

Learning theories in action in a second grade pupils' English lesson: a case study

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Abstract

This study reviews English teaching for second grader pupils in Finland. It focuses on the teacher's role in children's language learning and meaning making and the execution of sociocultural and ecological learning theories in an English classroom. In addition to sociocultural and ecological learning theories, the theoretical framework is based on earlier studies on language teaching and learning in a classroom setting and the national curriculum. The study is a case study conducted in an elementary school. The data was collected by observing an English lesson and interviewing the teacher. Three themes emerged in the analysis of the findings: learning through play, meaning making through multimodal resources, and guiding and providing affordances. The first two themes involve the methods and materials the teacher employs in teaching, and the last one reviews her role in the English lesson. The study sheds light on how the sociocultural and ecological learning theories and the national curriculum are visible in the three aspects found in the study.

Tiivistelmä

Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan englannin opettamista toisen luokan oppilaille. Tutkimuksen keskiössä on opettajan rooli kielenoppimisessa ja työstämisessä. Se pyrkii tarkastelemaan, miten sosiokulttuuriset ja ekologiset oppimisteoriat sekä vuonna 2016 käyttöön otettu opetussuunnitelma näkyvät englannin opetuksessa. Tutkimuksessa luodaan katsaus aiempaan kielenoppimista koulukontekstissa käsittelevään tutkimukseen. Tutkimus on tapaustutkimus, joka koostuu peruskoulussa toteutetusta toisen luokan englannin tunnin tarkkailusta, sekä opettajan haastattelusta. Tutkimuksen löydöksissä nousi esiin kolme teemaa: ”oppiminen leikin kautta”, ”kielen työstäminen multimodaalisten keinojen avulla” ja ”ohjaaminen ja affordanssien tarjoaminen”. Kaksi ensimmäistä teemaa koskevat opetustapoja ja materiaaleja, joita opettaja käyttää. Viimeinen taas käsittelee opettajan roolia englannin tunneilla. Tutkimus valottaa, kuinka sosiokulttuuriset ja ekologiset oppimisteoriat sekä opetussuunnitelma näkyvät näissä kolmessa esiinnousseessa englannin opetuksen osassa.

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1 Introduction

English language has been a part of the Finnish school system for long. Its position as the most popular foreign language to be studied was confirmed in the 1970's when the school curriculum was renewed (Leppänen et al., 2011). English has been taught to children starting from third grade. Only some schools have started teaching it earlier with occasional language showers. Since the 1970's, the role of the English language has become more important (Leppänen et al., 2011). Globalization has changed the way Finnish people communicate at work: English is used as the language of communication not only in international communications, but also between companies inside Finland (Leppänen et al., 2011).

English teaching in Finland has been similar to the way other foreign languages are taught. Nowadays, when English is a lingua franca of the world, the teaching could be changed to take the globalized situation into account. As the language learning theories have changed from input-output centered to meaning making and affordance (van Lier, 2000), the view on teaching methods has changed. Along with the new role of English, the language teachers have to consider the new guidelines of teaching: they need to include learners in the learning process instead of having them passively follow teaching.

A new national curriculum was put into operation in the fall of 2016, and it changed aspects of English language teaching amongst other things. According to the curriculum, English can be taught to students earlier than third grade, and teaching of multiculturalism, global perspective, and language variation should be integrated with English studies (Opetushallitus, 2014). English language teaching to pupils younger than third grade pupils should be language-shower-like: it should consist of games and playful activities. The curriculum instructs English to be part of other subjects: the new core curriculum has introduced multidisciplinary learning modules, which combine subjects together and join them with phenomena. Aspects of teaching changed too: the role of a student as an active learner is emphasized and the individuality of each student is taken into consideration (Opetushallitus, 2014).

This study of English teaching to second grade pupils at a Finnish school seeks to explore how English can be taught to young learners. It is a case study conducted in an elementary school and it involves an English lesson and an interview with the class teacher. The analysis draws on sociocultural and ecological learning theories and perspectives on the role of the

language teacher, and makes connections between previous studies on English teaching in a classroom setting. The study also seeks to find features of language teaching mentioned in the national curriculum at an English lesson setting.

