staying in charge themselves. In the classrooms, more traditional exercises, where the teacher is in the lead, were made more action-based and engaging with small modifications such as

adding movement to the exercise or bringing items to the classroom. This way, teacher-led activities became more age-appropriate, as activating students by encouraging them to copy gestures or expressions or adding concreteness brings a more tangible dimension to exercises. Input-rich activities, like aforementioned drills and activities reviewing learned content, are also suitable for beginners, as this takes the learners' proficiency level into consideration (Ellis 2009b: 241). The teacher is a source of input, as well as affordances, and the required amount of independent production, or output, is rather minimal at the stage where the students are just being introduced to new linguistic elements.

6.3.2   Student-centered activities

Several different types of student-centered activities arose from the data, more specifically four, as can be seen from Table 1. In the table, I have also given example activities from the lessons I observed. To explain these types in more detail, I will go through each of them briefly before going into more detail later in this Chapter.

Table 1. Student-centered task types.

Task type	Activated skill areas	Example activities from ELL lessons
Creative tasks	Several possibilities depending on the activity	Drawing, coloring
Descriptive tasks	Vocabulary, pronunciation, overall spoken production	Describing the color of one's clothes
Kinesthetic tasks	Vocabulary	Showing what the verb *to jump* means through movement, recognizing colors by finding items of certain color
Auditory tasks	Listening comprehension, vocabulary	Counting how many claps there are, reacting when one's color is mentioned

Considering categorizing different task types in FLT, a variety of classifications have been proposed by several theorists (e.g. Prabhu 1987, Pica & Doughty 1985, Crookall & Oxford 1990, in Jeon 2005: 92), and no one correct way of categorizing task types exists. Pattison (1987, cited in Jeon 2005: 92), for instance, has made a distinction between "questions and answers; dialogues and role-plays; matching activities; communication strategies; pictures and picture stories; puzzles and problems; discussions and decisions." Deviating from these categorizations that have been made earlier, while in part based on them, I divided the used activities in categories (see Table 1) that I defined myself. I made this decision so that the categories would better represent the data that I collected from the classrooms.

Based on my observations, I concluded that student-centered activities include, first of all, creative tasks where students are asked to draw or color something; second, descriptive tasks where they are asked to describe something in their own words; third, kinesthetic tasks, such as games; and fourth, auditory tasks, such as songs. It is worth mentioning, however, that many of these task types which I detected overlap, and sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish to which group a task actually belongs. Kinesthetic activities, for example, include aforementioned games as well as dances and other tasks involving movement. They support children's need to be hands-on to internalize information, and auditory input, or exposure to the TL, is important for beginner language learners according to theorists like Krashen (1985) and Edelenbos and Kubanek (2009). Communicative tasks, which can combine elements of descriptive, creative, and kinesthetic tasks, seem to be more common when there is a need for a bit more challenging activities within a certain thematic area, such as when a theme is being revised. To illustrate, when recapping colors, students were asked to use the words in a more advanced linguistic environment, more creatively. After repeating colors, they were asked to tell what their favorite color is, for instance, or point out where they can see objects of certain color in a classroom. Next, I will further examine each group of task types and exemplify how different types of activities were used in a classroom context.

First, an example of a creative task is an activity used in one of the lessons where students, after having been introduced to the numbers from one to ten, were given a piece of paper, crayons, and instructed to pick any number between the two, draw it, color it, and also write the number in letters underneath their drawing. The students had the chance to ask help from the teacher for this last part, and many of them copied the corresponding word, letter by letter, from the whiteboard. The goal of the task was to create a row of the numbers on the chalkboard in the correct order. Like the revising activity with the Angry Bird plushies, this task also functioned as a recapping exercise where recently studied words were used both orally and in the written form, but this time the teacher did not intervene with what the students were doing. They got to decide which number they wanted to draw on the piece of paper given to them, and the only part where some

needed help was with spelling the chosen number. Before hanging the numbers up to the chalkboard, the entire class was activated as each student presented their number by showing their drawing to classmates. In the final part of the task, the teacher stepped in, and the entire class went through the numbers in a random order, saying out loud the number that the teacher pointed on the chalkboard, going through them several times.

This activity demonstrates what supporting learner activity and agency can look like. Giving the students the choice by letting them pick which number they want to draw and color takes control away from the teacher and hands some power over to the students, giving them the rather empowering idea that they, as learners, can make things happen (Maddux 2012). The task was not challenging for a lot of the students, for, as I observed, many children seemed to know several numbers in English before they were even presented to them, but for young learners, small achievements can in fact be more significant than what they appear to an outside observer, as Zeidner and Schleyer (1999) argue. It is possible that students are experiencing what is known as the big-fish-little-pond effect, which does not necessarily mean anything negative: instead, even a smaller attainment can provide a surprising amount of support for a student's self-image and agency (Zeidner & Schleyer 1999). Moreover, students realizing that there are options and that they have the freedom to choose promotes their self-regulating capacity and intrinsic motivation (Teng 2018: 2), which makes the learning process start from within, and not from the outside. Essentially, Teng (2018: 2) suggests that the teacher does not have to *make* students learn, but rather, the freedom they are given piques their curiosity, and they acquire information by themselves. The fact that many students, those who were faster than others and asked for more paper so that they could practice more numbers without the teacher prompting them to pick a new number, seems to support this theory.

