

**SUBJECT TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM TEACHERS'
CONCEPTIONS OF EARLY ENGLISH TEACHING IN FIN-
LAND**

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Kielitaidon merkitys on kasvanut huomattavasti, mikä on korostanut kielenopetuksen tarvetta. Tämä näkyy myös perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman muutoksessa (2019), jonka myötä ensimmäisen vieraan kielen (A1) opetus alkaa jo ensimmäiseltä luokalta kolmannen luokan sijaan keväällä 2020. Muutosta on perusteltu esimerkiksi lasten oppimisherkkyydellä, jota on haluttu hyödyntää. Opetushallituksen (2019) mukaan, varhennettu englannin opetus pyrkii luomaan suotuisia asenteita kielenoppimista kohtaan, syventämään oppilaan itseluottamusta sekä kielen oppijana että sen käyttäjänä.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on selvittää millaisia näkemyksiä ja kokemuksia opettajilla on varhennetun englannin opettamisesta. Lisäksi tavoitteena on tarkastella menetelmiä, joita oppitunneilla hyödynnetään ja selvittää, miten opettajat näkevät varhennetun kielenopetuksen vaikuttavan oppilaiden kielitaitoon. Tutkimus toteutettiin kyselylomakkeen avulla, johon vastasi 27 varhennetun englannin opettajaa.</p> <p>Tulokset osoittivat, että opettajilla on enimmäkseen myönteisiä kokemuksia varhennetun englannin opettamisesta perustuen etenkin oppilaiden innokkuuteen. Lisäksi sen uskotaan olevan hyödyllistä ajatellen lasten kykyä oppia nopeasti. Oppitunneilla käytetyt menetelmät olivat monipuolisia ja varhennetun englannin opetuksen uskotaan luovan hyvän perustan tulevalle kielenoppimiselle. Lisäksi sen nähdään vaikuttavan positiivisesti erityisesti oppilaiden suulliseen kielitaitoon. Toisaalta myös negatiivisia kokemuksia ilmeni liittyen useimmiten opettajien koulutuksen puutteeseen.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

The significance of foreign language proficiency has grown remarkably over the years for instance due to internationalization. This is stated to reflect the need for *early language teaching* (ELT) that can respond to the demands of our society (Heilimo 2020: 5). “The main objective of ELT is to elicit children’s affirmative attitudes towards language learning, reinforce their confidence in their abilities and encourage them to utilize their language skills” (Finnish National Agency for Education 2019: 25, my translation).

ELT is a rather recent addition to Finnish education and language teaching. This is highly based on the hypothesis of children’s ability to acquire language better (Inha and Huhta 2018: 2). According to the Finnish Government’s regulation (2018/793 § 6), altogether at least two weekly lessons per year of first foreign language teaching are added for grades one and two from spring 2020.

Previous studies have shown that ELT has created positive attitudes among different parties. In addition, it is confronted as profitable in educational context (Huhta and Leontjev 2019, Heilimo 2020) despite the ambiguous results on its accuracy (Nikolov 2009: 1). On the contrary, studies do show that children have a high potential for language learning (Nikolov 2009). However, Heilimo (2020: 55) notes that the research they conducted on the issue in question does not give generalizable results but insights only into the status at the moment. Therefore, the present study intends to research early English teaching further in Finnish primary school context through an online questionnaire. More accurately, the aim of this study is to examine subject teachers and classroom teachers’ conceptions of early English teaching, its implementation and how teachers see it impacting on children’s language skills.

I find studying ELT beneficial especially due to its recent and constantly developing nature. This study intends to offer new and accurate information about early English teaching and reveal its possible shortcomings. In addition, it might help to develop

early English teaching, its methods and prepare teacher-students for teaching language at an early level. I see it as beneficial to the teacher community, teacher-students and to the people in education in general.

2 EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING

Koivula et al. (2017) consider acquiring language at an early stage as one of the focal subareas of children's interaction and cooperation. In addition, they note that early language learning creates the basis for later self-expression. Thus, the purpose of *early language teaching* (ELT) goes beyond linguistic functions (Commission of the European Communities 2003: 7, cited in Nikolov 2009: 7). As Finnish National Agency for Education (2019: 25) states, it is to awaken children's interest towards language learning, encourage them to utilize their language skills and build trust on their abilities. Moreover, ELT offers versatile experiences of foreign language as well as its culture, and the joy of learning is underlined.

Teacher's role is also central when it comes to young learners. For example, their sensitivity and communication skills are remarkable for children not only as students but for their development as a whole (Koivula et al. 2017). In addition, it is essential that a teacher creates and secures the conditions that help children to make progress (Tirri and Kuusisto 2019). Considering successful language learning, a qualified teacher is one of the focal factors (Nikolov 2009: 1). For instance, important objectives are acknowledging the fundamentals of children's language acquisition and being competent in both their first language and in the target language (Nikolov 2009: 9). However, ELT is changing language teaching towards student orientation, in which learner motivation and enthusiasm are seen as the foundation (Inha 2018: 4).

2.1 Defining and justifying early language teaching

Skinnari and Halvari (2018: 2) state that ELT cannot be specified with one definition since it is related to previously organized actions and its current context. However, they point out that in Finland it can be described as language teaching of first foreign language (A1) that is implemented in second grade at the latest. In turn, Skinnari and Sjöberg (2018: 8) define ELT as goal-orientated second or foreign language teaching

that occurs during early childhood education, preschool education, or underclass of primary education.

