Tabletop role-playing games as tools for English learning and their potential implementation into classrooms in Finland

Otto Girsén

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Tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkielma perehtyy pöytäroolipelien mahdolliseen hyödyntämiseen englannin kielen oppimisessa. Aihetta on tutkittu tähän mennessä kohtalaisen vähän ja tutkimuskirjallisuudessa on selvä aukko. Tästä huolimatta pöytäroolipelien pelaajamäärät kasvavat joka vuosi räjähdysmäisesti. Tämä osoittaa, että ilmiö on tutkimisen arvoinen myös kielenoppimisen näkökulmasta.

Tässä laadullisessa tutkimuksessa toteutettiin kolmen pelikerran mittainen pöytäroolipelikokeilu neljälle korkeakouluopiskelijalle, joilla ei ollut suoraa kokemusta pöytäroolipeleistä. Nämä osallistujat myös kokivat omat englannin kielen taitonsa korkeintaan kohtalaisiksi. Kaikki pelikerrat videokuvattiin, ja jokaista osallistujaa haastateltiin erikseen joka pelikerran jälkeen. Pääsääntöisenä aineistona tutkimuksessa toimi tallennetut haastattelut pelikertojen jälkeen. Aineistosta oli tarkoituksena selvittää osallistujien näkemyksiä pöytäroolipelien soveltuvuudesta englannin oppimiseen ja niiden sisällyttämisestä perinteiseen luokkahuoneopetukseen. Aineisto analysoitiin pääsääntöisesti laadullisen sisällönanalyysin metodeilla.

Tutkimuksen päätulokset osoittavat, että pöytäroolipelien pelaaminen englanniksi toimii hyvin englannin oppimisen keinona, johtuen etenkin kielenkäytön monipuolisuudesta ja pelaajien yhteistyöstä pelin aikana. Yllättävää oli kuitenkin, että osallistujat ilmaisivat pettymyksensä perinteiseen englannin luokkahuoneopetukseen Suomessa, johtuen etenkin vähäisestä improvisaation määrästä. Pöytäroolipelit voisivat paikata näitä puutteita, mutta etenkin nykyiset isot luokkahuonekoot ovat esteenä näiden pelien sujuvaan sisällyttämiseen.

Johtuen pöytäroolipelien rajusta kasvusta, tulisi aihetta tutkia vielä suuremmilla osallistujamäärillä, jotta aiheesta saataisiin kattavampaa tutkimustietoa.

Asiasanat
Tabletop role-playing games, English learning, learning environments

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1 Introduction

In recent years, tabletop role-playing games have experienced a renewed surge of interest. Over 10 million players actively play the most popular tabletop role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*, which is only one of the myriads of tabletop role-playing game systems available to the public, and the player numbers of these games are only rising each year. Although tabletop role-playing games may often be seen as the pastime of geeky male teenagers, according to reports from *Wizards of the Coast,* the developers of *Dungeons and Dragons*, over 38% of the players are female, the age demographic is wider than ever before, and the activity has players all around the world (Alimurung 2019). This interest in the hobby is not showing signs of decline, and is becoming more widespread with each passing year.

Tabletop role-playing games are, at their very core, a group based activity. Participating in this form of gaming consists of a number of players putting on the role of a selected character that they have usually self-created, and they control this single character's actions during the playing sessions. One of the players, usually called the game master, does not control a single character, however. The person functioning as the game master creates the setting for a playing session's content and plays the role of the entire world that the other players are interacting with. The fact that everything in the game revolves around these two roles means that everything that in essence, everything in the game is collaboratively created by the participating players.

This intrinsic collaboration in the storytelling process is what differentiates the activity from most other storytelling formats. In addition, tabletop role-playing games put the players in direct control of the character, and as such, allows for a more intimate connection with the story, the world, and the other characters that they are interacting with. Indeed, the basic requirement for the participation in role-playing of this kind requires immersing oneself into the activity (Balzer 2011). As everything relating to tabletop role-playing games is fundamentally player driven, it is natural that the activity requires a significant amount of successful communication both between the players and game master, and between the players themselves. Further, as a requirement for role-playing itself is to don the role of a different person than oneself, it may be that this change in roles may cause a difference in conversational styles as well. From all of this it can be summarised that all role-playing, which tabletop role-playing games rely on, is built almost entirely on verbal communication. Therefore, the activity

lends itself naturally to language learning scenarios, as has already been noted by some language teachers (Otty 2017).

As English is seen as the lingua franca of the world, it is of no surprise that most of the developers of these tabletop role-playing games usually write the rules and materials for their game in English. Some groups play in their native language and translate the English materials into that language, whereas some groups merely play the game in English even though it may not be their native language. Additionally, due to the global reach of the internet, many websites such as *Roll20* allow for role-playing games to be created and played on the internet. Nevertheless, simply the act of playing a role-playing game requires language work and contact with the English language, which is especially accentuated when English is a second or foreign language to the players engaging in the activity.

Tabletop role-playing games and their connection to language use have already been somewhat covered by past studies (see e.g. Cook, Gremo, and Morgan 2017 or Zalka 2012). However, most of these studies are limited to including tabletop role-playing gaming in a traditional language classroom. While this is definitely an extremely valid and worthy topic to research, not that many studies pertain to organic language learning that may occur through tabletop role-playing games in an extramural context. After all, not all matters concerning language learning occur in a classroom, and delving into the topic of seeing how participating in a role-playing game may affect one's perceived level of language proficiency is a worthwhile prospect. Furthermore, many of these previous studies appear to at times be more concerned with spreading the general message of tabletop role-playing games to the public, which oftentimes surfaces as the over-explaining of the mechanics of the tabletop role-playing game system. While detailing the rules of the specific systems is necessary to frame the potential of role-playing games, giving this aspect too much focus may detract from the academic potential of the study by potentially signifying too much enthusiasm for tabletop role-playing games.

In addition, the focus of previous studies in this field have been relatively scattered, as although the studies focus on the use of role-playing games in a language classroom, the chief concern of these studies is not necessarily on how this form of gaming assists in one's communicating in a foreign language. Instead, these previous studies often use tabletop role-playing games as an alternative method of reading comprehension, by teaching a classroom e.g. a short story and helping them memorize it through being active participants in the story. The study conducted by Cook, Gremo, and Morgan (2017) is one such study, and in their research, a middle school

class was taught a short story by integrating tabletop role-playing gaming into the teacher's teaching repertoire. Therefore, the focus in this study (and other similar studies) is more on teaching better literacy instead of improving communicative capabilities. In addition, other studies focus on learning mathematics as some tabletop role-playing games rely on knowing probabilities and knowing some mathematical equations (Quijano 2007).

From this can be inferred that previous studies have traditionally heavily valued the storytelling and mathematical potential that is inherent in tabletop role-playing games. While these aspects of role-playing games are core to the activity and offer opportunities for research, these dual foci leave a gap in the field of research when it comes to learning communication in a foreign language through tabletop role-playing games. Therefore, the focus in these previous studies is often less on the topic of learning fluent communication through tabletop role-playing games, and more on learning literacy or logical thinking and mathematics. Focusing on foreign language communication in this context places value on the organic communication that is always present in tabletop role-playing games, which is fundamental to the activity itself in addition to the previously discussed aspects of these games. Studies on the language learning potential of tabletop role-playing games would offer a better view of them as educational tools, both in and out of the classroom. In addition, the Finnish context for language learning of this kind is ultimately very unresearched, leaving proper effective opportunities for illuminating this context.

The present study attempts to remedy some of these gaps presented by previous research in the field by focusing on the learning of communicative skills in an extramural context through tabletop role-playing games. This research is a qualitative case study that delves into the potential of tabletop role-playing games as tools to build English skills by examining the thoughts and perceptions of university students who are all new to the genre. The specific goal is to see what people who have never played tabletop role-playing games think of their educational properties when it comes to language learning, both prior to them obtaining experience with such games and after. In addition, one of the aims of this study is to find out if the participants held any preconceived notions surrounding tabletop role-playing games and if there are any potential barriers to entry in the participants' minds. To fulfil these aims, four tabletop role-playing sessions were conducted with four participants in order to obtain their thorough perceptions on role-playing as a language learning tool. All of the sessions were recorded in video form, and the recordings were later used to create video-stimulated recall

interviews with the participants in order to obtain their insights on the topic at hand. For the analysis of this study the interviews are the main source of data, whereas the recordings of the tabletop role-playing sessions themselves were mainly used to support these interviews.

The study consists of seven chapters. The second chapter delves into the theoretical foundation of the study by going through previous literature related to EFL learning, centering on the most relevant topics to this study, which are learning English in an extramural context, drama, and creativity. The third chapter focuses on the heart of the study at hand, which is tabletop role-playing games. These games are considered both from the viewpoint of language use in them, as well as previous studies relating to their educational potential when it comes to language learning. The fourth chapter continues to a thorough description and discussion of the present study, discussing the design decisions and methodological choices. The fifth chapter illustrates the results of the study with excerpts from the video-stimulated recall interviews. The sixth chapter presents a deeper discussion on the themes that emerged from the results of the study. Lastly, the seventh chapter concludes the study and summarizes the main findings.

2 EFL learning through play

English is a very important language in today's world. Even multiple decades ago, it was seen as a language with a wide reach in the world due to the number of users who use it as a first language, second, or a foreign language. Broughton (1980: 5) states that all non-native users of English have two major reasons for learning English: either instrumentative or integrative motivations. Those with instrumental motivations learn the language to fulfil a specific purpose, such as to consume media in the language or to communicate efficiently with it. Those with integrative motivations, however, learn the language in order to feel at home with the other users of the language and the community that has formed around the language.

In today's society, however, this distinction appears overly simplistic and the use of especially English is different than many other languages in the world. English is used as the major language in most forms of media and the internet (Soler and Safont-Jorda 2012: 4), and as such, many non-native users of the language learn it to *both* use it instrumentally to communicate, and to integrate with the international community that has formed around using English as a lingua franca. In the context of the present study, that is tabletop role-playing games, this aspect of the role of English is of particular importance, as tabletop role-playing games are often played via the internet by people who use English as a foreign language. Therefore, they are engaging with English for two major reasons: first, the rulesets of the games are generally written in English, and second, English is the most commonly used language for intercultural role-playing groups. Therefore, using English in the context of tabletop role-playing gaming often involves both instrumentative and integrative purposes, which deepens the connection learners of the language have with it.

English as a foreign language (EFL) can generally be defined to mean language learning in a context, in which the community does not actively use the language for everyday activities (Butler 2015). However, the differences between English as a second language (ESL) and as a foreign language are not as apparent as may easily be considered. Broughton (1980: 8) points out that in many countries the boundaries between languages are greater than in some other countries, and it is difficult to categorize these languages properly. For example, if a German speaker of English consistently consumes English media, the language may be more emotionally connected to him than to a Chinese learner of English who does encounter the English language outside the classroom, even though to both parties English is technically by

most definitions a foreign language. Therefore, this aspect of the terminology is fundamentally connected to the nature of language itself, and who is using the language, especially when considering languages that have the status of a lingua franca in the world, such as English. This same discussion is ongoing in the Finnish context of English usage as well, and many are divided on whether English should be considered a second language or a foreign language (Saarinen and Jaativirta 2014: 37). Leppänen (2007) points out that especially for the younger generation of Finns the use of English as a form of constructing identity is more common, whereas for the older generation English is generally more of a foreign language. Even though some learners have enough contact with the language to obtain the status of an ESL learner, it is not always the case and thus cannot be assumed to be certain, which is why in the present study I have decided to use the term EFL when discussing the role and learning of English in Finland.

In this chapter, I will discuss studies that pertain to EFL learning, both in and out the classroom. The specific subsections for this chapter were selected to keep a connection of relevance to the main topic of tabletop role-playing games. First, I will discuss and present studies relating to learning English in an extramural context, that is outside of a formal language learning context, such as a school or university. After this, I will go over studies concerning English learning and its connection to drama and role-playing, and discuss what effects including these in a formal English education may have. Lastly, I will discuss learning English through a lens of expressing one's creativity, as role-playing allows a degree of self-expression that fosters creativity.