The study has implications for those who are interested in English language teaching, or other foreign language teaching. It is especially useful for those looking to teach younger pupils. It illustrates how sociocultural and ecological learning theories are carried out in a classroom and thus gives an example to teachers who are pondering on how to put theory into action. For those who will teach languages in Finland, it presents an example of national curriculum guidelines in practice.

In the following, I will first introduce sociocultural and ecological learning theories and perspectives on the teacher's role in the classroom. I am going to briefly look into previous studies on language teaching in a classroom. I will draw on the theoretical framework when analyzing the observation and interview I have conducted, and look for themes to discuss further. I will examine the themes and discuss the implications the study will have.

2 Theoretical framework

As the theoretical base of my study, I will use sociocultural and ecological learning theories and perspectives on the teacher's role in language learning. I will also examine some research conducted on language learning in classroom setting.

2.1 Sociocultural and ecological perspectives on language learning

Van Lier (2004) has outlined a theory of learning that deviates from previously foregrounded language learning theories. It is largely based on Vygotski's (1987) theory of development (van Lier, 2011). Van Lier describes the previously mainstream theories, and educational systems, to see learners as "an input-consuming and output-producing of homogeneous (or homogenisable) entities" (van Lier, 2007, p. 47). According to him, those theories focus on learning as a process that takes place in the brain (van Lier, 2000). Van Lier's (2004) theory focuses on the multimodality of learning. He introduces the term affordance, which means that an active learner uses their environment for linguistic action (van Lier, 2000). According to him, gestures and expressions are crucial parts of speech, and thus needed for learning a language. He argues that each person interprets a message by scanning and processing all aspects of it, and makes their own meaning of each message. The learner uses not only the audio or the written source but the surrounding environment and their own schemas, to make meaning (van Lier, 2000). Schema, as described by Johnson (1987) in McVee, Dunsmore and Gevelek's (2005) study, is an organizing structure that influences our vision and interpretation of the world.

According to van Lier (2004), to build a meaning making environment in a classroom, language has to be contextualized with the available systems. He describes context to be meanings and rituals that emerge in the physical, social, and symbolic resources (van Lier, 2011). Looking at the ecological learning theory, and its focus on activity as a learning tool, a learner uses all the possible forms of meaning making systems they have around them. This includes interaction with the teacher and peer learners, and the use of the learner's mother tongue (van Lier, 2004).

Van Lier (2000) explains the learning process through the ecological point of view as "the development of increasingly effective ways of dealing with the world and its meanings". This means that language learning happens between learners' cognitive possessions and the environment around them. Donato (2000) describes the sociocultural view of learning

similarly with van Lier. He argues meaning making in interaction to be bridging gaps between the individual/social and the intramental (Donato, 2000, p.46), which means that learners use affordances provided by the environment and use them to make meaning together with their peers and alone.

Sullivan (2000) presents a study of playful learning conducted in a Vietnamese language class. She bases her research on the Vygotskian sociocultural theory of learning and development: the theory sees play as a space for children to develop language and themselves beyond what their existing skills. According to the theory, play is an important part of child development. In play, children create a space for learning. Sullivan's study is focused on language playfulness between the teacher and the learners, and among the learners. In the research, she found out that learning through playful conversation was meaning making in a group, and called it "engaging in verbal pleasure". By "verbal pleasure", Sullivan means humorous and creative use of language.

Lave and Wenger (1991) provide a perspective on learning similar to ecological and sociocultural learning theories. They call it *situated learning*. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), "learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (p. 35). They describe situated learning to involve the learner as the agent acting with and in the world doing the activity (p. 33). They base their theory on studies of apprenticeship and want to make a distinction to schooling: they say they wanted to create a theory of learning that would stand on its own, outside of the context of learning in school. However, much like in apprenticeship, young pupils generally, and in my study, learn through different activities. Therefore, situated learning theory is also relevant for my study.