There are several sources that refer to children's ability to acquire deeper language proficiency. This hypothesis has also been a focal reason for the implementation of ELT in Finland (Inha and Huhta 2018: 2). According to Nikolov (2009: 2), it seems to be easier for children than for older learners to learn a new language successfully and effortlessly. Yule (2010: 188) also notes that some features such as pronunciation are difficult to acquire without early exposure to the target language. This is occasionally seen as a proof for the *critical period hypothesis* (CPH), according to which one has a certain period when native-like language learning is possible (Yule 2010: 188). Moreover, CPH stands for naturalistic language acquisition that only children have access to (Nikolov 2009: 4). However, CPH is noted to be highly disputed among different areas of research (Nikolov 2009: 2). As Abello-Contesse (2009: 2) points out, studies in a classroom context have shown that older learners seem to be more competent than children. Muñoz (2009: 151) indicates that this is due to children's ability to acquire language best implicitly which is unconscious rather than in a formal setting. Therefore, aside with learners' age, important factors are the quality of teaching, consistency, and qualified teachers (Skinnari and Sjöberg 2018: 3).

2.2 Early language teaching in Finland

According to Skinnari and Halvari (2018: 1), high level of language competence is needed and even required especially in smaller countries. In Finland, early language teaching occurred as a requirement to develop the nation's language proficiency and due to internationalization (Pyykkö 2017, cited in Skinnari and Halvari 2018: 1). As Ministry of Education and Culture (2018) presents, the first foreign language is taught from first grade instead of third grade in Finland onward from spring 2020. This reform increases the weekly lessons per year of the first foreign language by two hours.

Several previous studies show that teachers have positive conceptions of ELT in Finland. For example, Linna (2018) examines teachers who took part in an in-service training called the *Early Bird Gets the Word*, which is specifically directed to early language teachers. The study discusses teachers' conceptions of ELT and the effectiveness of the in-service training. In addition, it intends to examine who is responsible for implementing ELT: a classroom teacher or a subject teacher. Another study by Huhta and Leontjev (2019) focuses on three different groups' perceptions of ELT. They included students who started learning English in first, second and third grade of autumn 2017, their teachers as well as their guardians' conceptions. Their study consists of over 700 students, 200 teachers and little less than 80 guardians. In turn, Heilimo (2020) studies specifically classroom teachers' perceptions of ELT. They also examine the observations the participants have made considering the learners oral foreign language proficiency.

These studies show extensive results considering different issues of ELT such as teachers' qualifications, general conceptions, teaching materials and methods. Linna (2018) presents that the majority of the teachers had a lot of experience on teaching in general but little experience on ELT. Most of the teachers were classroom teachers and three of them had the qualifications of a language teacher. According to Enever (2011: 25-26, cited in Linna 2018: 75), this is typical in Europe where teachers conduct ELT even without proper qualifications. However, eight of the teachers had a degree suitable for early childhood education and twelve of the teachers had preschool education studies. Correspondingly most of the teachers in Huhta and Leontjev's (2019) study had a higher academic degree with extensive pedagogical studies but not necessarily qualifications of a language teacher. In turn, the participants in Heilimo's (2020) study had experience on ELT from two and a half months to even fifteen years.

The conceptions of ELT in general are fairly aligned with each other in these studies. Considering the in-service training the attitudes in Linna's (2018) study had a lot of diversity at first. For instance, the participants gained new concepts of ELT and peer support but would have liked to gain more practical advice. However, after a work

life period the conceptions changed mainly into positive, and they saw the in-service training as an enlightening experience. In addition, Huhta and Leontjev (2019) indicate that most of the participants had positive conceptions of ELT, and it is stated to be widely present even during the students' past time for instance through songs and television. Moreover, the teachers and the guardians brought up children's enthusiasm as a factor for the positive attitudes as well as examples of them utilizing English outside school hours. Altogether, ELT was confronted as a pleasant addition into the curriculum, and it is to motivate children to learn languages in the future (Heilimo 2020).

In addition, the results reflect the popularity of functional teaching methods. For example, the learning process with young students is described to be more active, which is said to differ from teaching older learners (Huhta and Leontjev 2019). Moreover, Heilimo (2020) reports that instead of traditional textbooks other means such as videos and songs were utilized as tools for language learning aside with concrete objects. According to Linna (2018), textbooks were also commonly left aside after the in-service training, which had confirmed the participants' beliefs in functional teaching.

2.3 Teaching young language learners

As mentioned above, naturalistic, and functional language learning is typically most efficient for young learners. According to Mindes (2020), play is a common tool through which this type of learning is conducted and achieved. They also state that play can be defined in several different ways depending on one's age, stage, and personality. For example, it can stand for practicing, gaming virtually or physically, and it can include talking, imagining and even risk taking. Moreover, teaching through play seems to elicit greater outcomes than other methods. This was also revealed by Shintani (2016), who shifted from treating the language as an object to task-based teaching, where language is seen as a tool to develop children's communication skills with naturalistic means. In addition, Kangasvieri and Moate (2018) examined the

methods utilized and found potential among teachers. They discovered that playing, storytelling and crafting were popular. Moreover, skills and themes already familiar to children were seen as important considering children's confidence as language users. The outcomes and joy one can attain through meaningful play also work as a foundation for future learning (Mindes 2020). This corresponds with the ideologies of Finnish National Agency for Education (2019: 25) according to which the purpose of ELT is to motivate children and establish positive attitudes towards language learning in general.