2.1 English acquisition extramurally and out of the classroom

An extramural language learning context is a context that occurs outside the walls of an establishment in which language is taught, such as a classroom. The term is similar to the perhaps more commonly found term *out-of-class language learning*, which also means language learning that is occurring outside of a classroom. The main difference between these terms is that out-of-class learning can be considered to mean language learning that occurs independently by language learners without organization, whereas extramural language learning generally refers to organized language learning that occurs outside the walls of a traditional formal language learning setting, such as a classroom (Benson 2011: 9).

What is often discussed as the most prevalent form of extramural and out-of-class language learning is the term *naturalistic learning*, which was pioneered in the late 1970s and the early 1980s (see e.g. Krashen 1981). The main learning form in this approach is the consumption of texts in the target language and active participation in discussions and cultural practices of the target language. The relevance of this term in regards to tabletop role-playing games and language learning is that such games can be considered a naturalistic learning environment. The reasoning being that when one learns English through a role-playing game, they may have other motives in mind as to why they are engaging with the activity in English instead of purposeful intention to learn English. The importance of naturalistic language learning is that it can severely impact the motivation a learner has towards language learning. When a learner simply uses a language without the specific purpose of trying to become proficient in it, the learner may have motivation to succeed on the task at hand without stressing about potentially not learning new aspects of a language. Thus, creating a new drive to learn that overshadows the motivation of simply learning a language overall strengthens the identity one has as a language user and makes learning the language more effective (Gardner 2006: 351).

Although it is a commonly held thought that the learning of a language most often occurs within the confines of a classroom, this concept has been challenged more and more by studies and papers on the topic (Sundqvist 2009: 26). Although the idea that learning occurs in a classroom has been criticized more, this does not mean that one form of language learning would be inherently above the other, as both forms have their places in society. Benson (2017: 137) notes the emergence of a balanced view to this issue, in which a learner can benefit from both learning occurring in and out the classroom. He thus proposes viewing the learning contexts as learning environments in which language learning is made possible. In addition to the spatial elements of these environments, they also take into account the temporal aspect of language learning, in that one can acquire better language skills in a classroom during the day, and through for example media consumption during the evening. This situates these two forms of language learning not as constructs that compete for the same resources in a person's life, but rather as two separate forms of learning that often naturally occur together with significant overlap.

2.2 Learning English through drama

Drama is a term that can be relatively difficult to describe efficiently, as it is broad enough to encompass multiple different ways of thinking and viewpoints. What drama is at its core, however, is a form of communication in which an active role is taken on by the participants to live through a simulated experience (Kalidas 2014: 445). In this way, drama can be seen as a symbolic language that can be utilized in a very diverse way to represent different situations that one would not potentially normally encounter. This nature gives drama inherent advantages when connected with language learning, and makes it possible to learn a language from many different perspectives, through not limiting one's perception to their own experiences and views.

The relationship between drama and language learning is a field of study that already has been relatively well scoped out. Even long before the advent of the first official tabletop role-playing games, studies surrounding the relationship between role-playing and language learning exist (see e.g. Holden 1981). In essence, role-playing centers around the participating parties donning new identities for the duration of the role-playing. Davies (1990: 92) discusses the role of role-playing in language learning in his article on and the use of drama in language education. He states that effective role-playing scaffolds the learning process for the learners by making the focus of the activity partly on words that the learners already know, with the other part being the words that the activity surrounds. For example, through role-playing a learner may learn how to properly reserve a table in a restaurant. What is of importance here is that role-playing enables learning language use in a safe environment, without one putting themselves in a situation in which their social face might be threatened.

Because the present study focuses on tabletop role-playing games, it is of importance to discuss the forms of drama that are most related to the activity. What is of great similarity to tabletop role-playing is process drama. Process drama is a form of teaching methodology, in which students and the teacher engage in deep role-playing with various roles (Bolton 1979). The students take on roles that they play in order to fulfil a specific goal, for instance protesting for environmental sustainability, whereas the teacher leads the process and acts as the other characters in the scenario. This form of drama is mostly unscripted, and it usually lasts for multiple sessions, forming a relatively short, yet continuous story. This form of drama bears a striking resemblance to role-playing games in many ways. In both, there is one person leading

the role-playing, while the others are experiencing and interacting with the story that the leading person is constructing.

Although process dramas and traditional role-playing activities have a great deal of features in common, such as the whole role-playing process itself and that there is a goal to accomplish, there is one crucial difference in the activities. The traditional role-playing exercises that are seen in many language learning textbooks rely on a sense of security that is served through prematurely scripted events and responses for the participants (Davies 1990: 93). This scripted play works well for classrooms, as it is easy to implement and for the learners to grasp. This may be why the activity is often seen as exercises in many English classes, and is fundamentally a form of drama that is only delivered in a different context to the learners of a language, although they may not be aware of it at the time.

Integrating drama into English learning also enables learners of the language to possess multiple viewpoints and voices within the language itself. As expressed by Bakhtin (1984), using a language for the purposes of communication is inherently a dialogical act, as one must choose to utilize a proper voice for a certain situation when engaging in social behaviour. Not all forms of language are socially appropriate for a given situation, after all, and being considered fluent in a language may be understood to know the proper voice for a certain situation. Drama may, by extension, serve as a tool to teach a class of English learners multiple different voices in a language, as the learners must adapt to the different roles they are taking on. Newell (2019: 365) states in her essay on exploration of dialogue in an English classroom that a Bakhtinian approach in language teaching allows learners to simultaneously take on multiple different roles as language users, therefore deepening their grasp on the language as a whole.

2.3 Creativity and English learning

Before going deeper on the subject of the interconnectedness of creativity and language learning, a definition for the term creativity must be given to establish boundaries on the topic. In a sense, all drama is inherently driven by creativity, and as such, the topic is of interest in this study. Creativity is at its core inherently connected with generativity, as it is vitally concerned with the creation of ideas or concepts. Runco and Jaeger (2012: 92) state that there is a "bipartite" aspect to the term creativity, in that being a creative person requires both

originality *and* effectiveness. Being original in prospects is not enough, as ineffectiveness quickly renders the novel action useless and futile in the long term. Indeed, it is the combination of these two aspects that are often used to mark an item as being creative in nature. However, although the strict definition of what constitutes creativity is constantly changing and evolving (such as the emergence of surprise as a third crucial feature of creativity as described by Runco and Jaeger (2012: 95)), it can be stated that the main defining features of creativity center around this bipartite nature of it.

Now that the main defining features of creativity have been defined, they can be contrasted with language use in general, and how these two concepts fit together. In general, the use of language has been found to correlate with the growth of one's creativity (Zhang et. al. 2019: 3). This is mainly due to the fact that all information is processed and expressed via language to others, and people who may possess better linguistic capabilities of expressing themselves with a language may also overall hold better creative ways of expressing themselves. Further, this effect of language knowledge on creativity is only expanded when taking multiple languages into consideration. Although the specifics on the reasons behind this effect are not fully clear, this may be due to multilingual people being able to view the world in multiple different ways through the different languages (Kharkhurin 2012: 173). In addition, multilingual users of languages may be able to approach problems in a simpler way due to them suppressing languages they are not in contact with, and thus increasing the ability to focus and concentrate (Kharkhurin 2012: 174). All in all, the relationship between language use and creativity is clear, and if language can foster a user to become more creative, languages might also be possible to learn more effectively and easily by utilizing one's creative potential.

Play is also a form of creativity that can be considered to be relevant to the study at hand. Playing is an activity that can be defined as being fun, which often overrules other emotions that are connected to the same activity at hand, although what defines as playing can be difficult to define. In fact, it can be stated that simply by self-identifying an activity as play means that it becomes play, as described by Cook (2000: 100). The aspect of play being fun means that language learning through it means that creating language in this creative and transformative fashion is often masked and made easier than it would otherwise be in some other contexts (Belz 2002: 16).

3 Tabletop role-playing games and language learning

Tabletop role-playing games are amassing more and more players with each passing year, and as such, more people are getting introduced to the concept of role-playing in a gaming context itself. Although tabletop role-playing are extremely varied and diverse as a grouping, because different games may have different rules and function entirely differently as a whole when compared to a different role-playing game, all of the games in this category have a few defining features in common. First, all tabletop role-playing games have participating players who have arrived at the table to take part in the playing process, the goal of which is to play through and participate in the unfolding of a story. As such, tabletop role-playing gaming is, at its very core, collaborative storytelling, as all of the players are active participants in the continuation of the story. Second, a tabletop role-playing game requires rules which all of the participants in the game must follow in order for the playing process to be functional and effective. Lastly, one of the players participating in the playing process usually serves as the game master, effectively playing the part of the world and all of the non-player characters that the other players meet and interact with in the story. However, it must be stated that as tabletop role-playing games are a very fluid activity to participate in, not all groups follow even these basic features of a usual game. Not all playing groups and tabletop role-playing game systems even have the role of a game master, as playing without it makes the activity even more collaborative as every participant in the table has the same role and works together as a team. Therefore, the only crucial aspect in the game is the presence of rules that all players follow to create boundaries for the game, whether those rules are reinforced by one of the players serving as a gamemaster or by the chosen game system itself.

Before the actual tabletop role-playing game can begin, all of the participants have to create a character that they are controlling in the playing session itself. As the game master is in control of the world and prepares the base for a session's content, this character creation is often done in collaboration with the game master in order for the created character to fit the baseline story. After all of the players have created their characters, the group can together participate in the actual playing process which is divided into "sessions", each of which lasts for multiple hours on average. During these sessions, the game master will often give descriptions of events, characters and locations to the players, who will then respond to these triggers given to them as their character that they are controlling. Additionally, a crucial aspect of the tabletop role-playing experience is the players interacting with each other as their characters. In many groups

it is not uncommon for the characters to engage in in-character conversation for a lengthy period without the game master taking part in the discussion, which potentially increases the players' immersion into their characters.

In this chapter, I will discuss different facets of tabletop role-playing games, especially in the context of learning languages through them. In the first subsection, I will elaborate on the use of language in tabletop role-playing games in general, and how for example dialogue affects participating in the activity. This is followed by the second section, which will build on the knowledge of the previous subsection by discussing and evaluating the potential of tabletop role-playing games as educational tools by weighing the positive and negative aspects of them.

3.1 Role of language use in tabletop role-playing games

As stated earlier, most of the tabletop role-playing game systems in the world have rule sets that were written in English, mainly due to its reach as the lingua franca of the world, especially the internet. Although many groups play in their native language, participating in the playing process still requires language work, as the players in the game still must translate at least the rules of the game into their native language. In addition to the rules of the game often being in English, the assets that are available for the players to use online are in English as well. These assets include in-game objects such as mundane and magical items, and descriptions of locations or character archetypes. Therefore, even if the role-playing game is not played in English, participating in the playing process still generally requires interacting with the English language.

Language use is without a doubt the central axis around which the whole process of the playing of a tabletop role-playing game revolves. In a tabletop role-playing game, everything is resolved through language, as players have to describe with words what their characters are doing in a specific moment, and not just what their characters are saying (Cook, Gremo, and Morgan 2017: 205). This differentiates tabletop role-playing games from many other forms of role-playing, because in these other forms players can often physically interact with the other players and do not have to linguistically describe how they are for instance standing. However, due to the fact that tabletop role-playing games are a collaborative group based activity, the attention should be divided equally between all the players. This means that one does not have to speak up all the time and therefore find the experience daunting and potentially frightening,

since the other players are there for potential support if the need arises. The collaborative nature of these games are highlighted in these situations, because the players are encouraged to support each other and ensure that everyone in the party achieves their full potential and functions as a part of the group (Quijano 2007).

In addition to the support provided by the other players, the game master also serves as a strong support in terms of language use for the other players (Otty 2017). The game master is often, although not strictly always, one person who is chosen beforehand to play a special role in the game. They guide the playing process and play as the 'world' the players explore, and thus they often describe events that the other players encounter and experience. This role generally requires better language skills than the roles that the other players fill, because they have much more attention placed on them due to playing so many different roles instead of just one character (Quijano 2007).

3.2 The potential of tabletop role-playing games as educational tools

Perhaps due to its only somewhat recent surge of interest, only a few studies focus on the educational aspects of tabletop role-playing games. Quijano (2007) states in his study on the integration of role-playing games in ESL classrooms that role-playing games force a language learner to use all of their skills available in order to succeed in the game, creating an environment where communicating with the language is motivating and rewarding. This is further bolstered by the fact that in general, playing games may be considered an effective means of learning and socializing due to it being voluntary and pleasurable (Rieber 1996: 44).