Second, descriptive tasks, which are chiefly communicational, were used in contexts where the teacher was taking a step further and expecting a bit more from their students, hence, letting them have their own turn to use the language more freely and independently, therefore supporting their agency and self-efficacy. The key here is,

however, to render tasks so that they meet students at their level and so that they are suitable compared to what they know (e.g. Ellis 2009b: 241). As stated, descriptive tasks seemed to be used in classrooms when talking about themes that the students were already familiar with, and therefore had the means to discuss different topics in their own words. Hence, these tasks were also used as tasks that helped learners revise words and content learned previously. An example of a descriptive task used during one of the lessons is an activity where students were expected to name the color of their clothes that day. The students had not learned to name pieces of clothing yet, but they were simply asked to point their shirts, for example, and say, e.g. *pink*. Despite clothing words being a completely different thematic area, they were approached similarly to verbs in Section 6.2.1. For the sake of teaching the students to use the words in phrases, they were then taught to say, for instance, *I have a pink shirt*, similarly to what they learned to say when revising verbs (*I am x, I can run*), even though phrase structures like *I can* were mostly unfamiliar to them.

According to Vygotsky's theory of the ZPD (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 17-19; Jarvis et al. 2003: 36-38; McGregor 2007: 28-29), the abovementioned example explains of how teachers can push their students further in their learning process and help them achieve higher levels in linguistic processing than they could on their own. Helping students to use their newly learned words to form more meaningful linguistic elements, which at the beginning with young students are phrases, is not only to challenge them, but also to support their feelings and beliefs of capability as a learner. Deepening their knowledge and showing students how they can have simple discussions where they tell someone about themselves or something familiar, whatever is age-appropriate and suitable for their skill level, helps them adopt new words and embrace them as part of their vocabulary. Since this is also information they will need in real life when telling something about themselves, simple tasks like this one can also be considered authentic (Maina 2004).

Third, the way student-centered and activating kinesthetic tasks can be used to support agency, autonomy and self-efficacy is often to avoid teaching words as linguistic elements that are not associated to anything. The mechanical technique of consciously *learning* words by heart is not favored, rather, the goal is to help the students to *acquire* new content, following Krashen and Terrel's (1983) idea of the Natural Approach to language acquisition. Languages are best learned when the process is made meaningful, which is why activities like the verb task described in Section 6.2.1, where students did the movement that corresponds to a certain verb, bring more depth to learning. Movement can also make learned content more memorable, and with school children who prefer to be directly involved with their surroundings when learning anyway (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 11), the engagement keeps them motivated.

Going back to colors, I noticed that another, seemingly effective way to teach students how to make a connection between a word and the real-world object is to ask them to find something of a specific color in the classroom. During the lesson where this activity was used, all students needed to be standing up and ready to move for this activity, and as the teacher, and later, students taking turns, said the name of one color, the class was expected to go to an object that is of the same color. Again, the task is simple, but it relies on the students' capacity to recognize colors, first by hearing the word, and then detecting an item that corresponds to it. The teacher relied on a similar task when revising verbs. Using an interactive whiteboard game of the textbook series *Go!* (Kanervo & Laukkarinen 2019), students worked in teams matching English verbs to the right picture from several options given on the screen. Here, the task was once again completely reliant on the students' skills, and it was up to them to find the correct matches. The task, while it generated competition in the classroom, made also room for social learning, as teammates helped each other find the right pictures. Negotiating tasks and meaning together can help both the helper and the student who is being helped (Ellis & Fotos 1999: 4).

Fourth and last, auditory tasks bring their own touch to ELL. Most often, such activities are listening comprehension tasks or songs, the latter of which takes advantage of

children's readiness and willingness to repeat the new words they have heard, which, in part, explains why they learn fast (Granena & Long 2013: 3-4). Repetition, which can be in the form of songs, is an essential part of Lenneberg's hypothesis on children's critical period in language acquisition (Lenneberg 1967, cited in Granena & Long 2013: 3-4), as well as Krashen (1985) and Edelenbos and Kubanek's (2009) ideas of them having to be exposed to a sufficient amount of linguistic input in the TL to ensure the acquisition of new content. Further, Ellis (2009: 241) points out that in order for action-based and task-based teaching to work with younger, beginner learners, tasks need to be "input-providing rather than output-prompting kind." Offering young learners building blocks, or input, with which later produce language on their own, is important in ELL.

During the lessons, songs were used as warm-up activities or breaks. Like descriptive tasks, they help students strengthen their handle on new, recently learned words, but instead of having to cognitively deduce how to form phrases with them, they are memorized with the help of a melody. As such, songs do not necessarily support autonomy, agency, or self-efficacy, at least in a very obvious way, but indirectly, on some level, remembering a song can help them come up with a certain word that they could not have thought of otherwise (Ala-Kyyny 2012). It can also be argued that despite the smaller amount of support they offer students in terms of improving their feelings of capability, songs can still be considered rather authentic materials that can be used in classrooms (Maina 2004): in the real world, some people learn and remember words in other languages by thinking of a song where they heard it being used. However, songs, like other auditory tasks, can be made more engaging and activating by asking students to, for instance, explain what was said in the song or a recording. This method was widely used in the classrooms that I visited.