The practicalities of ELT are also present in Huhta and Leontjev's (2019) study. Based on the teachers' perceptions, the focus is especially on the use of Finnish and the target language, implementation of the teaching as well as its contents. According to their study, cooperation among teachers in both implementation and planning of the lessons is common. In addition, Finnish seems to be a focal part of ELT, since most of the teacher participants report to use it at least as much as the target language. Moreover, oral language skills were emphasized, and written language skills were practiced either just a little or not at all. Commonly mentioned oral exercises with young learners were songs, listening and repeating, games, pair, or group activities and questions asked by the teacher. Considering the teaching materials, social media, and internet sources such as Youtube and different learning games (Kahoot etc.) were central. Furthermore, teachers' own creativity was commonly utilized in teaching methods. In addition, textbooks and materials related to them were mentioned even though the use of them was mainly based on giving homework that rarely occur at this stage of language learning.

As mentioned above, especially oral language skills are emphasized when teaching language to young learners, whereas other subdivisions are not as crucial. This is for instance a result of children's reading and writing skills that are still developing in their mother tongue (Heilimo 2020: 47). The progress learners make in oral language skills is also assessed in Huhta and Leontjev's (2019) study, in which the focus is on the learners' ability to provide English. According to the evaluations, most of the

students in first grade were still below the lowest skill level on the language proficiency level description scale of basic education curriculum 2004 after six months. They were able to provide individual words and phrases, which was expected since the students are still beginners regardless of their enthusiasm. On the other hand, third graders were familiar with approximately 70% of the most common 500 words of the target language. This illustrates that older learners acquired the foreign language faster during same period of time. This was estimated to be due to higher usage of English outside school hours and better literacy skills in their mother tongue.

Even though studies show mainly positive attitudes towards ELT, critique and a need for development are also present. For example, Pesonen's (2020) study questions the use of resources, since English is widely present among our environment and children exposure to it regardless of ELT. In addition, there occurs critique towards teaching materials. For instance, some of the teachers stated them to be inferior and irrelevant for children based on their context (Pesonen 2020). Therefore, planning ELT can be seen as a burden (Kangasvieri and Moate 2018). Furthermore, the need for in-service training was noted, since teachers do not have a lot of knowledge or practices of ELT (Skinnari and Sjöberg 2018: 24). Thus, to make ELTT more efficient and effortless for both teachers and learners, broader view of individuals' conceptions is required.

3 THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 The aim and the research questions

This study aims to explore classroom and subject teachers' conceptions and experiences of early English teaching. In addition, the methods of implementation are examined aside with teachers' views of the effectiveness of early English teaching. This is implemented in Finnish primary school context through an online questionnaire by focusing on the following questions:

1. What kind of conceptions/experiences do teachers have on early English teaching?
2. How is Early language teaching implemented?
3. How do teachers view learners' English development?

3.2 Data collection and methods of analysis

Altogether 27 teachers of early English took part in this study during spring 2022. From the participants 52% were English subject teachers and 56% classroom teachers. Moreover, 11% of the participants reported to have the qualifications for both. In addition, 7% of the participants' degree was still in progress. Taking into account the perspectives of different groups of teachers allowed ELT to be addressed from several perspectives. Primarily the participants were recruited through Facebook forums directed to both classroom teachers and English subject teachers. Furthermore, an individual school was contacted by email.

When collecting the data research ethics were also acknowledged. According to Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019), there are several things one needs to recognize. However, a general principle is that the participants' privacy is protected

(Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019: 14). Considering the present study, the participants' consensus and their personal details were focal. Therefore, the answers remained anonymous, and the required permits were received from the participants in pursuance of the questionnaire.

3.2.1 Data collection

The data for this study was collected through an online questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions. This specific data collection tool was selected based on its diverse nature. For example, it can be carried out with various forms of questions from multiple choice to different types of scales (Valli 2017: 9). In addition, open-ended questions enable that the participants can also express themselves freely (Valli 2017: 14). Moreover, a questionnaire is a good alternative to include numerous participants, whereas in a case of an interview the number of participants would have been lower in a small-scale study.

Considering the validity both the structure and the length of the questionnaire are focal (Denscombe 2014). As Valli (2017) presents, the questions typically move from warm-up questions to more demanding to create an easy approach to the topic. Therefore, multiple-choice questions were preferred to keep the participants motivated. In addition, Denscombe (2014) points out that immoderate amount of time cannot be required from the participants. Thus, the questions were carefully considered in relation to the research questions of the present study and unnecessary questions excluded to maintain the reliability of the data.

3.2.2 Methods of analysis

The analysis was implemented in terms of two different approaches based on the form of the questions. Considering the open-ended questions grounded theory approach and especially categorization were exploited. According to Denscombe (2014: 285), grounded theory approach is for revealing the meaning from the text, which corresponds with the initial aim of the present study. As Schreier (2014: 170) emphasizes,

the research questions need to be acknowledged throughout the analysis for it to correspond with the focus of the research and to distinguish the relevant aspects.