Some studies have already highlighted that especially the collaborative nature of tabletop role-playing games has an overall effect in the players in the form of improved communication skills (Cook, Gremo, and Morgan 2017; Otty 2017). This effect of the inherent collaborative nature of tabletop role-playing games may very well indicate that they provide an efficient context in which to learn communicating in a foreign language as well, as it is a form of communication in which practice is key. While many studies do not seem to exist on the actual effect of this in adults, some educators who have tested the concept of tabletop role-playing games as educational tools have discovered that they function excellently as a context which fosters social and emotional development in children and enhances verbal capabilities (Carter 2011). Further, tabletop role-playing games are occasionally used to teach autistic youth

communication skills, which serves as further evidence of the educational capabilities of these games (Burke 2017).

However, due to the free-form nature of role-playing games, some learners who are not particularly confident in their language skills may find the experience frightening and daunting (Quijano 2007). This emotion naturally makes the learning experience more difficult, meaning that not all aspects connected to tabletop role-playing games are inherently positive. Comfortability and proper self-image are crucial when it comes to effective language learning, as they are traits that relate to learners who are equipped to succeed in learning foreign languages (Krashen 1981). However, it must be stated that as role-playing is inherently a very personal affair with only a few people participating, a situation in which a player feels uncomfortable can be avoided and is usually attempted by most groups. Indeed, according to many tabletop role-playing game rulebooks, it is up to all players in the table to provide an atmosphere in which all players feel comfortable and do not fear the playing process. Further, role-playing is a highly adaptable activity, which can be shaped into whatever form the group playing prefers. Nevertheless, it can be said that some players will never find role-playing a comforting activity, as every person has their own personal cognitive learning style (Riding 2001). As such, role-playing may not be for everyone, which is perfectly acceptable, and a possible result of the present study as well.

The greatest difference that tabletop role-playing games have to traditional drama is the presence of game mechanics in role-playing games, whereas drama is purely focused on acting and playing a role. However, these game mechanics might serve an additional purpose that is not present in traditional process drama, as the game mechanics might give the activity additional distance from traditional activities that are connected to learning and as such make the process more fun to the participants (Cook, Gremo, and Morgan 2017: 211). In this case, the participants of role-playing games may focus less on the use of language and the potential mistakes they make, due to the aspect of the whole process being a game, which some may consider to be more engaging than simply acting a scene.

Identities are also an aspect of tabletop role-playing games that are crucial to the activity, which is related to the educational possibilities the activity offers. Role-playing requires a person to take the role of another creature that might be vastly different from the identity of the person playing the character. All learning involves identity work, and role-playing games may make

learning a language easier as the role-player can construct an identity that they are comfortable in (Gee 2003). This in turn may make role-playing games an ideal learning context, especially for those who have problems in adapting to the requirements in identity set by some other learning contexts. Additionally, according to the long since established tradition surrounding second language acquisition, motivation is of utmost importance (Dörnyei 2001). Role-playing games may offer an efficient alternative to learn communication in a foreign language in a context that learners may find more pleasant than other contexts. In fact, there is generally a strong correlation between high motivation and games (Gee 2003: 21), which can be linked to tabletop games as well.

4 The present study

The present study is a qualitative case study that delves into the potential of tabletop role-playing games as tools to build English skills. The specific goal is to see what people who have never played tabletop role-playing games think of their educational properties when it comes to language learning, both prior to them obtaining experience with such games and after. To fulfil this aim, three tabletop role-playing sessions were conducted with four participants in order to obtain their perceptions on role-playing games as a language learning tool. All of the sessions were recorded in video form, and the recordings were later used to create video-stimulated recall interviews with the participants in order to obtain their insights on the topic at hand.

In addition, before the actual role-playing sessions, the participants answered a brief questionnaire concerning their background information on the topic and their preferences in the game's content, or if they had any content that they did not wish to see in the playing sessions themselves. These questionnaires were, therefore, used as a guide to construct the actual sessions that the participants played and experienced, but they were not of particular importance for the actual analysis of the study.

The first part of this section details and discusses the research questions for the study, and what are the aims for each of the research questions and design behind each question. The second subsection details the participants of the study and the tabletop role-playing game system that was utilized for the study, both of which are divided into their own subchapters for ease of navigation. Lastly, I will describe and discuss both the diverse array of data collection methods used for the study, as well as the methods that were used to analyze the obtained data.

4.1 Aim and research questions

The purpose of the study is to examine tabletop role-playing games as a source to learn a language, especially regarding communication skills. The aspect of communication is heavily weighed because of the inherent collaborative aspect native to role-playing games, forcing the participants in the activity to interact verbally with one another. Although the focus may be on the communication aspect of tabletop role-playing games, the present study is broad enough to

provide data on multiple different aspects of tabletop role-playing games which will all be taken into consideration in the data analysis section.

Rather than comparing and contrasting the starting skills of participants with the results at the end, for the present study I am more interested in obtaining information about the participants' perceptions on how useful tabletop role-playing games are for learning languages and communication in a foreign language. This potential surfaces in what the participants describe to be the strengths and weaknesses of learning English through participating in tabletop role-playing games. What is of particular interest to me is obtaining opinions held by the participants about the educational potential of tabletop role-playing games *before* obtaining experience with them, and then observing if these viewpoints had changed at all after actually playing them for the first time. The main objective with this approach is to see if these preconceived notions held by the participants are realistic or not, and whether they can be changed or not. In addition, the present study is also concerned about the possible integration of tabletop role-playing games into a traditional classroom context in Finland, and if such an integration would even be worth striving for. From all of these general driving points, the research questions formulated for the study are as follows:

> 1. What preconceived notions did the participants hold about tabletop role-playing games, especially as educational tools, before obtaining experience with them?

> 2. How do the participants view tabletop role-playing games as a method of developing linguistic competence in English, and what opportunities and challenges do the participants connect with this form of learning?

> 3. According to the participants, can tabletop role-playing games be effectively integrated into traditional English education in Finland, and what benefits and challenges would a potential inclusion face?

The purpose of the first question is to assess the participants' preconceived notions surrounding tabletop role-playing games. The obtained data which serves as the answer to this question is then contrasted with the participants' opinions of this educational potential of tabletop role-playing games after they had participated in all three role-playing sessions, in order to extract insight into how their views had changed after acquiring experience with the activity itself. The second research question delves deeper into the important question of how useful tabletop role-

playing games are as language learning tools in the participants' eyes. In addition, this research question will also scope out the positive and negative aspects of learning English through tabletop games. The last research question takes the theoretical nature of the second research question into a concrete application and obtains information on the participants' views on potentially including tabletop role-playing games into a traditional classroom context in Finland.

4.2 Research participants and setting

In this subsection, I will explain the intricacies of the setting of the present study in more detail. First, the research participants are introduced, and the relevant information surrounding them is given for context. As a qualitative case study, the study focuses heavily on these participants and their personal opinions on the researched matters. Due to this detailed look into the participants and their opinions, it is of utmost importance that they maintain their anonymity even though their opinions are revealed in the study itself. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, all of the participants are referred to in the roles that they held during the role-playing process itself. Additionally, all information that is either too personally revealing or of no relevance to the study is not published via this research.

4.2.1 Research participants

The present study has four participants, two male and two female, all of which had to fulfil several criteria in order to have qualified for the study. Each of the participants had to be a student of higher education in Finland, have Finnish as their mother tongue, not have studied English as a part of their higher education or otherwise possess obviously high capabilities in English (such as by having an English significant other), and to not have significant experience with tabletop role-playing games (in any language). The first people considered for the participant positions who filled these criteria were chosen without any further criteria applied, after I had personally met with each of the participants to see if they would mesh with the other participants well. This was done to minimize the possibility that the participants would keep their guard up with the other players and thus inhibit their natural behaviours during the playing process, especially because role-playing is a fairly intimate process due to the close interactions between the players.

The participants for the study were recruited privately at the very end of 2019 and at the beginning of 2020, through private connections with people. For the sake of the data being as pure as possible, however, I was personally not well acquainted with any of the participants in order for a possible connection or a form of bias to corrupt the data in any way. In addition, none of the participants knew each other well before participating in the study, although some had seen each other briefly before.

All of the relevant information of the participants is located in the following table. The column on the left side of the table shows the roles that the participants' characters filled in the actual gameplay sessions themselves, which are what the participants will be referred to from this point on.

Role in game	Gender	Opinion of their own level of English	Prior knowledge of tabletop role-playing games
Captain	Female	Good	Had heard of
Engineer	Male	Good	Had heard of
Medic	Female	Passable, everyday situations	None
Mercenary	Male	Decent, better written than spoken skills	Very limited personal experience

In the table it can be seen that the participants had differing levels of both familiarity with tabletop role-playing games as a concept and with their own evaluation of their English skills. The Captain and the Engineer were very similar in this regard, as both of them had heard of tabletop role-playing games and considered themselves to possess good (but not excellent) skills in English. These two aspects set the two participants apart from the two other participants, as their previous experience with both the English language and tabletop role-playing games were so alike. The Mercenary, on the other hand, had very limited personal experience with tabletop role-playing games as a player, but still was not wholly familiar with the concept of tabletop role-playing games. The Medic was by far the most distinct new player of the group in two significant ways: out of the participants, she considered herself to have the

weakest English skills, and she had never even heard of tabletop role-playing games before participating in the study.

4.2.2 The tabletop role-playing game system

For the present study, the tabletop role-playing system used was Dread, published by The Impossible Dream in 2006. Unlike many other tabletop role-playing games which utilize rolling dice with different variables for resolving actions taken, Dread has a much more straightforward system that is potentially easier to understand, especially for newcomers to the genre. As most of the participants in the study have never played tabletop role-playing games before, for the purposes of this study it was considered crucial to make engaging with the system as effortless as possible. Relying on a simpler system also allows for the players to participate in the narrative aspects of the story more, since they do not have to worry about not remembering all the rules in specific situations. Additionally, due to the fact that Dread provides each player characters that have distinct skill sets and areas of expertise, it may foster an atmosphere in which the players are naturally drawn to interact and negotiate with each other in order to utilize their skills in the appropriate contexts.

The benefits of this simple system, especially for the present study, are both narrative and mechanical in origin. The narrative scaffolding provided by the system is seen in the players being provided with a brief questionnaire before the first playing session begins. This questionnaire gives every player a specific role, and also presents them some loaded questions to think about in order to flesh out their characters' personalities before playing, so that the potentially intimidating venture of having to start with a blank slate could be avoided. For example, a question in the questionnaire could be "Why were you exiled from your home country?", which tells the player that their character is an exile, and they just have to fill in the gaps instead of having to come up with story beats on their own.

The mechanical scaffolding, on the other hand, is seen in the simplification or lack of many tabletop mechanics that may be associated with games in the genre, such as reliance on dice and complex character sheets. In Dread, whenever a player attempts to do an action that their character is not proficient in through the questionnaire they filled in before playing, they have to pull a wooden block from a tower of wooden blocks located on a table the players are sitting around (as in the game Jenga). In other words, the participants do not have to consult a complex character sheet in order to deduce what they are able to do, since they can just tell the game

master what they are attempting, and the game master then makes the player pull a block if required. If the tower topples and the pull is unsuccessful, the action fails and the character in the game dies due to some circumstances. This mechanic works especially well for games that only take place during a single session, as a player only has to sit out a couple of hours at most. However, as the present study comprises multiple play sessions, the decision was made to replace this aspect of player death with something negative happening to the character in order to maintain the longevity of the game. In addition, this change enables more role-playing possibilities for the players, as their characters experience events to which they can react to as players instead of just being forcefully removed from the game altogether.

The story campaign that the participants played through with the tabletop role-playing game system was written by me personally. In the story, the participants were explorers hired by a company to make an expedition into a previously unvisited tropical island. The first playing session revolved around travelling to the island, the second the party's exploration of the island proper, and the last session was the climax and also provided a brief epilogue for the players to wrap up their characters' stories. The outlines for the sessions themselves were very loose in form, and the sessions were adjusted during play accordingly when the participants wanted to do something that was not strictly in my preparations for the session, which is very common in tabletop role-playing games and for many people one of the main draws that the activity has.