In sum, the variety and execution of different communicational and action-based tasks that I have seen being implemented in ELL classrooms prove that hands-on activities can work with younger learners, as long as activities match the students' abilities, as Duran and Ramaut (2006) suggest. Teacher-centered instruction seems to be, based on my

observations, the typically provide students with rich input, whereas student-centered instruction, at its best, promotes students' positive views of themselves as capable language learners who can take charge of their own learning, as discussed earlier in Chapter 2.3. While it looks like, based on my observations, that early FL instruction tends to be mainly student-centered with the aim of supporting learners' autonomy and agency, teacher-centered activities can still coexist with task-based activities and incorporating them into the instruction is definitely not a crime but sometimes a necessity, as discussed.

As I observed, supporting students' feelings of agency can be made possible through the positive experiences that action-based and communicational tasks can offer them. Emotions are, like Mercer (2011) points out, an essential part of any learning process, and ELL is not an exception. When learning is enjoyable, students are more open to it, and therefore are also able to absorb information more readily. Furthermore, as Teng (2018: 69) explains, making learning meaningful and engaging is the trick to activating students' intrinsic motivation, their inner initiative that freely and independently makes the choice to learn. Because they believe they are capable and can learn, they take action, and the learning process starts where it should: from within.

6.3.3   The role of textbooks

When it comes to textbooks, which represent more traditional teaching materials, based on my observations, the apparent role of textbooks in the classrooms that I visited was close to non-existent. While at first glance, the observed ELL lessons seemed to be all about social learning and the communicational aspect of it, they all had something in common: themes and topics discussed, and the order in which they are dealt with, still often followed the outline that the textbooks suggest. This makes sense, since textbooks, in turn, follow the goals and guidelines of the curriculum, and therefore they rather accurately depict what thematic areas teachers should be including in their instruction with each age group. The series *Go!* (Kanervo & Laukkarinen 2019), for example, is

intended for EFL classes in the first grade, and since early FL instruction in Finland is generally a new phenomenon, textbooks can offer teachers the support they need when planning courses and individual lessons.

I noticed that in the classrooms, textbooks can be used in different ways. It should be noted that these days, electronic materials are part of most textbook series, and *Go!* is not an exception in this sense. These e-materials often include both teacher's materials, extra tasks, and games that can be played with the class. In Section 6.2.2, when discussing different kinesthetic tasks, I briefly introduced a game where students were expected to match a verb and the correct picture on the whiteboard. Other examples of activities include memory games and other speed games. Materials like these function as an extension to textbooks' traditional, printed form. Still, as Maina (2004) argues, textbooks are still textbooks, meaning that they are not authentic materials. Norris (2009: 581-582), Ellis (2009: 222-225) and Willis (1996, cited in Johnson 2008: 186) agree, also stating that authenticity, like agency, is an important factor in action-based or task-based approaches in teaching students skills that are relevant outside the classroom.

Based on my observations, teaching without textbooks promotes social learning, and teachers stated that they leave textbook exercises for students to do at home; three out of the four teachers did this and assigned homework at the end of the lesson. Still, some activities were sometimes be used as warm-up exercises, for instance, when discussing a new topic, or breaks during the lesson (often songs). Mostly in class, however, the socio-constructivist views of learning mentioned in the NCC were reinforced, and one teacher explicitly stated that the classroom situation is for learning together, since they gather there every day anyway. Therefore, it is difficult to find reasons for not taking advantage of that. Furthermore, ELT in Finland, again, according to the amendment of the NCC (VOPS 2019) focuses on learning communicational skills in the TL, which constitutes oral skills and listening comprehension. Besides this notion of LA as a socially constructed process, one obvious reason for not using textbooks in the classroom to the extent which they were once used, is the fact that many 7-year-olds struggle with reading and writing

even in their first language, and the more complicated orthography of English compared to, for instance, Finnish, does not help.

6.4 Teacher's role in ELL classrooms

At present, when education is largely looking up to a socio-constructivist and task-based take on learning and values opportunities where students get to actively explore whatever subject they are studying, for example foreign languages, the role of the teacher in the classroom is highlighted. Only this time, we are asking whether teachers' purpose or roles have changed in the classroom due to the increasing emphasis on student agency.

In this Chapter, which is divided into two Sections, I am focused on the teacher's role in an ELL classroom. In Section 6.4.1, I will first examine how the observed teachers supported the learners' autonomy and agency in the classroom setting. In Section 6.4.2, I will provide examples of how students' agency can also be supported through differentiation.

6.4.1 Supporting autonomy and agency

Van Avermaet et al. (2006: 189) state that more than anything, a FL teacher is a mentor who points students into the direction of correct language use, gives feedback and negotiates meaning with the students. This is not to say that the teacher is all-knowing, and they do not have all the correct answers. Rather, discovering rules, words and meanings together is essential. Teachers facilitate students' learning process and nudge them into the direction of discovering answers and developing tools for solving problems themselves. This supports students' sense of agency and feelings of self-efficacy.