Denscombe (2014: 285-288) also presents the focal stages of grounded theory approach that were followed in the analysis of open-ended questions. First, the data was carefully observed to have sufficient knowledge from the totality. Second, the data was color coded in order to organize and clarify the data. Third, the data was categorized based on the research questions and participants' perceptions of ELT. This was to form an overall picture from the participants' conceptions and for deep interpretation of the data.

For the closed questions, descriptive statistics were utilized, and the results are presented as relative frequencies drawn from the survey platform. According to Denscombe (2014: 270) the purpose of this is to illustrate how common a certain variable is among the data. In addition, the questionnaire included Likert scales, which are used for closed questions that for instance measure perspectives by changing it to a number (Denscombe 2014: 279).

4 RESULTS

In this section, I present the results of the questionnaire. I have divided the results into four different subareas according to the research questions of the present study. The following subareas will cover both closed and open-ended questions with the support of excerpts and figures drawn from the data. The language of the questionnaire was Finnish based on the participants' first language. However, the excerpts are given in both languages: Finnish and English. In addition, the data presented in percentages is rounded off to the closest total value.

4.1 Positive conceptions of early English teaching

In a form of a multiple-choice question the participants were asked whether they have had enough training to conduct early English teaching in practice or not. The majority (67%) of the participants answered yes indicating that they have had enough training.

Most (89%) of the participants also reported early English teaching to be beneficial. The participants who answered so, often elaborated their decision to be based on children's ability to acquire language easier, which can be seen in Excerpt 1. In addition, students' enthusiasm towards language learning and playful nature of the lessons were mentioned frequently. These are demonstrated in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 1.

"Mitä varhemmin, sitä helpompaa kielenoppiminen on."

"The earlier language learning starts, the easier language learning is."

Excerpt 2.

"Oppilaat ovat motivoituneita oppimaan vierasta kieltä heti 1. luokasta alkaen ja se voidaan aloittaa leikkien ja laulaen."

"Students are motivated to learn a foreign language ever since first grade and it can be started through playing and singing."

The participants were also asked to grade their experiences of early English teaching from negative (0) to positive (10). The average grade was eight, and 89% of the respondents selected a value between 6-10 which illustrates that most of the answers were closer to the positive end of the scale. In addition, none of the participants graded their experiences to zero. Furthermore, the participants were asked to elaborate what kind of positive or negative experiences they have had. Most of the answers reported positive experiences, which often included factors related to students' behavior such as their eagerness towards learning and to the practicalities of the early English lessons. Both of these aspects can be seen in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3.

"Oppilaat ovat motivoituneita, tunneista on ollut helppo suunnitella toiminnallisia. Koulussamme on ollut käytössä laadukkaat materiaalit --."

"Students are motivated, it has been easy to plan functional lessons. High quality materials have been used in our school--."

In addition, some reported to enjoy the freedom early English lessons have brought for the participants as teachers. For example, creativity considering the planning as well as the pressure free atmosphere of the lessons were mentioned. Moreover, children's ability to acquire language easier appeared occasionally as a reasoning for positive experiences.

4.2 Negative conceptions of early English teaching

Even though most of the participants' conceptions represented positivity towards early English teaching, the answers also reflected some concerns and need for improvement that have or might have affected negatively on the participants. For instance, 33% of the respondents reported that they have not had enough training to

conduct early English teaching, and according to 11% of the participants early English teaching is not beneficial. When elaborating this for example lack of qualifications was reported, which can be seen in Excerpt 4. In addition, the concern of early English teaching disturbing learners whose first language is not Finnish was noted. Another shortcoming stated by one of the participants was related to the general root of organizing early English teaching, which is visible in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 4.

“En saanut koulutusta aineen opetukseen. Vieraiden kielten opetus ei kuulu luokanopettajan koulutukseen. En kokenut osaavani kielipedagogiikkaa – ”.

“I did not get training to teach the subject in question. Foreign language teaching is not part of the classroom teacher education. I did not feel competent with language pedagogy.

Excerpt 5.

“-- varhennettu englannin opetus on enemmän poliittisesti tehty päätös kuin tutkimuksiin perustuva.”

“ -- early English teaching is more of a political decision than based on research.”

In addition, when evaluating their experiences on a scale from negative (0) to positive (10) the minimum value drawn from the data was three. When asked to elaborate their experiences through an open-ended question, several participants also had negative conceptions to express aside with the positive ones. Commonly associated with unfavorable experiences were again the lack of training aside with big group sizes. In addition, two of the participants brought up difficulties to stream students which is presented in Excerpt 5.

Excerpt 5.

“Haastavaa on, kun oppilaiden lähtötaso on todella eri. Jotkut osaavat sanoa ekalla hello ja toiset puhuvat sujuvaa englantia. Sujuvaa englantia puhuville tunniti ovat usein liian helppoja.”

"It is difficult when students' starting levels are very different. Some can say hello in first grade and others speak fluent English. The lessons are often too easy for those who speak fluent English."

4.3 Implementation of early English lessons

Different methods teachers have used during early English lessons were examined as a multiple-choice question, where the participants were allowed to choose several options and elaborate their choices. Figure 1. presents the most common methods among the participants, from which games and play as well as music were the choice of 96% of the respondents. Some of the participants who selected textbook chose to elaborate that they have utilized the available digital material rather than the physical book. As is also visible from Figure 1. 48% reported to use other methods such as own materials and handouts. One of the participants also brought up native guests as a method of language teaching in early English lessons.