4.3 Data collection

In order to obtain answers for the research questions presented, the data has been collected from three different sources: the preliminary questionnaires handed to the participants before the playing process had begun, the video recordings of the three tabletop role-playing sessions themselves, as well as the video-stimulated recall interviews conducted after every tabletop role-playing game session. In this subsection, each of these sources will be detailed. Of the three sources, the primary source of data are the interviews, whereas the questionnaires and the video recordings of the sessions were mainly used to supplement the amount and quality of information to be obtained from the interviews.

4.3.1 Preliminary questionnaire

To obtain data of the participants' previous knowledge of tabletop role-playing games, a brief questionnaire was handed to the participants relating to tabletop role-playing games and their possible potential as tools to learn languages (see Appendix 1). As the participants had no prior knowledge of tabletop role-playing games in practice before participating in the study, the answers showed the participants' preconceived thoughts about role-playing games and their potential as educational tools. These opinions and points were then utilized later as part of the interviews with the participants, and the participants were asked to reflect on their answers in the preliminary questionnaire especially in the final interview, mainly to obtain insight into if their views had changed or not.

An additional need that the questionnaire fulfilled was adapting the content of the actual role-playing sessions to fit the wishes of the participants. Tabletop role-playing games are an activity that is very free in form, and as such, it can contain all kinds of content. Not all players have the same tolerance for all content, however, and the questionnaire enabled the participants to anonymously state if they found exempli gratia violence in role-playing distasteful and preferred not to encounter it in excessive amounts during the sessions. The role-playing sessions were then created and conducted with these limits in mind in order not to make any of the players at the table feel uncomfortable.

4.3.2 Video recording the role-playing sessions

Even though I was present in the role-playing sessions and functioned as the game master for the participants during the game, it is difficult to perceive everything that is happening due to the relatively frantic nature of the activity. Additionally, the free-form nature of role-playing games usually creates a situation in which multiple events are occurring simultaneously, the most common of which can be overlapping talk. To not miss any actions that occurred during the playing sessions, the decision was made early on to video record the sessions. In addition, the existence of these recordings also allows the revisiting of the collected data, thus giving an overall clearer picture of the events that have occurred (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010: 8). Further, video recordings are a better fit for the purposes of the study than, for instance audio recordings, since they allow the observation of spatial elements as well.

However, when discussing video recordings, it is crucial to acknowledge that the simple presence of a video camera may alter the situation, due to the participants being aware of the filming process. This effect is commonly referred to as the observer's paradox (Labov 1972). This means that the data obtained through videoing will never be completely pure and reliable, as filming itself alters the situation. However, as Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff (2010: 47-49) argue, this problem mostly affects roving cameras, as people generally tend to forget the existence of small and static cameras. Due to tabletop role-playing occurring around a single table without much movement, a small and static camera lends itself naturally to the study and thus also lessens the impact of the observer's paradox. In addition, due to role-playing being a relatively intense activity that requires concentration, the participants may focus less on the presence of the camera. Following this line of studies on the topic, for the purpose of preserving reliability in the observed phenomena, a single, small static camera was used for the filming process that was located in the corner of the room the tabletop session took place in.

As the study consisted of three game sessions, all three of these sessions were filmed from the beginning to the end. Every session took place during late February in 2020, in Jyväskylä, Finland. The first two sessions were approximately two hours in duration, whereas the third and the last session was an hour and a half. The participants naturally all knew the existence of the camera and that the sessions were filmed, but aside from the beginning of the first session, the participants appeared to pay no attention to the camera.

4.3.3 Video-stimulated recall interviews

To find out in detail what the participants' perceptions on the potential of tabletop role-playing games as language learning tools is, interviews about the role-playing experience were conducted with every participant personally. As a form of data collecting, interviewing is particularly fitting when studying lived experience and obtaining a person's detailed opinion on a matter (Brinkmann 2013; Hyvärinen et al. 2017). Therefore, as the present study focuses specifically on the perceptions of the participants, interviewing functions particularly well here.

Three one-on-one interviews were conducted with each participant in order to collect the data for the study, each one scheduled a few days after a given role-playing session, in early 2020. For every participant, the first two interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes, whereas the

last interview for every participant had a duration of 45 minutes due to the conclusive nature of those specific interviews. The audio for every interview was recorded in order to revisit the data at a later point, and segments deemed to be of particular importance and value were transcribed. This choice in scheduling and structuring was done in order to obtain fresh recollections from the participants regarding the role-playing sessions. If too much time had passed after the session itself, the responses and comments obtained from the participants would not have been as truthful, simply due to the features of human memory (Brinkmann 2013: 153). In addition, the interviews were chosen to be one-on-one so as not to interfere with the data collection, and to make the obtained data clearer to interpret and analyze due to only one participant's thoughts and opinions being recorded. In addition, one-on-one interviews allow the participants to be more open about their views and potentially reveal information that they would have been more hesitant to tell in the presence of the other participants.

Additionally, video-stimulated recall was utilized in the interviewing process in order to obtain more insightful data on the topics discussed. After each role-playing session, I personally sifted through the audiovisual footage and selected specific sections as stimuli for the interviews to be shown to the participants in order to supplement their views. In other words, the participants were shown brief excerpts of the video data, which was followed by a discussion on the clip shown. The participants were also asked questions relating to the extract that they saw. In each interview, approximately two brief excerpts from the playing sessions were shown to the participants. Utilizing these excerpts from the role-playing sessions allowed the participants to reflect their thoughts on the topic at hand with concrete situations that they had themselves experienced, leading to data that is more rooted in reality and not idealized actions (Dempsey 2010). In addition to the stimuli providing more detailed data, it also helps in combating the natural decay of memories and thus makes the information more reliable (Brinkmann 2013: 38).

4.4 Methods of analysis

The main method of analysis for the study is qualitative content analysis, which is particularly fitting in studies where the amount of data collected is significantly large (Schreier 2012). In the context of the present study, the amount of data to analyze and go through is considerably large: with the audiovisual footage obtained from the tabletop role-playing sessions being approximately 6 hours in length, whereas the total length of all the interviews combined is not

far from 6 hours either. Therefore, content analysis allows for the handling of this data to be more easily managed in search of new and relevant information. In qualitative content analysis, preconceived categorizations are often not used, instead having a data-driven focus. This is particularly fitting for the present study when considering how little research has been conducted surrounding tabletop role-playing games, especially regarding natural language learning. Instead of using already existing categories, qualitative content analysis allows the categorizations to flow from the data, enabling the researchers to come to new insights with an open mind (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Especially in the present study where the focus is on participant perceptions and possible prejudices, allowing the conclusions to flow from the data hopefully provides more comprehensive results instead of having a previously created hypothesis in mind that is looked at being supported.

For the present study, all of the data obtained was meticulously investigated in search of elements to codify as recurring themes, such as the participants pointing out particular features of tabletop role-playing games as being especially conducive to language learning. Even though the audiovisual footage from the actual role-playing sessions are extensive, the primary focus was placed on the stimulated recall interviews with the participants, as the most prominent pieces of audiovisual footage obtained from the sessions were used to refine the data obtained from the interviews themselves. The extracts from the role-playing sessions that were of relevance in the interviews were all transcribed, as well as the sections of the interviews of which codified themes can be derived. In section 5, these codified themes and observations will be discussed in more detail in order to build a comprehensive view of the topic at hand.

5. Results and analysis

In this chapter the analytical findings of the study are presented. The chapter is divided into three parts, each of which delves into a different aspect relevant to the research questions of the present study. The first subsection focuses on the participants' preconceived notions surrounding tabletop role-playing games, especially as tools for language learning. The second subsection reveals what the participants thought of the educational possibilities of tabletop role-playing games. The third and last subsection focuses on the participants' opinions of integrating tabletop role-playing games into school curricula in Finland. In addition, this last subsection also covers the participants' views on what there would be to gain and what challenges such an integration would face.

Although the focus of the study is on role-playing games and three sessions were conducted for the participants to give them experience on the topic, the sessions themselves are not the focus of this analysis. Instead, the video-stimulated recall interviews which were held after the playing sessions are the main source of analysis. Excerpts of the interviews will be presented at appropriate moments in order to flesh out the data and give thorough examples of the covered themes and the participants' thoughts.

5.1 The participants' preconceived notions surrounding role-playing and language use

None of the participants had extensive knowledge surrounding tabletop role-playing games and what the activity actually entails. Only the Mercenary had participated in a tabletop role-playing game before the study, and even then, his experiences about the activity were limited in scope. This means that even though he had played as part of a tabletop role-playing group before, it was a brief incident and the participant stated that he was still not completely familiar with tabletop role-playing games as a concept before participating in the study.

The participant who differed the most from the other participants in previous experience is without any doubts the Medic. Like almost every other participant, she had no experience with tabletop role-playing games, but unlike everyone else, she had no idea what tabletop role-playing games even were, whereas the other participants had at least heard about them before. After the first session, she stated with some embarrassment that she had expected a traditional board game with pieces that are moved through dice rolls. Regarding this, she said:

(1) *"I thought that tabletop role-playing games are like a fancy word for traditional board games! So I expected dice and boards and all that. And then when I found out what these games actually are I thought to myself 'wow, this is actually pretty cool!"* - Medic

The statement made by the player highlights the fact that she was taken aback by the reliance on imagination and verbal discussion to play the game. However, the Medic also said that she enjoyed the feeling of discovery when finding out that her initial considerations on the topic did not be true.

Every participant except the Medic had strong preconceived notions about mechanical barriers in the form of many complex rules to learn and comprehend before the playing process becomes fun. It is interesting to note, that because the Medic had not even acquired any indirect experience about the activity, she did not share the fears of mechanical barriers that the other players held. Below are full excerpts from the three participants regarding these barriers:

(2) *"I was of course excited to see how the tower works because it seemed fun. And I was expecting more rules and that was actually pretty free-form. I mean, I knew that it was going to be more free than many tabletop games but still."* - Mercenary

(3) *"I thought that these games would take a lot of time, sessions would last for many hours, and that the rules would be difficult ... complexity. But this game was actually pretty straightforward. It's not that complexity is a bad thing if you get time to learn the rules but it is a small barrier.*" - Engineer

(4) *"It was fun that it was so simple and relied on the story, because from what I had heard from my friends I expected a lot of mechanical complexity in that you don't really know what's happening before you play a lot."* - Captain

As illustrated by the above quotes, the three participants expected to find the learning curve of the game high. This expectation of mechanical density is particularly interesting because it was shared by all three participants that had any form of experience with the activity, whether it be self-acquired experience, tales heard from friends, or seen episodes of television shows. Although some tabletop role-playing games have a high learning curve and may have many rules to keep in mind, the participants expected this to be a core feature of the playing experience, and thus were surprised by the lack of rigid rules. Furthermore, this expectation created anxiety especially in the minds of the Captain and the Engineer, which serves as a barrier to entry. In his quote, the Engineer also shows an appreciation for the more mechanically dense role-playing game systems, but he also stated that playing such a game in

a foreign language would make him more stressed out than engaging with a lighter system. This fact is also highlighted by him having a more positive outlook on the activity after all of the role-playing sessions had concluded.

In addition to the mechanical rules of the game creating some anxiety in the minds of the players, simply the fact of having to communicate in a foreign language for a long period of time made some of the players nervous. In fact, all of the players showed at least some anxiety regarding this language, and it directly correlated with the participants' own assessment about their English language proficiency. Before participating in the study, the Captain and the Engineer assessed their English language skills to be good, whereas the Mercenary and Medic assessed their English to be decent. Reflecting this, the Mercenary and the Medic held some anxiety about having to use English in such an intensive context. Below are full quotes from every participant in which they describe their levels of anxiety before the first session:

> (5) *"I've written quite a lot in English but I haven't really communicated much in a foreign language through drama. So I thought about that a little but I wasn't scared."* - Captain

> (6) *"It was pretty natural to use a language like this, even though at times I noticed that I started pronouncing a word wrong or even completely forgot a word. That's something I thought about beforehand. But it wasn't really scary because English is strong enough for me that I can think of a circumlocution in those situations."* - Engineer

> (7) *"Well I thought in a certain way that it would be personally much more difficult to communicate freely like that in English, but it wasn't really so bad after all."* - Mercenary

> (8) *"Well at first I was actually very nervous because I don't really think that I know English at all, but then during the first meeting this turned more into excitement as we got to know each other."* - Medic

As these excerpts show, before the first session, all of the participants at least thought about the fact that they had to communicate in a foreign language. From this it can be inferred that the process of communicating in English was not completely natural to any of the participants, even though the Captain and the Engineer clearly had less stress than the Mercenary and the Medic. What is noteworthy, however, is that every participant stated that any anxiety they held before the sessions was unfounded and that it faded early on in a session. The fact that this also holds true to the participants who consider themselves to be less fluent in English is remarkable,

because this indicates that feeling comfortable in such a potentially intensive situation is not tied to one's level of language proficiency. The Medic's comment, in particular, is illuminating because it shows that as using a language is inherently a social activity, any potential anxiety can be mitigated by the other active participants. The Medic opened up more and began to express herself more freely after getting to know the other players.