This is something that I saw happen in the classrooms that I visited: teachers do not simply give their students the right answers. Instead, they supported them by giving them memory aids or hints and encouraged them by saying something along the lines of,

"Do you remember this?" and then imitating drinking when helping a student which English verb corresponds to the movement, or "It's starts with an r." when helping a student who was handed a red piece of paper in the color exercise described in Section 6.2.2 come up with the name of the color. Another example would be a lesson that was held a few days before Valentine's Day. The class listened to a song about love and friendship, and the teacher did not tell the class beforehand what phrases they would hear (and those who could read, see, as the lyrics were visible). They just told the students that there would be a dance, which they would copy watching the girls dance in the video and showed them the moves. Only after they had watched the video, copied the moves, and listened to the song, the teacher asked the entire class questions such as, "What does 'I love you' mean?". Sometimes activities or questions can be a little bit on the more demanding side, which is when teachers can try to push their students' limits, help them aim reach higher than they would have on their own, and therefore teach them more than they otherwise would have learned, as per Vygotsky's theory of ZDP (e.g. McGregor 2007: 28-29).

Another important role that the observed teachers had in their increasingly student-centered classrooms was being a motivator. It was essential for them to find ways to motivate and encourage the students to work on their goals and help them achieve them. This can be something as fundamental as managing to complete a task (Van Avermaet et al. 2006: 175), which means, in other words, that teachers are then "interactionally supporting task performance". This also entails creating cooperation and discussion in teamwork settings. An example of this kind of support is an activity track where students worked in pairs along a path made out of pieces of paper with pictures that each depicted one verb in the shape of an S on the floor. The idea of the task was for students to take turns in telling their partner which paper, or step, they should land next, by saying the corresponding verb aloud. Their partner should then move to the correct step and perform the movement they had learned earlier in the kinesthetic teacher-led task described in Section 6.2.1. The students were in charge of the activity progressing, but the teacher was observing the in-task phase, helping the students if they needed it. However,

in a classroom environment where cooperation is encouraged, like Van Avermaet et al. (2006) point out, teacher is in part relying on the students lending each other a hand.

Again, talking about input, the importance of which theorists like Krashen (1985), Edelenbos and Kubanek (2009), as well as Ellis (2009) have discussed, one of teachers' duties in a task-based, student-centered classroom is to provide meaningful linguistic input to help them improve. The teacher sets an example of a speaker of the TL (Ellis 2009b: 236), functioning as a linguistic model to the students. Especially in elementary grades, basic classroom English can facilitate student agency and give opportunities to exploring the language. In the observed classrooms, the language of the EFL class was predominantly English. While some teachers believed in using the TL as much as possible, others decided to rely on Finnish at times to, for instance, clarify instructions. This is not necessary, though, as demonstrated by the EFL teacher who has been teaching first graders for a longer time: repetition can be one way to make sure that all students, both more advanced and less advanced ones, understand what is going on. Other teachers used repetition, too, along with concreteness and context clues, and they also asked other students to explain or translate what was said. While Krashen's comprehensible input is important in helping students improve, keeping Vygotsky and his theory in mind, it can be pointed out that input that is a little beyond learners' reach can prove to be effective as well. Besides, based on even what happened in the classrooms, it seems that students do not need to understand every word to figure out what is expected of them. Like Lenneberg said, children's minds are like sponges (Granena & Long, 2013: 3-4), and teaching an ELL group is a great opportunity to take advantage of the critical and auspicious period for language acquisition that the students are still going through, and observe the rate at which they absorb bits and pieces of the TL.

6.4.2 Agency support through differentiation

Finally, in an ideal situation at least, in everything that teachers do in the classroom, they direct individual students with individual needs and skill levels through the studied subject matter (Tomlinson & Imbeau 2010: 27-29). The skill levels of students can vary drastically even in one ELL classroom at a beginner level: while there are students who are having a hard time remembering anything else beyond the most rudimentary expressions like *thank you* and *bye, bye*, there can also be students who are quite advanced and use the language independently even on the phrasal level. Therefore, differentiation is crucial, and it is important to make sure that everyone is on the same page and has at least the very basic knowledge of the TL needed to complete a given task. Through individually directed help, teachers can best help their students develop their skills and give them suitable chances for independent language use while still supporting their feelings of agency. As discussed earlier in Section 4.1, it can be argued that planning lessons around action-based activities also makes it easier to provide more advanced, and, in turn, less advanced students challenges that are more suitable for them because modifying these types of tasks is relatively easy (Long 2000, 2015).

I noticed that tweaking activities can be done in variety of ways. The experienced ELL teacher used yes-no tasks and two-alternative forced choice tasks to simplify certain activities by providing students with options to choose from. With the latter mentioned questions, they stated that it is also possible to differentiate them by offering more than two options to choose from, or by offering more challenging options. Another way to add difficulty is to ask open-ended questions where students need to be able to explain a situation using their own words and therefore demonstrate understanding. As I mentioned earlier, repetition is another way to ensure that everyone understands what the class was talking about or what is going on at a given moment. I also stated that other teachers sometimes rely on Finnish to a varying degree to explain tasks or instruction.