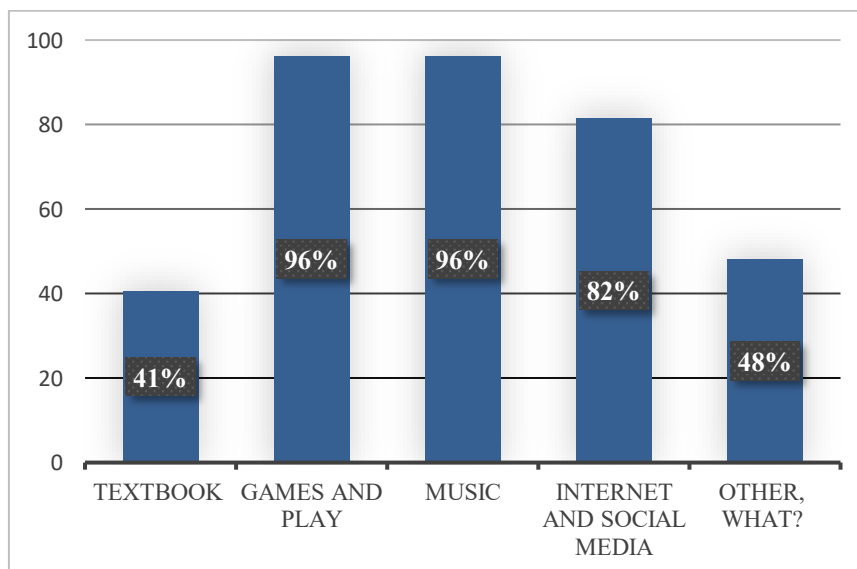


Figure 1. (n=98) "What methods have you used in early English teaching?"

The participants were also asked about the language choices they make when teaching early English. As Figure 2. illustrates, most of the participants (41%) reported to use Finnish a bit more than English whereas only 4% reported to use a bit more or mostly English. However, 33% of the respondents addressed to use both languages equally.

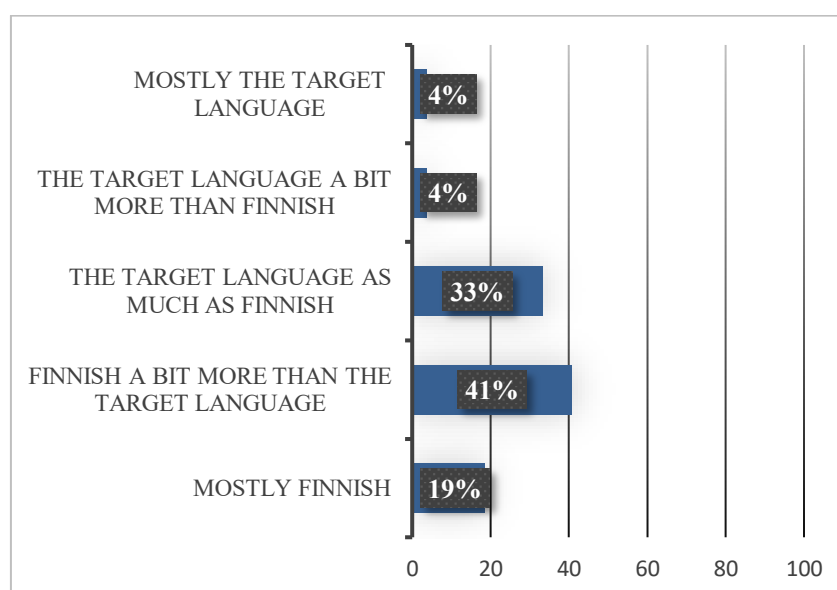


Figure 2. (n=27) "How much do you use the target language in early English teaching compared to Finnish?"

Another question related to the implementation of the lessons was about the language subdivisions. The teachers were asked if there is a subdivision that is more focal in early English teaching and if so, which. The answers divided almost unanimously, where 93% of the participants selected the answer "yes". In their view, oral skills such as pronunciation and speech were seen as focal areas of early English teaching. In addition, listening comprehension and vocabulary were mentioned occasionally.

Compared to English teaching in third grade all the participants (100%) agreed that early English teaching is different. As a reason for this, the participants stated early English teaching to be more free-formed than teaching English in third grade. For example, exams, homework and books were not seen as a part of early English teaching, and there is no rush to achieve certain goals. The participants also stated the focus of early English lessons to be on oral skills whereas writing is often excluded. In addition, the lessons were described to include more games and play.

4.4 The impact of early English teaching on students' English skills

The questionnaire also covered teachers' views considering the impact of early English teaching on students' language skills. The participants were asked to estimate how much they see early English teaching impacting on the development of students' English skills in general. From a scale of zero (very little) to ten (a lot) the average grade of the answers was 7 and 78% of the participants chose a value from 6-10. However, both ends of the scales occurred indicating diverse opinions to some extent, where 11% of the respondents selected a value from 1-3.

Lastly in a form of an open-ended question, the participants were asked to freely describe how they see early English teaching impacting on students' English skills. Many of the respondents argued early English teaching to build a foundation for future language learning. For instance, when moving on to third grade, students were seen to already know some fundamentals of English. This is also demonstrated in Excerpt 6. In addition, the participants noted it to increase students' vocabulary and to improve their oral skills. Considering students' motivation, early English teaching was argued to have a positive impact. Moreover, some pointed out it to encourage students to use English in practice. On the other hand, Excerpts 8. illustrates the other end of the scale where early English teaching was not seen as effective based on the input that comes from the environment regardless of formal teaching.