However, the inherently social nature of tabletop role-playing games can also serve to have an adverse effect on a player, because a player might feel judged if they say something that would threaten their face. This was expressed particularly by the Mercenary, who said the following:

> (9) *"I feel that it actually helps me to play with people you don't really know. You can be more carefree there and say different things, whereas if there's people you see every day then they might latch onto some things and taunt you with them later on."* - Mercenary

The Mercenary's quote illuminates the potential risks of participating in a tabletop role-playing game with people close to you. He felt that it was actually a very positive aspect for him to play in a context in which he did not know the other players before participating, as he could act more naturally and not have to think about potentially having his face threatened in front of people who might remember what he said in a session.

The point of acting a character and being in a role was also mentioned by all of the participants when asked if their preconceptions about role-playing games held true. All of them stated that they knew perfectly well that they had a role in mind that they were going to play before the first session took place, but in the interviews that followed, every participant independently brought up how they had to create facets of their character during the course of the game without preplanning. Below is an example from the Mercenary right at the start of the first interview when asked about their feelings:

> (10) *"Of course it was at first a bit icy to be the character in the game and it limited what I would say, because I hadn't fully fleshed out my character's personality, but on the other hand I enjoy improvisation so it didn't really matter once we got started."* - Mercenary

Although only an excerpt from the Mercenary is included in here, the statements from the other participants mirrored this sentiment almost precisely with even the same wording. In particular, all of the participants considered themselves to be hesitant at the beginning of the first session through the wording "iciness", but this feeling was quickly defrosted through improvisation.

Therefore, none of the participants saw this as a downside, but rather as a natural facet of the role-playing process. It could be considered that the participants were naturally inclined towards drama and acting even before participating in the study, but the Engineer stated exactly the opposite during his first interview. In detail, he stated as follows:

> (11) *"I haven't really acted or anything after primary school and I don't even find it all that interesting but in the game it was actually pretty interesting!"* - Engineer

As can be seen from the excerpt, the Engineer was at first reluctant to take on a role due to him only having contact with the activity at a very early age. In his view, the main difference between his prior role-playing experience and participating in this study was that in his previous experience his own agency as an actor was limited. In other words, the Engineer stated that he enjoyed being in full control of his character and inventing various personality traits for his character during the playing process.

The findings in this subsection show that the participants definitely held strong preconceived notions about tabletop role-playing games and foreign language usage in such contexts. Before playing, the game was generally perceived to be complex, and playing a complex game in English was considered difficult as well. Out of the participants, however, the Medic was the only one who did not possess any information about tabletop role-playing games before the study, and as such did not have the same presumptions about the game's complexity as the other participants. The participants who had preconceived notions about the difficulty of the game all found their fears to be unfounded, and all the participants conversed in English without anxiety during the playing sessions.

5.2 The participants' perceptions on tabletop role-playing games as tools for language learning

Generally, all of the participants considered tabletop role-playing games to be effective tools for language learning. This opinion was held by every participant even before the actual role-playing sessions had begun, with the common reasoning being that simply communicating in a foreign language helps in learning it. The Medic had discussed beforehand with the rest of the participants that she had intentionally had to learn English, whereas the other participants had passively acquired language skills mainly through consuming different forms of media in the English language. Therefore, it is perhaps the most pertinent to include here a comment made by her after the first session that she played:

(12) *"I actually got really early on the strong feeling that through that (tabletop role-playing games) you can learn a language really fast and well. I mean I realized that at the point when the Engineer started presenting all his tools in detail and in a way funnier way than if I were to read them in a textbook!"* - Medic

This comment made by the Medic effectively illuminates her previous views on language learning in general. She stated that language learning is a relatively dry activity for her, and in the quote above it can be seen by her comparing the situation occurring in the role-playing game to learning words from a textbook. From this can be inferred that the Medic has at least a partially warped view of language learning in general, mostly seeing it as an activity one does alone in order to learn a language completely, although paradoxically she knows that the primary purpose of language is to fluently communicate with others.

Generally speaking, from the interviews a sense of language being a form of learning that is obtained mostly from outside sources could be detected. This was directly reflected through a question during the final interview in which the participants were to describe what aspects of a language could be easily learned through tabletop role-playing games, and whether such role-playing games are ill-suited to learn any particular aspect. Below are some excerpts from the participants in connection to this discussion:

(13) *"You learn speech, confidence, general communication, vocabulary, and pronunciation pretty naturally in my opinion. But then maybe grammar is something that is left on the wayside. Especially if the game master is not a language teacher then you just won't learn the rules."* - Mercenary

(14) *"Well of course there's a lot of general communication. And a form of visualisation when you have to rely so much on your imagination and describe what you're doing or seeing. But when I'm thinking about it, it's pretty difficult to include grammar in it. Because it's free communication after all. For example if we've just gone through some grammar stuff I don't know how you'd fit it naturally into the role-playing game."* - Medic

(15) *"The best in this is that it's a role-playing game and everyone had their roles. So there's this distribution that one person is the Captain and I was the Engineer so that you learn special vocabulary around the professions. But when you're just freely discussing something and you make some grammar mistakes then they're just going to stay there because there's nobody to correct you. Unless there's an unpleasant player there who just comments on them. So that's something you probably don't learn from this, grammar and stuff, because you have to yourself know if you're speaking correctly or incorrectly. So if I'd have to say one thing that you don't learn then grammar."* - Engineer

(16) *"There's a lot of listening comprehension and understanding others. So how you understand others and make others understand you in return. There's a lot of speaking and listening. But I don't really see if there's anything you couldn't include in this. Possibly like some grammar theories? But even then I don't really see it being out of the question that somebody could introduce me to a game format that has grammar as a part of this. So some tinkerer could adapt this into anything, really."* - Captain

From these excerpts, two main ideas are particularly noteworthy and of relevance. Firstly, all of the participants clearly believe that simply communicating in a foreign language is conducive for learning the language and making one a more fluent user of the language. This is natural, as the participants correctly identified that the primary purpose of any language is to transfer information between individuals. The two main features of this proficiency that were immediately brought up by all the participants were listening comprehension and pronunciation. These two features were considered key in the participants' minds in order to hold a conversation in English, and participating in tabletop role-playing games helped in improving both of these areas of expertise.

Secondly, every participant very firmly divided 'correct' and 'incorrect' English, in that there is a right way to use English. All of the participants held strong beliefs in that English has very rigid rules to follow and without knowing these rules one cannot be fully fluent in English. The participants stated that these rules are often separated from the other parts of English, and that they are taught in schools in their own sections with barely any overlap between grammar learning and for instance vocabulary learning. In the interviews, this belief that the participants have translated directly into every one of them stating that grammar is one aspect of language that cannot be easily learned from tabletop role-playing games. This is reinforced by the fact that especially the Medic, the Mercenary, and the Engineer had a strong schematic in their minds of what grammar learning is: in that it is something that is told to learners by the teacher. In essence, this means that grammar is one aspect of language that is strictly learned from an outside authority, and that a learner cannot know grammar rules unless they are directly told to the learner by one who already comprehensively understands them. The Captain was the only one of the participants who viewed that grammar could possibly be integrated into a role-playing game. Even then, she showed clear evidence that she has obtained the engrained concept of grammar being taught in a certain way. As such, she could not conceive of a way in which grammar could be brought into the game, even though she conceded the point that it is very likely possible.

In addition to the aspect of grammar being an inherently outside force of language in the participants' minds, vocabulary was also raised by the Engineer in the first interview as one additional aspect of language that probably cannot be learned from tabletop role-playing games as there is no teacher to tell the player the words. Here is an excerpt from their comment on the topic:

> (17) *"You get a lot of interaction and like creating language. Kind of like what happens in real life so that you just start communicating in a foreign language. But you cannot really learn vocabulary directly because you just speak and it doesn't come from the outside in the situation."* - Engineer

In addition to the previous excerpts relating to grammar (excerpts 13-16), this excerpt illustrates the general thought of how languages work in the participants' minds. In excerpt 17, the Engineer clearly links vocabulary to the same premise shown by all of the participants in the previous excerpts relating to grammar. This is that most language learning occurs through outside factors, i.e. someone explaining linguistic aspects to a learner, be it grammar or vocabulary. This is particularly interesting, as the Engineer clearly rescinded his statement about vocabulary learning as he acquired more play experience. However, this change in opinion also resulted in the player stating more firmly than in the first interview that grammar is hard to integrate into a tabletop role-playing game.

The main reason why all of the participants considered tabletop role-playing games to be a useful asset in language learning lay in the fact that it is a group activity in which every player is a part of the same team. Regarding this, the participants stated the following:

> (18) *"And I mean in this activity it's really good that there's always others nearby when you're talking and they can support you if you don't happen to find the right word."* - Mercenary

> (19) *"In that situation [video about the Medic talking about the Mercenary's weapons] I felt like I didn't really know how I'm supposed to frame my thoughts, but it was nice when the rest of you gave some options. I mean, of course it's easier when somebody like guides you when needed."* - Medic

> (20) *"The game was interesting and I got a really good feeling about it. The company was great and I particularly enjoyed creating the story together as we played."* - Engineer

> (21) *"I noticed immediately that one thing that furthers language learning is that you can freely create even comical plot twists and then the other players build on that as they wish."* - Captain

As can be seen from the excerpts, the participants raised various benefits provided by the role-playing occurring within a group that works together as a team. The key and common factor in all of the examples listed by the participants is the fact that the players are on the same side, and thus, offer support to each other when needed. The Mercenary's and the Medic's quotes particularly stand out about this, as they both placed significant value on the other players' ability to provide support and help out when they felt themselves linguistically unequipped to an occasion. This also correlates directly with the two participants' self-evaluation on their English skills, as they considered themselves to have decent or below that fluency in English. From this it can be inferred that players who think that they need more support than others appreciate the scaffolding provided by the other players and the game master.

Although every participant appreciated this aspect, the Captain and the Engineer in particular highlighted the collaborative storytelling capabilities of the game more during their interviews. During their interviews, they both stated clearly that they felt that the free-form telling of the story that occurs when the players are personally in control of the narrative enriches the learning capabilities provided by the role-playing game. This act of engaging in the role-playing distanced the participants from thinking that they were communicating in a language that they were not fully fluent in, and thus made the learning experience more enjoyable. What is of particular note, however, is that especially the Medic, who before the study expressed the most reluctance to play in English, was keen on continuing playing the game after the first session. The following is what she stated:

> (22) *"What I'm feeling the most towards the next session is anticipation. You really get hooked into it like you're watching a tv-series. I mean, I'm really interested in what happens next, I'm not actually even thinking about using a language I don't really like."*
> - Medic

This excerpt very effectively communicates the addictive nature that storytelling had on the participant. Even though she was not particularly eager to use English for such a creative activity, she thoroughly enjoyed taking part in the collaborative story that the participants engaged in. The Medic also clearly stated that she found most forms of language learning that she has encountered in her life to be dull and mechanical, whereas playing the tabletop role-playing game was an activity she found to be the most rewarding out of all the times she has personally used English for such a long time.