Sometimes teachers also engaged in full conversations with their students or encourage them to demonstrate their knowledge of the TL. The first example is from the lesson where students were revising the numbers from one to ten. One student stated that they accidentally counted to twenty at home, and the teacher asked if they wanted to demonstrate how to do it. Another example is from the Valentine's Day themed lesson, where the class got to choose and color their own cards. One student, whom the teacher often asks simple questions like, "How are you?" while waiting for others to come to class or finish with their tasks, engaged in a full conversation with the teacher:

Teacher: *You chose the dinosaur card? It looks nice.*
Student: *Yeah.*
Teacher: *Did you know about these English Valentine's Day traditions?*
Student: *I knew some things about them, but not everything.*

Without knowing the background of this 7-year-old, one can state that they demonstrated fluency in English. It is possible that this noticeably higher competence compared to the classmates in the same group has been acquired through immersion and attending bilingual daycare and preschool. It is also possible that the student is, if not completely then partially, bilingual due to having a parent whose native language is English. One should also keep in mind that the effect of hobbies, such as videogames and browsing social media, as well as older siblings' influence plays a role in explaining why so many young learners come to a FL class, for example, knowing all the colors of the rainbow.

Differentiation allows for more autonomy and room to those who are more advanced. On the other hand, since, action-based tasks can be adjusted according to individual students' progress and level, teachers can also help weaker students find their own strategies for becoming more self-directed. The ability to solve problems more independently means that the student is more autonomous, which leads to a heightened feeling of agency. This, in theory, boosts the student's feelings of self-efficacy and improves their confidence and self-image. Feeling better about themselves and their

learning process should translate into less anxiety, more enjoyment in language classes, and eventually, better results. As mentioned earlier, teachers can also ask students to help each other, which is another way to integrate differentiation and give more advanced students the chance to apply their knowledge. The student needing help, in turn, can learn something new from their peer.

7   CONCLUSION

The main goal of the present, qualitative study was to unveil how action-based learning is put in practice in early FL education in Finnish elementary schools, specifically, in the first grade. I also focused on examining how teaching methods and materials used support FL learning, and therefore students' agency and autonomy. I was interested in finding out how action-based learning, which is supposed to be practical, offers chances for independent and active language use and practice in the classroom environment. Further, I introduced different types of communicative and task-based activities that seemed to be repeated from class to class. The data were collected by visiting and observing five early EFL lessons by four different teachers in two different schools.

The study saw its first humble beginnings when I suddenly realized that I wanted to get better acquainted with ELL and present compelling evidence in favor of promoting action-based learning and communicativeness in FL instruction. Along with the recent revision of the current NCC and the changes it brought to schools nationwide, the topic gained a lot of publicity in newspaper headlines and, inevitably, in dissertations and other studies. However, with so many unknown territories to it and with my own interest towards learning by doing, I decided to familiarize myself with ELL and the current state of EFL education in Finland.

This Chapter is divided into two Sections. In Section 7.1, I will conclude my observations on the patterns that arose from the analysis of the findings by answering the research questions. I will also put the results into a larger framework by comparing it to previous, somewhat similar studies in the field. In Section 7.2, I will then examine and evaluate the present study what comes to different constraints and ethical considerations. In other words, I will discuss its reliability, quality, and the choices made to carry out the research. Finally, I will conclude the study by discussing and suggesting topics for future studies in the field of early FL education in Section 7.3.

7.1 Concluding thoughts on the findings

In this Chapter, I will present my concluding thoughts and answers to my research questions, which were introduced in Section 5.1.

The first research question, "How does action-based learning show in Finnish early EFL classrooms?", was further divided into three sub-questions to clarify the vastness of the main question. However, on a general level, ELL can be described as instruction that echoes the descriptions, ideals and goals stated in the NCC (POPS 2014: 127) and its amendment (VOPS 2019: 25-30): FL learning in the first grade is supposed to, first and foremost, engage young learners through activities that resemble play, for as Piaget states, children, even at this age, still learn best through active participation, or as one might even say, exploration (Beloglovsky & Daly 2015: 11). What is more, when classroom activities are age-appropriate, meaningful, and interesting, they are more likely to keep students interested in FL learning even after they become older. This goes back to nationwide aims of ELL teaching succeeding in keeping students interested in continuing their language studies beyond their teenage years, and therefore improving the current linguistic reservoir that Finland has (Ministry of Culture and Education 2017).

All four teachers favored tasks that activated their students, and to some extent even stimulated several senses. Here, not only were several types of learners in the classroom taken into account, but the tasks also exhibited a level of concreteness, they activated students, and gave them opportunities for exploring the language both alone and together with their peers. Based on these factors among a few others, the tasks that were used can therefore be considered suitable for the age group. Classroom activities, at their best, contained cultural and linguistic stimuli with a relevance to real-world contexts, therefore being also authentic (VOPS 2019: 25). Action-based instruction and learning encourage students to actively use their linguistic resources in order to practice foreign

language use and interaction through it in different situations, and it invites them to independently observe how languages are intertwined with everyday life and cultures.

In order to find answers to the first sub-question, "What kinds of tasks and activities are used to attain the goals stated in the amendment of the latest NCC?", I took notes of the different tasks of which first graders' English classes consisted. In Section 6.2, I divided the types into teacher-centered and student-centered activities, and the latter mentioned further into four more precise types: creative, descriptive, kinesthetic and auditory. These fall into the categories mentioned in the NCC and its amendment, as introducing tasks that are based on drama, for example, is suggested. Making sure that there is an even combination of different tasks methods being used ensures that students who learn in their own, individual ways, get the practice they need. Action-based instruction can be rewarding for all kinds of learners, whether kinesthetic, auditory, or something else.