Excerpt 6.

"-- Opitaan siis hyvää perusta myöhemmälle kielen opiskelulle --."

" -- Thus, a good foundation for later language learning is learned --."

Excerpt 7.

"No eipä se paljon vaikuta. Vapaa-ajan pelit, lyriikat ja to ajavat ihan saman asian."

"Well, it does not affect a lot. Past-time games, lyrics and to run the same thing."

Furthermore, some of the participants found it difficult to estimate the development of children's language skills. For instance, one of the respondents underlined that early English teaching has not been implemented for a long time, due to which the results are hard to distinguish at this point. In addition, the outcomes were presumed to depend on the teacher.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this section, I will analyze the presented results thoroughly in a light of the theoretical framework and previous findings. I aim to discuss and interpret the meaning behind the results comprehensively from the point of view of ELT. Lastly, I will summarize the present study and address both its strengths as well as limitations. In addition, I will consider the results in terms of possible future research.

5.1 Discussion and implications

Most of the teachers' conceptions of early English teaching reflected positive attitudes. This indicates that teaching English to young learners has often been pleasant for the respondents. For example, the majority of the participants reported good experiences that were commonly attributed to children's enthusiasm and to lesson practices such as good materials. These factors could possibly lighten teachers' workload and allow them to focus on teaching in pedagogically rich ways. Therefore, this could be seen as a cause for the affirmative experiences. These results align with the studies of Huhta and Leontjev (2019: 31), Heilimo (2020: 52) and the article of Kangasvieri and Moate (2018), where similar attitudes among teachers occurred, and especially learners' interest in learning was highlighted to have a positive effect.

Moreover, 89% of the participants stated early English teaching to be beneficial in early education. This was often supported with children's sensitivity to learn, which according to the respondents is a potential that should be utilized. According to Nikolov (2009: 1), this assumption is highly common. The factors that might promote children's rapid language acquisition are for instance their willingness to learn as well as their courage towards trying (Yule 2010: 189). Therefore, the age itself might not be the crucial factor but the characteristics that are highly common with children at young age. These results are similar with Heilimo's (2020: 45) study, where teachers had reported to notice children's fast progress in language learning. In addition, the same

phenomenon occurs in Huhta and Leontjev's (2019: 31) study, according to which children are said to learn with ease. This illustrates that even though the so-called age factor and CPH are stated to be controversial (Nikolov 2009: 1-2), those are highly trusted among people in education where teachers can observe students' development at close quarters.

Furthermore, 67% of the participants felt confident with the amount of training they have received to conduct language teaching at an early level. According to Mustalampi (2019: 33), knowledge is one of teacher's fundamental elements since it defines their perceptions of their work. In addition, it creates the basis for consistent teaching (Kourios 2014: 1). Since only 7% of the participants' degree was still in progress, the adequacy of education might partially be due to the participants' comprehensive experience in the field of education. For example, this might give them confidence and expertise they can apply into a new form of teaching without specified in-service training. These results are slightly different from the study of Huhta and Leontjev (2019: 36), in which 47% of the respondents noted to need more training. In addition, teachers in Heilimo's (2020: 38) study had received only a little training or not at all.

On the other hand, small proportion of the results showed unfavorable conceptions of early English teaching. For example, 33% of the participants stated not to have had enough training. According to Nikolov (2009: 315), this is a common challenge in ELT. The same phenomenon occurs in Linna's (2018: 113) study, in which the participants did not feel the teacher training program to provide enough means to teach language at an early level. As pointed out by Lawrence (1999: 11), this can for instance have a negative impact on one's confidence as a teacher. This phenomenon can also be seen in Heilimo's (2020: 39) study, where the lack of training had created insecurities among a focal participant. As Lawrence (1999: 12) states, in-service training could reverse these feelings and give teachers confidence in the new field of language education.

The results also imply that teachers might have differing needs considering the in-service training. This corresponds with Huhta and Leontjev's (2019: 36) study, in

which training was required for various issues such as language training and language pedagogical training. Huhta and Leontjev (2019: 36) also point out that this might initially be a result of teachers' differing educational backgrounds. For instance, a classroom teacher might not be competent in the target language, and a subject teacher might require more training when it comes to teaching children (Nikolov 2009: 315). As Skinnari and Sjöberg (2018: 30) state, both language pedagogical and age pedagogical proficiency are required to be qualified for ELT. In addition, these results illustrate the constantly changing nature of education, which increases even more experienced teachers' need for in-service training.

Other factors creating unfavorable experiences might also be associated with the lack of training to some extent. For example, the negative perceptions caused by big group sizes could support the hypothesis, where subject teachers have not had enough training for group management. In addition, Huhta and Leontjev's (2019: 31) study points out that big group sizes limit the possibilities to organize functional lessons. This illustrates that even though children are eager to learn, they get distracted easily. Therefore, the focus might be shifted from teaching to disciplinary, which can cause frustration among different parties. In addition, 11% of the respondents did not consider early English teaching beneficial. These perceptions were also justified with unqualified teachers that might not provide profitable language teaching.