One aspect of foreign language learning that was brought up by all of the participants is that using English through tabletop role-playing games diversified how they attempted to use the language, ultimately giving a more thorough understanding of the language as a whole. Participating in the game requires one to take on a role, after all, and the participants noted that these roles affected how they attempted to adapt their language depending on the occasion. Below are relevant examples from the participants regarding their opinions on the roles' influence on language use in tabletop role-playing games:

> (23) *"It's my duty to lead the group and make sure that everything works and the others have their own tasks. If I had some other role then I would have acted differently, but in that scene [she was just shown a clip of her reprimanding the Mercenary for lacking equipment] it was accusatory like that because it was my job."* - Captain

> (24) *"Well, of course it always affects the situation somewhat with whom you're talking with in the story. With the Engineer we have more friendly banter, and the Captain my character addresses more formally. So that does teach you to consider how you're speaking when talking to different people."* - Mercenary

> (25) *"Yeah sure it has an impact with whom you're talking with. I crack jokes with pretty much everyone, but for people my character is friends with, such as the Mercenary, the tone is more relaxed. With the Captain, he [the Engineer] behaves like her word is the law."* - Engineer

The excerpts from the Captain, the Engineer, and the Medic illustrate how the role one has affects the language they attempt to use in a specific situation. The participants stated that they had not really encountered an occasion in which they had to switch often between different tones of voice. They all acted like their roles, which was visible through e.g. every character appreciating the Captain's orders more than the suggestions which came from other characters. An instant camaraderie was also born between the Mercenary and the Engineer, with both players feeling that their characters shared a similar role in the adventuring group. This eventually led to more light-hearted moments between the two characters. The Medic, however, felt like her language skills were not up to par with the rest of the participants, and as such played her character in a more shy and official manner. This led to the other characters treating her formally and respectfully. Additionally, she stated that she acknowledged how the roles affected how she thought of her language usage, but that her fluency in English was not adequate enough to fulfil all of her wishes.

In addition to the role-playing diversifying the language used by the participants, drama and taking on a role served a form of protective function for the Medic. Below is what she said regarding the topic:

> (26) *"I don't really know if I'm a good actress or anything but I like to get into a role. And I've always said that I'm personally afraid to go in front of the class as myself, because it's me getting judged there, but if I have a role then I feel like it's the character getting judged and not me personally."* - Medic

The excerpt shows that the Medic clearly felt more comfortable talking in a role rather than as her own personal self. In effect, this influenced the Medic to act more naturally and reduced her overall anxiety surrounding the role-playing sessions. In addition, she stated that because she got to use English in a creative way that allowed her to distance herself from the language use, she stated that she would surely grow in confidence as a user of English if she were to participate regularly in tabletop role-playing sessions.

The findings in this subsection show that the participants held the strong opinion that tabletop role-playing games can be utilized as effective tools for language learning. This stemmed from multiple reasons, mainly that role-playing allows one to learn language skills spanning various situations and roles. This allows language learning in a more authentic context by taking advantage of the natural benefits of role-playing in a game format. Additionally, the inherent collaborative nature of tabletop role-playing games helped in fostering an atmosphere of support among the participants, giving them incentive to help each other and work together as a team.

5.3 The participants' thoughts on integrating tabletop role-playing games into English classrooms in Finland

All of the participants were of the opinion that tabletop role-playing games could be integrated into an English classroom in Finland. Additionally, the inclusion of such role-playing would in the participants' minds be a boon to English education in Finland. The main reasoning for this conclusion generally was drawn by the participants from the fact that role-playing is vastly different from every other form of exercise that the participants had seen during any of their English classes. Below are some excerpts from the interviews in which the participants elaborated on their thoughts on implementing role-playing games in a classroom setting:

(27) *"Well all the school exercises, for example in which you are in a restaurant with a partner, well they are really good for learning one specific situation. But in these role-playing things the focus is lacking so it's difficult to learn something specific because the players can choose what to talk about. But for general communication this sort of freedom works really well."* - Mercenary

(28) *"I think it's pretty dull that usually in schools you read from a book what is the word for a dog and a cat. And then you get a sentence 'I have a dog and a cat'. And then you discuss with a partner a scenario in which one has a dog and the other has a cat and so on. It's pretty good that some of it is restricted like that, but there should also be something outside of these restrictions so you aren't scared to use language in real situations."* - Medic

(29) *"Especially for more shy people who are afraid of making mistakes and speaking this sort of thing in a good group would be particularly good. So you get some positive experiences about using a foreign language."* - Engineer

(30) *"Everything that was spoken in English classes, or at least mine, was always like that you were in a restaurant and you are A and the other person is B and there is a script to follow. And then the more free discussions were about professions or something like that. So this format of role-playing games is much more free because you can come up with crazy ideas, get into a role and see things in a different way, and the biggest thing in this is that there's multiple people participating in the activity. And that's something I've never had in any school."* - Captain

The common factor in all of the above quotes is that the participants clearly placed heavy value on the freedom that tabletop role-playing games provide, especially in comparison to the classroom exercises that they were accustomed to. Tabletop role-playing games allow for language use in a free and authentic context, and as the participants stated during their interviews, is similar to how one uses language throughout their lives because the different contexts one encounters cannot be foreseen beforehand. Acquiring experience about using English in a wide variety of situations and contexts help in preparing the language learner for their life after the class, and thus gives them more courage to use language in an extramural context. Especially the Medic and the Engineer theorized in their interviews that a school's strict focus on scripts are easily graded to be correct or incorrect, and that such binary nature may make Finnish people more hesitant to use foreign languages. However, although every participant stated that they wished that the learning methods of classrooms were diversified, none of them directly said that the reliance on scripts as they saw it is a purely detrimental feature. Instead, all of them expressed their wish for balance in English education when it comes to scripts and freedom, and that the school system would prepare them both for specific

situations as well as general free-form use. This belief in balancing these two aspects was justified by all of the participants by stating that it would create more confident users of English across the country.

When asked if tabletop role-playing games in English are suitable for learners of all ages, the participants were in agreement that the players should have some basic knowledge of the language in order to participate in the game effectively. Every participant based this opinion on the view that in tabletop role-playing games one cannot truly prepare for the kind of language they need, and as such it is vital to possess a basic grasp of the language to survive in different kinds of situations. Examples of viewpoints the participants held are visible from the following excerpts:

(31) *"In my opinion you have to have some basic knowledge [of English]. So probably for some teenagers this would work really well, but not for younger than that."* - Captain

(32) *"If I think about who would benefit the most from that [playing in English], then I'd say that maybe 12-year olds would be more capable. So that you already know some basics and that you can boldly test your language skills."* - Medic

(33) *"It requires that there's mature enough people there so that they can concentrate. So for young pupils it wouldn't probably fit… well maybe it would actually fit but there's probably a barrier of language skills."* - Engineer

(34) *"I guess it's easier to participate if you know vocabulary and stuff but it develops fast when you start talking. And there's many roles to take in this, so that you don't have to talk all the time."* - Mercenary

These excerpts show the unity of opinion the participants generally held regarding the basic level of knowledge required in order to effectively participate in the playing process. The only one of the participants who believed the English skills to be as big of a barrier as the others is the Mercenary. He stated on multiple occasions that as tabletop role-playing games intrinsically feature roles, participating in the game with a lower skill level is not a barrier to entry as one can take a role that does not have to produce as much as some other roles. In addition, he also placed value on the fact that unskilled learners of English would very quickly absorb some language knowledge from the other players, much akin to a language shower. With the exception of the Mercenary, however, the participants generally found the barrier to entry in regards to language requirements to be impassable. This was based on the fact that although the activity could in theory be adapted to serve younger learners, doing so would lessen the

effectiveness of tabletop role-playing games as a learning context. The Captain said a fitting passage relating to this:

> (35) *"The younger you were to do that for [hold tabletop role-playing game sessions] the more directed it should be and the clearer the boundaries should be. But that also kind of eats away at the potential."* - Captain

In addition to potentially having to think of how to effectively implement tabletop role-playing games for a specific age group, the biggest challenge a tabletop role-playing game implementation might face would be the size of a standard language classroom in Finland. Although inexperienced on the subject, the participants accurately identified that participating in a tabletop role-playing game is an intimate and inherently collaborative activity, and that it would not have the same effect on the players if there were around 30 players.

> (36) *"It would maybe work the best like so that there is like an extra class for willing people so that it wouldn't be obligatory. It probably would require smaller groups to be good. So that there's not an entire class playing the same thing because it would probably take like a year to go through a single round of actions."* - Mercenary

> (37) *"Well if you consider that class sizes are just growing and growing and that about 30 pupils were to play something like this I can't say for sure if anything useful would come out of it."* - Medic

> (38) *"If you think that it [tabletop role-playing games] could be included into a voluntary course and there'd be like 10 people you could easily divide them into two groups and observe them both at the same time. But if there's like 20 people or over, that would create such an uproar. And especially if there's like an enthusiastic blabbermouth present then they would probably talk alone for half of the playing time."* - Engineer

> (39) *"Well mostly the biggest barriers will be the practical arrangements. I mean that if there's like 25 pupils and only one instructor, it's really poor then."* - Captain

From the above excerpts it can be interpreted that the participants were hesitant about the integration of table-top role-playing games mostly due to the classroom sizes being too large to properly benefit from the possibilities offered by the role-playing process. The crux of the issue shown in many of the excerpts here is that one game-master cannot properly divide their attention between a large number of players and that the players cannot actively participate in the role-playing if the time allotted is divided between such a large number of players. In his statement, the Engineer also raises the potential fear of too active players being able to steal the spotlight more effectively in a large group of people, which may demotivate others from

participating. However, the participants showed that they had considered this problem on their own, as every participant independently discussed potential remedies for this issue.

The main suggested solution brought up by the participants was that the class could be divided into smaller groups, in which one pupil with adequate enough knowledge of English could serve as the game master for the group. Especially the Engineer, the Medic, and the Mercenary said that this could prove to be quite fun for the class, as the lack of strict supervision could make the players more active and willing to use English in the game as there is nobody to correct their possibly incorrect use of English. This is a mindset that is a clear continuation of the opinions presented in the section 5.2. (see e.g. excerpts 13-16 for the divide between the participants' perceived incorrect and correct English), in that the participants were of the opinion that when one is learning English in a formal context it is expected that the teacher corrects the pupils' incorrect usage of certain forms. In addition, the Mercenary and the Engineer held the firm opinion that the best way to circumvent the problem of too large a number of players is to include tabletop role-playing games into voluntary courses. Both of these participants argued that voluntary courses generally have less pupils in them than obligatory courses, and therefore the effectiveness of tabletop role-playing games as language learning tools would not be diluted by the number of players present.

However, although every other participant offered this solution of dividing a class of learners into smaller groups in order to facilitate the playing process, the Captain held differing opinions of this matter. She was mainly concerned that the lack of supervision could cause personal dynamics between the players to surface in the playing process. The following is what she stated in relation to this:

> (40) *"But I was also maybe thinking it more pedagogically, that could this trigger like bullying more? So could some use this to bully someone more, like if there's a threat that someone like that is a peer game master. I was also thinking that my role as the group's leader would have been a delicious opportunity to bully others if I wanted to do so. So you don't really even need to be a peer game master since it's enough to just hold power within the story to do something bad."* - Captain

This statement by the Captain is very interesting because it illuminates the difference in perspective between her and the other participants. The Captain was by far the most influential character in the story the participants partook in, and this has clearly affected her way of viewing a potential implementation of a similar system in a classroom context. Although experts in their own fields within the story, the player characters of the other participants did

not issue commands to others, and therefore did not pay attention to the potential negative consequences of power dynamics. When asked about how to reduce this potential abuse of the power dynamics within smaller role-playing groups, the captain stated that in her view it could be addressed in two ways. On the one hand, the teacher of the classroom can develop the tabletop role-playing game materials in such a manner that the opportunities for any abuse of power are minimized. This could be accomplished through for instance not having any player characters that hold influence over the other players or by having the peer game master rotate from session to session. On the other hand, the Captain considered substituting the game master in these smaller groups into an automated system of some kind. An example she stated that could work was a deck of cards which hold different events and situations, and the players just draw cards and then all together work to solve the situation presented in the card. The Captain's observations on solutions to this problem of power abuse were very thorough and clearly showed a personal interest in the topic.

The results of this subsection showed that the participants considered integrating tabletop role-playing games into a language classroom a positive venture, although not without its challenges. Every participant expressed obvious discontent with the lack of free-form communication experience during their own formal English learning contexts, and they thought that tabletop role-playing games could remedy this. The general consensus was that although many tasks in schools prepare learners for various situations in which English is used, they are often rigid and bound by strict rules. Therefore, these tasks do not effectively give learners the skillset and the courage to use language without fear in everyday situations. It is important to note, however, that the participants only wished for tabletop role-playing games to supplement traditional English classes, not replace material already included in them. However, the biggest challenge that the implementation of tabletop role-playing games into a classroom context faces is solving the issue of a large number of learners present. The participants saw role-playing as a relatively intimate activity, and not being able to fulfil those conditions would most likely make their implementation less effective.