The role of textbooks was generally not significant, as I concluded. They were, however, used for assigning homework and planning lessons. Granted, first graders are learning the very basics of English, such as colors, numbers, and some verbs, all of which I have mentioned above. Lesson planning around these topics should not be very challenging, one would think, and this may be true. However, textbooks seem to function as something of a compass for teachers, a tool with which to navigate through this transition period where early FL teaching has already been set in motion, but where it is regardless a new concept and where everyone, students, teachers and other people working in education alike, are still learners. Since especially first graders' EFL textbooks are brand new, they are not only up to date and in line with the latest NCC and its amendment, but they still mostly offer traditional exercises, listening comprehensions, pronunciation activities and exercises where students are expected to fill in missing parts.

To answer the second sub-question, "How do the teacher and different tasks used facilitate foreign language learning, support student agency, and what kinds of opportunities for language use and practice do they provide?", I found out that teachers,

for one, have distinct roles in the classroom. Being an educator who is aware of all the ways that they influence and can influence their students is therefore important. I mentioned differentiation above; besides this, teachers also help students to find answers to different questions, and solutions to tasks, on their own. Differentiation was used in the observed classrooms to cater both to those learners who were faster and to those who were slower. Through differentiation, teachers were able to help their students, whether they needed extra tasks or struggled with other activities.

Action-based instruction allows for creativity in the classroom. In this study, several types of tasks emerged from the observed lessons. In ELL, or at least in the early EFL classrooms that I visited, learning a foreign language in the first grade is engaging through different prompts, whether kinesthetic, auditory, visual, or oral. Tasks can also be descriptive or creative. What seemed to be the case with all of them is that they encourage active participation. *Doing* can be thought of as one of the keywords describing ELL. At their best, different activities are engaging and fun, and therefore persuade students to participate actively without even noticing how much they are learning. Activities develop different linguistic competencies, although in ELL, these are mostly related to communicational and interpersonal skills, as emphasized by the current NCC (POPS 2014), with hopes of preparing students for real-life situations where these competencies are needed.

In terms of the ratio of teacher-centered tasks to student-centered ones, as of now, a certain balance seems to prevail. With younger learners, the teacher needs to lead and pace the classroom activity, and teacher-led activities can play an important part in giving students a break and possibly calming them down and restoring focus on the right aspects when they get a little too excited. What comes to the action-based learning of different types of tasks, to me it looks like right now they activate students quite well. Surely, however, we will learn a lot in the coming of years, as the practice of teaching foreign languages to first graders becomes more established and teachers notice what works, what does not, and what kinds of risks are worth taking.

My final research question was more reflective. "Could existing tasks or activities possibly be improved, and if so, how?" is a question that I could not directly find answers to from the notes I collected from the lessons, but through evaluating the findings. Not being an expert of educational materials, I am only offering my point of view as a suggestion in the light of my findings and the theoretical framework of this study. Materials could possibly be improved in the future, and it is likely that they will eventually evolve to one direction or another, as most people are new to ELL and therefore still learning. Based on my findings, it looks like the updates that textbooks receive could be a little more rebellious or ambitious, for right now it seems that they have merely gotten an upgrade. The exercises they contain, it can be argued, have barely changed compared to previous books and series, but then again, if textbooks establish their status as "homework books", then the decision to keep them more or less as they are can be rather easily justified. However, as homework tasks could also be more action-based, one can only speculate on what the future of FL textbooks might possibly look like.

Previous research on the topic, and especially from the same point of view, does not really exist at this time, which is why it offers the research community some new information. However, the present study seems to be in line with similar studies conducted before it, and no contradictions or concerning paradoxes have risen. In early Swedish as a foreign language instruction, Mönkkönen (2019: 31-33) describes similar tasks than what I found were used in early EFL classrooms. Social and kinesthetic aspects were similarly present in the tasks that were used in the classes that were being observed in her study.

7.2   Possible evolution of early EFL instruction in Finland

Considering the possible future of FL teaching based on the findings, it can stated that in the light of the changes that have occurred in the previous decades after the introduction of CLT, it is likely that the nature of the instruction will probably get even more creative

and authentic, immersive, a little like movies when they first became a 3D experience. Based on what has been stated in the latest version of the NCC, and regarding the urgency around the need for more communicativeness in FL teaching in Finland, it is hard to see how teaching would, in a sense, go backward and start embracing form-focused exercises again any time soon. The reason why language classes have evolved is the need for schooling to be more in touch with reality and society's demands, as they are now.