Furthermore, some noted that early English teaching might be pointless use of resources, since one can easily acquire English from the environment. This is similar to what was reported in Pesonen's (2020: 41) study, according to which teaching should be focused on other subjects, since input in English is available regardless. These conceptions also imply that sense of relevance is focal on the field of education. Therefore, teachers might want to focus on the fields they find useful and are familiar with in order to avoid feeling of wasted time.

Considering the implementation of early English lessons, games and play as well as music were the most used (96%) out of all the methods. In addition, 82% of the

respondents stated to use the internet and social media, whereas 48% reported to use their own adaptations and 41% textbooks. Similar methods were also presented in the studies of Huhta and Leontjev (2019: 34), Heilimo (2020: 41) and Inha (2018: 4). The choices teachers make could be highly related to learners' age, since there seems to be no difference between learning and playing for children, and it is suggested to elicit higher results (Mindes 2020: 136-139). Teachers might also aim for creating authentic learning settings, which according to Nikolov (2009: 101) is also suitable for young learners. Moreover, children have difficulties with engaging in learning on purpose, which is why it should be unconscious (Tough 1977, cited in Nikolov 2009: 98). As Inha (2018: 4) states, students' young age challenges one to develop the pedagogy of language teaching, since traditional methods might not be the most effective choice.

The participants also noted unanimously that early English teaching differs from the old norm of teaching English in third grade. A reason for this was often stated to be the rather loose guidelines: strict goals and exams are excluded whereas functional teaching methods are emphasized. This might have had also created positive conceptions, since the lessons can be implemented in a matter that suits oneself. Oral skills were also highlighted as a focal subdivision. This corresponds with the utilized methods mentioned above, since for instance music develops one's aural output (Nikolov 2009: 102). Similar results in the studies of Huhta and Leontjev (2019: 31) and Heilimo (2020: 47) were supported with the fact that children's reading and writing skills are still radically developing in their mother tongue, which effects on the implementation and focal areas of teaching.

In addition, using Finnish a bit more than English as a medium of instruction appeared to be most common (41%). Moreover, 33% of the respondents stated to use both languages equally, whereas only 4% have chosen to use mostly English. This is similar to what was reported in Huhta and Leontjev's (2019: 33) study, where most of the participants stated to use Finnish at least as much as English. This might also be a result to children's insufficient skills on their first language since understanding in one's mother tongue is required in order for one to be proficient in listening comprehension

in English (Nikolov 2009: 100). On the other hand, this could also be due to teachers' incompetence in English, which might reduce their use of the target language (Kourieos 2014: 1).

Most of the participants also see early English teaching having an impact on children's language skills at least to some extent. For example, Early English teaching was often stated to build a foundation for future language learning among different language subdivisions such as vocabulary and pronunciation. However, the results of Huhta and Leontjev's (2019) study dispute these assumptions, since the development of first graders' oral skills participating in their study was not as rapid as expected. On the contrary, third graders seemed to have a wide vocabulary. However, as Nikolov (2009: 1) states, results that do not necessarily support ELT do not indicate that it is pointless. On the contrary, he implies that ELT is a favorable option since it allows children to utilize later the assets they gain when starting young.

5.2 Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to discover Finnish early English teachers' conceptions considering the recent addition to primary language education: early English teaching. In addition, this study aimed to inspect the methods of its implementation and how the respondents view its effect on students' English skills.

My research questions were:

1. What kind of conceptions/experiences do teachers have on early English teaching?
2. How is Early language teaching implemented?
3. How do teachers view learners' English development?

In conclusion, the participants' conceptions were mostly aligned with each other, supporting early English teaching aside with some opposing opinions. The affirmative perceptions were often due to motivated children as well as the versatile nature of the

lessons. In addition, early English teaching was not just pleasant but also seen as beneficial since learning a language was stated to be effortless and rapid at a young age. Moreover, sufficient amount of training seemed to be related to favorable attitudes.

On the contrary, the lack of training was focal considering negative perceptions. For instance, some participants reported it as a reason why early English teaching is not beneficial. In addition, lack of training was related to teacher's insecurities when conducting ELT. Moreover, the results implied that the need for training might consider different things depending on the individual: language pedagogy, age pedagogy or general matters of early education.

The results also revealed that a wide range of methods from music to online sources can be utilized with children, and one can be creative when implementing early English lessons. The medium of instruction was most commonly Finnish or both languages were utilized equally. In addition, oral skills such as pronunciation and speech were highlighted subdivisions and stated to have the highest potential of developing. The participants also viewed early English teaching as different compared to English teaching in third grade based on its loose guidelines. Moreover, starting early was noted to have an affirmative impact on children's language skills, since it was noted to create a foundation considering later language learning.

Even though the present study revealed important results, it has some limitations. For example, the number of the participants was rather limited which restricts the possibility to generalize the results. Therefore, recruiting a higher number of respondents could have provided more data as well as differing results. In addition, the study is based on conceptions that cannot be generalized extensively. However, as Denzin and Lincoln (2018, cited in Mustalampi 2019: 33) point out, the purpose of conceptions is not to state the facts but to describe the world through one's perspectives. The data was also collected through a questionnaire which according to Valli (2017: 14), might produce ambiguous and limited answers. Therefore, a potential for lack of information and misunderstandings is higher than for instance with interviews. Furthermore, the

open-ended questions were analyzed with categorization. Thus, one might have decided to do different divisions from the data. This illustrates the room of interpretation.