6 Discussion

The present study obtained a plethora of data surrounding a wide range of topics relating to tabletop role-playing games and their connection to language learning. In this section, these general findings will be discussed and reflected in view of the information presented in chapters 2 and 3 of this study.

The first finding that is perceivable from the data is that the participants all held strong preconceived notions surrounding tabletop role-playing games. It is notable that these preconceptions were for the most part negative, with every participant seeing mechanical complexity as a strong barrier to entry in tabletop role-playing games. The fears of mechanical complexity were erased from the mind of every participant after they had participated in the first playing session. From this it can be concluded that although tabletop role-playing game systems of various levels of complexity have been made through the years, it is perhaps easy to assume that every system is mechanically intricate and difficult to get into. This may, therefore, dissuade potential interested parties in engaging with tabletop role-playing games and thus lower them being considered for educational purposes.

The second preconceived notion that surfaced from the data is that the participants all felt at least a certain level of anxiety and nervousness before participating in the first game session. The main reason behind this feeling was the knowledge that the language used in role-playing is extremely free-form and challenging due to this aspect of it. Especially the Medic and the Mercenary felt this nervousness, which directly correlates with their lower evaluation of their own skill level in English. This anxiety connected to language use and fear of not being able to communicate is similar to the results presented by Quijano (2007), who stated that tabletop role-playing games can be an intimidating prospect for many language learners, especially when the activity is combined with language learning. However, it is crucial to note that in the present study, the preconceived notions held by the participants did not hold to be true after the game had truly begun. The reason why these fears were not realized lies in the collaborative nature of tabletop role-playing games, in which the players all work together as a group and support each other, including in their language usage. This can be considered to be a vital aspect of tabletop role-playing games, as normally many other games are competitive in nature in that the language users are placed against each other, whereas in role-playing games the players are encouraged to work together and support each other. This same observation was made by Otty (2017), who stated that role-playing games can help bring normally more shy and reserved

users of language out of their shells and give them courage to use the language in actual contexts. In this study, the results clearly show that the participants considered this linguistic support provided by the other players to be a definite positive, and it helped the weaker English users like the Medic to use English more freely than she otherwise would have done.

Additionally, as described by Balzer (2011: 37), a core aspect of role-playing is to immerse oneself in the role they are playing, which gives authentic experience using the language. In the present study this statement proved to be true. The Medic in particular obtained a sense of solace from the fact that she was playing a role, whereas in other contexts she has generally disliked using English as herself. Playing the role allowed herself to distance herself from her feeling of embarrassment and use the language more freely. Furthermore, this sense of immersion was present in the other participants' views as well, even though this effect of encouragement was found in only the Medic. Every participant felt a strong sense of connection with their characters and the story they played, eagerly anticipating the continuation of the story at the beginning of each session. This effect created a strong sense of motivation in the participants that was not fueled by the language use itself, but rather by the stimulus of participating in the game, which makes learning the language more enjoyable and effective (Dörnyei 2001: 74).

Interestingly, every participant was clearly influenced by their experiences in the Finnish school system. This crucial finding manifested through the strong belief that some aspects of language are separated from others, and that there is a difference between language that is learned in a formal context and an informal context. In particular, all participants found grammar to be at least partly fundamentally incompatible with tabletop role-playing games, and thus, learning language solely through them would always give a learner an incomplete picture of the language. Although formal and informal language learning and their importance and differences when it comes to learning a language has been discussed at length (see e.g. Benson 2011; Benson 2017), it is telling that the participants drew a fine line between the ability to utilize a language and the knowledge of how a language is structured when it comes to rules. Therefore, the participants firmly believed that participating in tabletop role-playing games in English will improve a player's English skills, but the player will not truly obtain knowledge of the language's grammar because there is no outside influence to teach them the rules. Jarvis (2012: 9) states that while language learning occurs within formal education, it should not be considered synonymous with all language learning. In other words, learning a language means learning how to communicate effectively with others, which is what the

participants accurately identified to be the definition and overall aim of all language learning. Still, this finding of the beliefs relating to formal and informal language learning shows the sense of discord that many English learners hold in Finland: informal learning is for communication, whereas formal education is for grammar and rules.

Furthermore, perhaps the most important finding of the present study is that every participant considered the English teaching that occurs within classrooms to be lacking because of its aforementioned perceived focus being on the ruleset of a language instead of how to effectively communicate with others using it. Every participant, whether they considered themselves to be good in English or not, felt that learning to communicate in English is an extremely important skill in today's society. It is equally revealing that every participant felt that the formal English education in Finland does not properly equip learners with the skills to survive in the kinds of situations that are encountered in actual life. This only furthers the disconnect between formal and informal language learning that the participants of this study held, in that one learns English differently within a classroom and outside it. As explained by Soler and Safont-Jorda (2012: 5), English is a globally significant language due to its role as a lingua franca and is therefore often encountered whether one is in support of this global role or not.

The global reach of English and the fact it functions as a lingua franca makes it crucial to learn how to survive in various situations in which the language is used, which is reflected in the statements made by the participants in this study. The participants expressed regret that the Finnish education system had not fully equipped them with the skills to tackle different kinds of situations outside of specific scripted scenarios. The participants were of the opinion that these highly scripted scenarios were excellent in order to learn how to communicate effectively in one specific situation, such as ordering food in a restaurant, but that the large issue with these tasks is that there cannot be enough of them to fully teach learners of English to improvise and survive in the kinds of situations one might encounter.

When this is connected to the previously mentioned general idea that many Finnish learners of English consider formal language learning to revolve around learning rules, it can be inferred that the participants view fluent and easily improvisable communication skills in high regard. The main reason behind this importance of fluent and fast communication skills was explained by every participant to be the status that English holds in today's society as a lingua franca. This view exactly mirrors the thought presented by Soler and Safont-Jorda (2012: 5), which is that English is a globally very important language and one cannot avoid having to use it even

if one did not want to. This is of particular relevance to the topic of tabletop role-playing games in that the participants considered that such games are an excellent avenue for learning this crucial skill of improvised communication skills. The main rationale behind the statements made by the participants in regard to this is very similar to the main thrust presented by Quijano (2007), which is that participating in tabletop role-playing games forces the players to utilize their language skills in various different contexts and therefore, challenge themselves to use all the resources available to them. Further, this natural diversity of tabletop role-playing games in the form of players experiencing many different kinds of linguistic encounters ensures that the players get to practice using a foreign language in many different actual situations with the other players, and not just follow a script of how the situation is supposed to unfold. The key concept here is authenticity in the language use contexts. In addition, the previously discussed collaborative nature of participating in tabletop role-playing games inherently supports the existence of these different contexts, as the players work together as a team and as such the normally potentially frightening situations may not feel as overwhelming as before (Otty 2017).

Every participant in the study was of the firm opinion that the traditional English teaching in a classroom context could be supplemented by the inclusion of tabletop role-playing games. It is of particular importance to note that every participant thought that tabletop games should replace the script-based exercises found in many textbooks, but that more free form discussion activities would give English learners more experience and confidence as language users. However, while every participant was of the opinion that effective implementation of tabletop role-playing games into traditional English education would serve educational purposes well, how this could be properly done was questioned widely by the participants. Further, directly implementing tabletop role-playing games into a traditional English classroom in Finland may face difficulties which must be addressed before the full potential of these games can be harnessed.

Reasoning surrounding this topic of potential weaknesses of effective implementation was divided by every participant into two clear categories: skill requirements and logistical decisions. By skill requirements the participants all collectively agreed that there is the requirement of a certain skill level in order for the role-playing to proceed smoothly and enable the players to properly utilize and develop their language skills further. Although the firm requirements described by the participants differed somewhat depending on the person, most put forth the general idea that a learner has to have studied English at least a couple of years in order to fully take advantage of the educational opportunities provided by the tabletop role-

playing game they are playing. By stating this, the participants identified that the biggest strength in terms of language learning in tabletop games is that they allow a free-form use of language that is not scripted like many situations presented in formal education. However, it is interesting to note that the participants all saw that the support found in the other participating players and the game master lowers this perceived skill level significantly. Every participant framed the situation as such that participating in these role-playing games requires strong English skills, but since the language use is collaborative, perhaps the required competency is not as high as they initially thought. In other words, the collaborative nature of these games makes them more accessible to English learners.

In addition to this aspect of skill requirements, the second crucial problem with the inclusion of tabletop role-playing games into a traditional classroom context is the logistical problems with it. Every participant identified that role-playing in the context of a game such as this is an intimate activity and as such, properly integrating it into a classroom that can have tens of people in it can be difficult to execute. However, although the participants identified this as a problem, none of them thought that this is a problem that could not be solved through innovation and creativity. The solutions offered by the participants were varied and offered multiple solutions to the problem at hand. Two of the participants thought that integrating tabletop role-playing games only into voluntary English courses that have fewer people in them would be a potential solution. Another potential solution offered was the creation of more automated systems that would make it possible for groups of players to play without the presence of a game master, which would make the teacher more of a facilitator in the learning process rather than the game master who is responsible for guiding the playing process hands-on.

While the study gives valuable information about the shortcomings of English education in Finland and how this could be supplemented through systems such as tabletop role-playing games, it must be stated that the present study is of relatively small scale and the results found and presented here cannot truly be generalized to draw full conclusions of the matters at hand. What can be inferred from the results, however, is that the subject of potential shortcomings when it comes to the genuineness of English education in Finland is a very important topic that needs to be delved into further in order to scope out every angle found in it. The present study shows that tabletop role-playing games could potentially be utilized in formal language teaching in order to change some of these perceptions that language learning occurring in classrooms is mainly to learn the grammar and rules of a language, whereas one learns how to

communicate authentically outside the classroom. It is not difficult to say that this divide is unnatural and does not accurately represent the fundamental nature of languages.

Furthermore, the data obtained in this study is also great enough to enable further research to be done with the same pool of data. The data could be used to, for instance, delve into the topic of how the players perceived specific events in the role-playing game and if these perceptions differed between the players. There is also a host of potential data available on the interpersonal relationships between the players in the tabletop role-playing game and how the players' linguistic interaction changed depending on the speakers. Further, the topic of the educational possibilities of tabletop role-playing games is a topic that needs to be researched more, especially as the present study has unearthed some signs of it potentially being especially relevant in the Finnish context. Although the present study was small in scope due to only having four participants, the study still showed that tabletop role-playing games have the potential to enable language learning in a context that is different from many others and inherently versatile.

7 Conclusion

The present study looked at the language learning possibilities of tabletop role-playing games and how they could be harnessed to efficiently learn communication in a foreign language. To accomplish these objectives, an experiment was conducted focusing on the observations of four students, all of whom considered themselves to be average or below in English and who had not had much experience with tabletop role-playing games in general. Every participant played in three tabletop role-playing game sessions and each was interviewed after each playing session to scope out their thoughts regarding the topic. The interviews served as the primary source of data for the study. In addition, another important focus of the study was to find out if tabletop games potentially may have a place in traditional English education in Finland, and if this integration would be worth the effort, as well as any potential preconceived notions the participants held surrounding tabletop role-playing games and if these held out to be true in the end.

In order to observe the topic thoroughly, three research questions were formed when analyzing the data obtained from the role-playing sessions and the interviews. The first research question concerned the preconceived notions the participants held. As an answer to this question, every participant who had knowledge of tabletop role-playing games connected a strong mechanical density to the games and held the firm belief that participating in them would require learning a lot of technical terms. It is interesting to note that the only participant who had not heard of such games came into the session with an open mind that was free of these complexities. Furthermore, the participants who did have these preconceived notions quickly found out that while some games certainly can be mechanically dense and difficult to get into, this does not apply to every system and that the genre is more approachable than they had at first imagined.