The general discussion around FL instruction in Finland has recently reflected the need to reform old, previously established and outdated notions of arranging language education in the country (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019c). This is also echoed in the amendment to the latest NCC (VOPS 2019), where the goal to provide even younger learners with engaging learning opportunities with their chosen first foreign language at school has first been stated in an official directive document. The educational system has awoken to the paradigm shift within FL instruction: it is time to get more hands-on. This is especially a good idea with language learners that are younger than before; the need for different kinds of approaches and methods to language teaching is also apparent in teachers' own views of the recent changes. While I did not interview any of the teachers whose classes I observed, I did jot down comments that I found interesting, and one of them said it best: many of the pedagogical strategies that FL teachers have been used to utilizing with older students do not simply work anymore in a classroom where the students are so young that they are only learning how to behave at school, and where most of them cannot read or write yet. While for third graders, for instance, the teacher could spell out the word *elephant*, for a 7-year-old this does not necessarily make a lot of sense yet and it might confuse them even more. Therefore, ways of teaching the TL that work with younger learners are needed, and at the same time, these methods should follow the learning ideals mirrored in the NCC (POPS 2014, VOPS 2019) and give students more space to explore and discover parts of the language themselves through action-based tasks which support their agency and feelings of self-efficacy. The answer to this seems to be student-centered tasks, which were preferred over teacher-centered tasks in the classrooms that I visited. Student-centeredness, with

young learners, still arguably requires some facilitation on the teacher's part, although one could argue about the extent to which teachers really need to exercise control over their students and their doing (see e.g. Barnes 2012).

Technological advancements are already used in ELL classrooms, including those that I visited for the purposes of this study. The means that technology provides teachers to expand the traditional classroom setting are most likely going to evolve. Teaching might also take more influences from previously mentioned concepts, role reversal (Barnes 2012) and flipped learning (Bergmann & Sams 2014) and become even braver with changes and putting students in charge more. It is possible that students will be given even more autonomy and that they are therefore expected to take charge of their own learning process through projects and independent information seeking to an even greater extent, although this may not apply to young learners. The flipped learning or flipped classroom arrangement, for example, would call for tech-savvy teachers who are up for the challenge of recording their lessons for their students to see before they come to the next class.

To an extent, the present setting where the role of the textbook seems to be diminishing and where instruction is becoming more student-centered, based on my observations, is in fact already beginning to resemble the ideas of a flipped classroom and role reversal. What we are trying to achieve in ELL is stated in the NCC, and this covers basically making teaching *more* student-centered and task-based to fit the needs of young learners, and not flipping the classroom design upside down. Not yet, at least. Arguably, most schools are not ready for such reformations just yet, much like textbooks which still remain mostly the same as they have previously been. Nothing happens overnight, and on the other hand, gradual changes are good, for that way both teachers and students will be able to keep up with the pace and new ways of working and learning.

Exceptional situations, however, can speed up the pace at which changes occur. At the time that I am writing this, in April 2020, the world is battling against the novel

coronavirus, COVID-19, which, upon becoming a global pandemic and a real reason for worry, has locked people inside their homes. What this has meant for schools is that lessons had to be moved online, and now students meeting their teachers via video chatting platforms every weekday is the strange new norm. Being another new learning experience to teachers, other educators and students alike, it would be interesting to explore how some goals stated in the NCC (POPS 2014) and its amendment (VOPS 2019), such as the call for action-based and authentic tasks, for instance, are taken into account during such an unprecedented time. However, this is not what the present study was aiming to find out. This new situation has therefore also brought about new research gaps for those carrying out research in the field of education. I will discuss other potential topics for future studies later in Section 7.2.

Novel ways of teaching can pose novel challenges for both teachers and students. Longitudinal studies would be needed to find out if the need for differentiation and especially for remedial teaching is going to increase after the introduction of ELL in all elementary schools nationwide. The present study is not able to provide answers to these questions, and as the concept of nationwide early FL teaching is new, we will also need to wait in order to see if new concerns arise. In general, the new practices introduced in the latest NCC (POPS 2014), such as interdisciplinary learning, may change students' needs, especially for those who have gaps in their knowledge across different subjects (Maina 2004: 2) or have learning disabilities. Following teaching strictly in one subject can be demanding for some, not to mention in a situation where an English class, for instance, is not just an English class, but also Math and Science class. Educators can then be forced to ponder on important yet difficult questions, such as what might happen to students who struggle with both languages and sciences. It is possible that the increased need for differentiation and support will be taken into consideration when training new teachers.

On the other hand, now ELL can also draw teachers' attention to those learners who have problems with linguistic processing earlier, which can have positive consequences on

students' self-image as a language learner. Getting help early on makes it possible to work together with these students to introduce to them suitable strategies that make studying easier. This, in turn, helps creating positive learning experiences, which is likely to influence students' thoughts about studying languages. When learning is made enjoyable and interesting, it is also more likely that students will keep studying languages for longer, which would then, in the long run, positively affect linguistic resources in Finland. The need for speakers of foreign languages in the country is something that has recently been discussed (see e.g. Skinnari & Sjöberg 2018: 29). Then again, the nature of ELL and, later, as its more hands-on practices may spread to latter years of FL studies in school, can bring welcomed variety of different tasks to FL instruction. When the focus is less on the form and more on the function of a language, this shift can make learning experiences more pleasant for many students.

In the Finnish context, the relevance of introducing the first FL in elementary schools earlier than before serves students themselves. After anticipating them for some years, it looks like oral exams in foreign languages are becoming a mandatory part of the Finnish matricular examination procedure in the coming of years, in 2022 at the earliest (The Matriculation Examination Board 2019). This would mean that at the end of the Finnish high school or *lukio*, students would need to present their oral competence in at least one foreign language, such as English. Thinking forward, educators have realized that upon accepting this change to the structure of examinations in foreign languages, there is a need for communicative tasks that teach student to be active and think quite quickly in another language, preferably right from the beginning. The earlier students are taught to speak foreign languages, the more likely it is that it will become second nature for them. This, in turn, would help building that confidence and readiness that are needed for expressing oneself in a foreign language, while hopefully also teaching students that no matter their actual skills, whether an exam or a real-life situation, it is better to always at least try.