On the other hand, this study is beneficial considering the information it provides of early English teaching. It can also raise awareness considering the strengths as well as shortcomings ELT has and how to develop it further. For instance, the results imply that in-service training considering ELT should be organized for both classroom teachers as well as subject teachers. This would elicit teachers who feel competent when teaching languages at an early level. The present study could also offer practical advice for people in education considering the implementation of ELT. For example, one could identify methods that other teachers have found useful. In addition, one could find inspiration and variation in their own practices, which could make ELT more versatile.

As discussed, ELT is a relatively recent addition into language education. Therefore, numerous research has not been implemented of it. Thus, further study would be beneficial considering its development. For instance, future research could focus on teacher training and how ELT is dealt in it. In addition, teachers' needs considering their training could be examined from the point of view of ELT. This could improve the teacher training program and benefit especially future teachers. Furthermore, the focus could be on different focal parties' perceptions to reveal similarities and possible differences. In addition, the development of children's language skills could be studied to see the benefits of ELT. Diverse teaching methods could also be examined to discover which elicit successful outcomes. Lastly, different methods for data collection such as interviews and observations could be utilized to achieve results from various perspectives.

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[2018/varhemmin-helposti-luokanopettajien-kaytannon-ideoita-kieltenopetuksen-varhentamiseen.](#)

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Kandidaatin tutkielma opettajien näkemyksistä, sekä kokemuksista koskien varhennettua englannin opetusta

 Pakolliset kysymykset merkitty tähdellä (*)

Tervetuloa vastaamaan verkkokyselyyn!

Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tavoitteena on selvittää opettajien näkemyksiä, sekä kokemuksia koskien varhennetun englannin opettamista.

Kysely on suomenkielinen ja se koostuu sekä erilaisista monivalinta- että avoimista kysymyksistä. Kyselyyn vastaaminen kestää noin 5-10 minuuttia ja se on vapaaehtoista. Antamiasi vastauksia käytetään ainoastaan tutkimustarkoituksessa, eikä niiden perusteella voida tunnistaa vastaajia.

Vastaamalla tähän kyselyyn vakuutat olevasi vähintään 18-vuotias, ja annat luvan vastaustesi käyttämiseen yllä mainitussa kandidaatintutkielmassa.

Tutkimuksen tekijänä toimii Emmi Salo, kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitos, Jyväskylän yliopisto

Ota rohkeasti yhteyttä tarvittaessa ja kysy lisää lähettämällä viesti sähköpostiosoitteeseen:
emmi.k.salo@student.jyu.fi

Kiitos ajastasi ja vastauksistasi jo etukäteen!

1. Mikä on koulutuksesi? Valitse kaikki sopivat vaihtoehdot *

- Englannin aineenopettaja
- Luokanopettaja
- Tutkintoni on kesken

2. Oletko saanut riittävästi valmiuksia varhennetun englannin opettamiseen? *

- Kyllä
- Ei

3. Pidätkö varhennettua englannin opetusta hyödyllisenä? Miksi, miksi et? *

- Kyllä
- Ei

4. Millaisia ovat omat kokemuksesi varhennetun englannin opettamisesta? ***5. Tarkenna, millaisia myönteisiä tai kielteisiä kokemuksia sinulla on varhennetusta englannin opetuksesta? ***

6. Mitä menetelmiä olet käyttänyt varhennetun englannin opetuksessa? Valitse kaikki sopivat vaihtoehdot ja tarkenna halutessasi. *

<input type="checkbox"/> Oppikirja	<input type="text"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Pelit ja leikit	<input type="text"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Musiikki	<input type="text"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Internetti ja sosiaalinen media	<input type="text"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Muu, mikä?	<input type="text"/>

7. Kuinka paljon käytät kohdekieltä varhennetun englannin opetuksessa verrattuna suomen kieleen? *

	1. Käytän enimmäkseen suomea	2. Käytän suomea hieman kohdekieltä enemmän	3. Käytän kohdekieltä yhtä paljon kuin suomea	4. Käytän kohdekieltä hieman enemmän kuin suomea	5. Käytän enimmäkseen kohdekieltä
Arvioi kohdekielen käyttöä oppitunneilla	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. Onko jokin/jotkin kielen osa-alueet keskeisimpiä varhennetun englannin opetuksessa? Jos vastasit kyllä, mikä? *

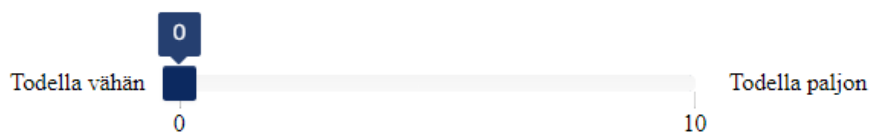
Kyllä

Ei

9. Eroaako varhennettu englannin opettaminen 3. luokan englannin opetuksesta? Jos vastasit kyllä, miten? *

- Kyllä
- Ei

10. Kuinka paljon näet varhennetun englannin opetuksen vaikuttavan oppilaiden kielitaidon kehitykseen? *



11. Kerro omin sanoin, kuinka varhennettu kielenopetus mielestäsi vaikuttaa oppilaiden kielitaidon kehittymiseen. *