The second research question dealt with the educational potential and possible hindrances of tabletop role-playing games when it comes to learning English through playing them. The results showed that the participants all were of the opinion that active participation in tabletop role-playing games would help one develop better communication skills in English very quickly. The main reasons behind this conclusion are the fact that tabletop role-playing games are inherently very diverse in terms of communication and one learns to use language in multiple different contexts and roles through participation in them. In addition, the participants very quickly recognized that tabletop role-playing games are an inherently collaborative activity, which sets it apart from other avenues of language learning. Participating in tabletop

role-playing games puts the players on the same team, and they are working together to fulfil their goals. This support extends to language use as well, and the players feel invested in helping each other and making them succeed. However, while the participants saw that tabletop role-playing games are potentially really helpful in learning communication skills, when it came to considering other aspects of language learning, such as grammar, the opinions were not as agreeable. The general consensus in this area is that integrating especially grammar into tabletop role-playing games can prove to be extraordinarily difficult, which further highlights the perceived differences between formal and informal language learning contexts in Finland. The last research question of the study dealt with the problematic prospect of including tabletop role-playing games into a formal language classroom context in Finland. While this was not planned to have been the focal point of the study in the planning phase, the results for this research question, in particular, revealed important shortcomings of English education in Finland. The participants all felt very strongly that tabletop role-playing games could supplement the language learning in a formal context very well. Every participant independently expressed strong frustration towards the fact that they had found formal English instruction in Finland to have been rigid and focusing more on the rules of a language instead of how to communicate effectively. It is crucial to note, however, that the participants only wanted balance in these two aspects of language learning, and that education should be utilized to teach learners both the grammar of a language and to teach effective communication. Interestingly, the participants also expressed the hesitant thought that this division between these two features in language learning and the lack of proper practice of free-form communication may be the reason why they and many other Finnish learners of English struggle to speak English and may be afraid of using it in actual contexts. However, even though the participants expressed interest in possibly getting tabletop role-playing games or a similar system included into a traditional classroom setting, there were a few potential obstacles in this. These hindrances had either to do with the logistical solutions of how to include over 20 people into an activity that revolves around active conversation, or the required skill level that effective free-form role-playing needs for the players to properly express themselves.

Although the primary purpose of the study was to obtain information on the participants' perceptions on how tabletop role-playing games serve as functional tools for learning the English language through play, the results of this study also suggest that English education in Finland requires an opportunity for the learners to properly utilize all of their obtained linguistic resources in a context that can be ever-shifting and changed to fit the whims of the users of the

language. In addition, the inherent collaborative nature of tabletop role-playing games in that it pushes the players to work together as a team is another lacking aspect not adequately found in formal language education contexts. While the scripted conversations and scenes where the learners serve different sides of conversations that are provided by many assignments presented in a formal education environment do help in learning how to use English in a specific situation, they do not effectively prepare English learners to survive in the real world where these contexts are not all that one encounters. While limited in scope and the results of this study cannot be truly generalized, the information found and presented in this paper do point in the direction that tabletop role-playing games may help learners of a foreign language to get valuable practice in using their linguistic skills and resources in a context that naturally provides support and scaffolding through the existence of the other players.

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Appendices

Preliminary Questionnaire for the Participants

Mikä on koulutustaustasi ennen korkeakouluun tuloa?
What is your educational background?

Miten arvioisit oman englannin kielen taitosi?
How would you rate your own English proficiency?

Mikä on mielestäsi paras tapa opetella kommunikaatiota vieraalla kielellä?
What do you see as the best way to learn communication in a foreign language?

Onko sinulla aikaisempaa kokemusta pöytäroolipeleistä? Jos on, niin mitä?
Do you have any previous experience with tabletop role-playing games? If yes, what?

Mitä sinulle tulee ensiksi pöytäroolipeleistä mieleen?
What is the first thing that comes to your mind in regards to tabletop role-playing games?

Onko jotain tiettyä tapahtumaa, jonka et haluaisi olla osana peliä, esim. väkivaltaa? Jos, niin mitä?
Is there any form of content that you would not like to be a part of the game, e.g. violence? If yes, what?

Excerpts from interviews both in Finnish and English

(1) *"I thought that tabletop role-playing games are like a fancy word for traditional board games! So I expected dice and boards and all that. And then when I found out what these games actually are I thought to myself 'wow, this is actually pretty cool!"* - Medic

(2) *"I was of course excited to see how the tower works because it seemed fun. And I was expecting more rules and that was actually pretty free-form. I mean, I knew that it was going to be more free than many tabletop games but still."* - Mercenary

(3) *"I thought that these games would take a lot of time, sessions would last for many hours, and that the rules would be difficult ... complexity. But this game was actually pretty straightforward. It's not that complexity is a bad thing if you get time to learn the rules but it is a small barrier."* - Engineer

(4) *"It was fun that it was so simple and relied on the story, because from what I had heard from my friends I expected a lot of mechanical complexity in that you don't really know what's happening before you play a lot."* - Captain

(5) *"I've written quite a lot in English but I haven't really communicated much in a foreign language through drama. So I thought about that a little but I wasn't scared."* - Captain

(6) *"It was pretty natural to use a language like this, even though at times I noticed that I started pronouncing a word wrong or even completely forgot a word. That's something I thought about beforehand. But it wasn't really scary because English is strong enough for me that I can think of a circumlocution in those situations."* - Engineer

(7) *"Well I thought in a certain way that it would be personally much more difficult to communicate freely like that in English, but it wasn't really so bad after all."* - Mercenary

(8) *"Well at first I was actually very nervous because I don't really think that I know English at all, but then during the first meeting this turned more into excitement as we got to know each other."* - Medic

(9) *"I feel that it actually helps me to play with people you don't really know. You can be more carefree there and say different things, whereas if there's people you see every day then they might latch onto some things and taunt you with them later on."* - Mercenary

(10) *"Of course it was at first a bit icy to be the character in the game and it limited what I would say, because I hadn't fully fleshed out my character's personality, but on*

the other hand I enjoy improvisation so it didn't really matter once we got started." - Mercenary

(11) *"I haven't really acted or anything after primary school and I don't even find it all that interesting but in the game it was actually pretty interesting!"* - Engineer

(12) *"I actually got really early on the strong feeling that through that (tabletop role-playing games) you can learn a language really fast and well. I mean I realized that at the point when the Engineer started presenting all his tools in detail and in a way funnier way than if I were to read them in a textbook!"* - Medic

(13) *"You learn speech, confidence, general communication, vocabulary, and pronunciation pretty naturally in my opinion. But then maybe grammar is something that is left on the wayside. Especially if the game master is not a language teacher then you just won't learn the rules."* - Mercenary

(14) *"Well of course there's a lot of general communication. And a form of visualisation when you have to rely so much on your imagination and describe what you're doing or seeing. But when I'm thinking about it, it's pretty difficult to include grammar in it. Because it's free communication after all. For example if we've just gone through some grammar stuff I don't know how you'd fit it naturally into the role-playing game."* - Medic

(15) *"The best in this is that it's a role-playing game and everyone had their roles. So there's this distribution that one person is the Captain and I was the Engineer so that you learn special vocabulary around the professions. But when you're just freely discussing something and you make some grammar mistakes then they're just going to stay there because there's nobody to correct you. Unless there's an unpleasant player there who just comments on them. So that's something you probably don't learn from this, grammar and stuff, because you have to yourself know if you're speaking correctly or incorrectly. So if I'd have to say one thing that you don't learn then grammar."* - Engineer

(16) *"There's a lot of listening comprehension and understanding others. So how you understand others and make others understand you in return. There's a lot of speaking and listening. But I don't really see if there's anything you couldn't include in this. Possibly like some grammar theories? But even then I don't really see it being out of the question that somebody could introduce me to a game format that has grammar as a part of this. So some tinkerer could adapt this into anything, really."* - Captain

(17) *"You get a lot of interaction and like creating language. Kind of like what happens in real life so that you just start communicating in a foreign language. But you cannot really learn vocabulary directly because you just speak and it doesn't come from the outside in the situation."* - Engineer

(18) *"And I mean in this activity it's really good that there's always others nearby when you're talking and they can support you if you don't happen to find the right word."* - Mercenary

(19) *"In that situation [video about the Medic talking about the Mercenary's weapons] I felt like I didn't really know how I'm supposed to frame my thoughts, but it was nice when the rest of you gave some options. I mean, of course it's easier when somebody like guides you when needed."* - Medic

(20) *"The game was interesting and I got a really good feeling about it. The company was great and I particularly enjoyed creating the story together as we played."* - Engineer

(21) *"I noticed immediately that one thing that furthers language learning is that you can freely create even comical plot twists and then the other players build on that as they wish."* - Captain

(22) *"What I'm feeling the most towards the next session is anticipation. You really get hooked into it like you're watching a tv-series. I mean, I'm really interested in what happens next, I'm not actually even thinking about using a language I don't really like."* - Medic

(23) *"It's my duty to lead the group and make sure that everything works and the others have their own tasks. If I had some other role then I would have acted differently, but in that scene [she was just shown a clip of her reprimanding the Mercenary for lacking equipment] it was accusatory like that because it was my job."* - Captain

(24) *"Well, of course it always affects the situation somewhat with whom you're talking with in the story. With the Engineer we have more friendly banter, and the Captain my character addresses more formally. So that does teach you to consider how you're speaking when talking to different people."* - Mercenary

(25) *"Yeah sure it has an impact with whom you're talking with. I crack jokes with pretty much everyone, but for people my character is friends with, such as the Mercenary, the tone is more relaxed. With the Captain, he [the Engineer] behaves like her word is the law."* - Engineer

(26) *"I don't really know if I'm a good actress or anything but I like to get into a role. And I've always said that I'm personally afraid to go in front of the class as myself, because it's me getting judged there, but if I have a role then I feel like it's the character getting judged and not me personally."* - Medic

(27) *"Well all the school exercises, for example in which you are in a restaurant with a partner, well they are really good for learning one specific situation. But in these role-playing things the focus is lacking so it's difficult to learn something specific because the players can choose what to talk about. But for general communication this sort of freedom works really well."* - Mercenary

(28) *"I think it's pretty dull that usually in schools you read from a book what is the word for a dog and a cat. And then you get a sentence 'I have a dog and a cat'. And then you discuss with a partner a scenario in which one has a dog and the other has a cat and so on. It's pretty good that some of it is restricted like that, but there should also be something outside of these restrictions so you aren't scared to use language in real situations."* - Medic

(29) *"Especially for shier people who are afraid of making mistakes and speaking this sort of thing in a good group would be particularly good. So you get some positive experiences about using a foreign language."* - Engineer

(30) *"Everything that was spoken in English classes, or at least mine, was always like that you were in a restaurant and you are A and the other person is B and there is a script to follow. And then the more free discussions were about professions or something like that. So this format of role-playing games is much more free because you can come up with crazy ideas, get into a role and see things in a different way, and the biggest thing in this is that there's multiple people participating in the activity. And that's something I've never had in any school."* - Captain

(31) *"In my opinion you have to have some basic knowledge [of English]. So probably for some teenagers this would work really well, but not for younger than that."* - Captain

(32) *"If I think about who would benefit the most from that [playing in English], then I'd say that maybe 12-year olds would be more capable. So that you already know some basics and that you can boldly test your language skills."* - Medic

(33) *"It requires that there's mature enough people there so that they can concentrate. So for young pupils it wouldn't probably fit… well maybe it would actually fit but there's probably a barrier of language skills."* - Engineer

(34) *"I guess it's easier to participate if you know vocabulary and stuff but it develops fast when you start talking. And there's many roles to take in this, so that you don't have to talk all the time."* - Mercenary

(35) *"The younger you were to do that for [hold tabletop role-playing game sessions] the more directed it should be and the clearer the boundaries should be. But that also kind of eats away at the potential."* - Captain

(36) *"It would maybe work the best like so that there is like an extra class for willing people so that it wouldn't be obligatory. It probably would require smaller groups to be good. So that there's not an entire class playing the same thing because it would probably take like a year to go through a single round of actions."* - Mercenary

(37) *"Well if you consider that class sizes are just growing and growing and that about 30 pupils were to play something like this I can't say for sure if anything useful would come out of it."* - Medic

(38) *"If you think that it [tabletop role-playing games] could be included into a voluntary course and there'd be like 10 people you could easily divide them into two groups and observe them both at the same time. But if there's like 20 people or over, that would create such an uproar. And especially if there's like an enthusiastic blabbermouth present then they would probably talk alone for half of the playing time."* - Engineer

(39) *"Well mostly the biggest barriers will be the practical arrangements. I mean that if there's like 25 pupils and only one instructor, it's really poor then."* - Captain

(40) *"But I was also maybe thinking it more pedagogically, that could this trigger like bullying more? So could some use this to bully someone more, like if there's a threat that someone like that is a peer game master. I was also thinking that my role as the group's leader would have been a delicious opportunity to bully others if I wanted to do so. So you don't really even need to be a peer game master since it's enough to just hold power within the story to do something bad."* - Captain