These changes that have happened and that are likely to happen in FL instruction, evidently help pave roads for students as they prepare themselves for life. They acquire skills needed to be as competitive as they can in the job markets, both domestically and internationally.

7.3   Evaluation and implications

The present study, being a thesis, was faced with certain constraints that somewhat adversely affected its extensiveness and therefore its ability to generalize some aspects of ELL instruction in Finland. For one, theses usually have a certain time limit in which they are written from start to end, and conducting longitudinal study or spending a longer amount of time in the field, collecting data, is often not feasible or even reasonable, even though this could improve both the quality of the thesis and the reliability of the findings. It is also possible that besides time constraints, there are other obstacles to collecting a larger amount of data. In my case, the commencement of ELL instruction kept many teachers busy, and getting in contact with them turned out to be a challenge. Therefore, I had to settle for the number of teachers to which I managed to reach out, as well as the number of lessons which I observed and to take notes. I would also have preferred to have more participating schools and more geographical spread between them. However, I was content to be able to collect data of the teaching of four different teachers, all of which were at different stages in their career: while some of them were getting started in general, there was one who is not only an experienced teacher, but also an experienced early FL teacher. While all four had their own way of teaching, the similarities and general patterns of ELL were clearly present.

In terms of the ethicality of the study, I followed the general ethical guidelines of conducting research. The participants, teachers and students, as well as the schools in question, were kept anonymous, which, according to Angrosino (2007: 85) is essential. I made sure I had all the permissions needed to conduct research in participating schools, and the four teachers were aware of the aim of the present study, as well as the IKI project,

for Miller and Bell (2012: 61) argue that it is important to gain what they call "'informed consent" to make sure that people know what participation to a certain study actually means. Angrosino (2007: 85) also states that a researcher should be open about the "purpose(s), potential impact(s), and source(s) of support" whenever introducing a study that for which they are asking people's participation. For the purposes of this study and because of the nature of it and the permissions that the IKI project was already given in these schools, I did not need to ask the students' parents if I could observe their children in class. I also followed the rules and requirements that were presented to me, due to collaborating with the researchers of IKI. I was asked to sign a form of confidentiality to solemnly confirm that I was going to keep all the data in a secure place. My notes were deleted and destroyed once the analysis was complete, except for the copies which I shared with IKI using secured means.

In terms of generalizations and as for the implications of the study, the results can give an idea of the nature of ELL and how it can be arranged. The findings reflect the general goals and descriptions stated in the NCC and its amendment, but due to the small scale of the research conducted, no detailed generalizations can be made for a few reasons. For one, I mentioned before that every teacher is an individual and has therefore their unique preferences and ways of teaching. Two, schools in Finland are different, as some of them get more funding for equipment, electronics, and other materials, which can either support or restrict the implementation of action-based teaching. Three, no school is identical with the next one, as they all have their own curricula besides the national one, which everyone is supposed to follow. Hence, the emphasis and selection of different core values can differ between schools.

Implications wise, the present study has still managed to capture the ways in which ELL instruction can be implemented in elementary schools in different parts of Finland, and as such it can give teachers and educators an idea of how to approach first graders who are beginning their journey as FL learners. It can offer some ideas for those designing teaching materials in terms of what is useful and needed in ELT classrooms, as well as

task suitability for this particular age group. Further, the findings can offer a starting point, point of reference or comparison for future studies.

7.4   Suggestions for future research

A clear research gap in action-based early FL teaching exists at least in the Finnish context, which is why it is rather easy to suggest further research, whether small or larger scale studies, in the topic. What would be especially useful in the future is using mixed methods and adding something to notes and observations. Teacher interviews have been conducted previously, as stated in Chapter 3.4, but asking more specific questions and targeting them to action-based learning in the classroom could be something to consider. Getting more teachers and schools to participate would also bring a possibility to new discoveries as to how ELL can be conducted; with smaller scale studies it is understandable that resources do not always allow for the most ideal of generalizations.

Longitudinal studies would be needed to find out whether the tasks used in an ELL classroom are efficient, or how FL teaching based on action-based learning and communicativeness takes different learners or students with special needs into account. More studies dedicated for studying differentiation and if the need for it has increased in Finnish schools after the introduction of FL instruction in the first grade may also be needed. One might ask, for example, if dyslexic students, or students with other learning disabilities need more assistance now that FL learning starts earlier, and if special needs are noticed earlier as well in those who do not seem to have difficulties at first. Further, it could also be interesting to compare teachers' and students' notions, experiences and beliefs on action-based FL learning. A material package compiling examples of action-based activities for first graders could also be a possibility.

As mentioned previously in Section 6.5, societies and therefore also schools can face unexpected challenge, which is why one could also research how unforeseen crises and situations, such as the current coronavirus pandemic, can affect teaching especially in

lower elementary grades, and if implementing action-based learning is feasible by using technology. Researching the relationship between online teaching, electronic materials and action-based learning does not even have to be linked to crises whatsoever, as the topic would be an interesting and enlightening one also as it is.

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