2.2 Perspectives on language teaching and the teacher's role

First, I will focus on van Lier's ideas of teaching, which are based on sociocultural and ecological learning theories. He introduces the teacher as a make-believer, who "pretends that the learner knows more than she actually does, and can do more than she has shown to be capable of" (van Lier, 2004). He emphasizes the learner's role as an agent, and the teacher's role as an assister. He argues that an ecological learning theory is not a teaching method: it is more a way of viewing learning, teaching, and learner. He points out that it may not provide a curriculum for teaching, but by following the principles and ideas of ecology, it may help the

learners to become more active, and the lessons to evolve into being more about meaning making, and less about input of information (van Lier, 2004).

Koivistoinen (2017) discusses the changes in language learning and teaching in the modern world. She employs ecological views on teaching, and describes it to be sometimes chaotic and complex action that appears in participation and collaboration with the students. In the ecological way of teaching, the learner is seen as an active participant in the process of creating the learning environment. Koivistoinen (2017) considers the changes that have taken place in the world and are thus taking place in language teaching: the world has evolved into a place, where people hear many other languages in addition to their own mother tongue via the Internet, immigration and tourism. A modern language teacher has to find a way to acknowledge that in teaching. According to Koivistoinen, it involves balancing between old and new. The basics of language should be learned, but the possibilities and affordances that the globalized and digitalized world provides should be used in learning

Karlsson-Fält and Majjala (2007) describe a good teacher to be demanding, inspiring, competent, and in possession of a sense of humor. In their survey of language studies, they found out that from all the factors present at a teaching situation, the teacher was mentioned most often. In the survey, an ideal language teacher is described to be excited about the language they are teaching, and also the culture that comes with the language. Flexibility, expertise, and people skills were mentioned, too. The students say they appreciate if the language teacher has traveled or lived in the area where the taught language is spoken.

In his study on language teacher expertise, Farrell (2013) discovered five aspects of an expert language teacher: knowledge of learners, learning and teaching, engaging in critical reflection, assessing prior experiences, having an informed lesson planning, and having active student involvement. According to him, these aspects are often found in research on teacher expertise. Farrell (2013) emphasizes the importance of balancing between these five features. He also found out that his subject teachers, whom he described to be experts, “provide personalized instruction thus providing overall optimum learning opportunities for their students” (Farrell, 2013, p. 1079)

Kramersch (2008) describes language teachers to be "teachers of meaning" (p. 403). She encourages the teachers to put language in relation with the culture of the learner, and the culture that surrounds the language to be learned. Kramersch also encourages the teachers to

use multimodal resources, like pictures and even entertainment, in teaching. She suggests the linear nature of syllabus to be broken from time to time, and room to be left for "verbal pleasure" (Sullivan, 2000). According to Kramsch, language is always history-bound (2008, p. 405). Much like the national curriculum of Finland established in 2014, Kramsch tells teachers to link phenomena with the subject they are teaching: she says history should be linked with language teaching. She encourages teachers to use reflective talk of the classroom situation and meaning itself. This means discussing about the learning situation itself with the learners.

2.3 Language learning in the classroom

The studies introduced below are conducted in the field of language learning in a classroom setting. They are in accordance with the sociocultural and ecological learning theories employed in this study, and thus also relevant.

Enever (2014) has written a survey of English teachers in Europe. Her article is based on research of early language learning in Europe. In the article, she examines the education and classroom competence of foreign language teachers. She raises a few issues visible in her data: according to her, some of the teachers are insufficiently trained in the language they are to teach, and thus lack proper instructional skills (Enever, 2014). She points out that there are many differences in the language teacher education policies, which leads to having a varying quality in language teaching. According to her, there is a mix of qualifications among the teachers who were studied for her survey of English language teachers. There are general class teachers, specialized language teachers, semi-specialized language teachers, and even unqualified teachers with a fluency in the language taught, or a degree in it (Enever, 2014).

Andrews and Rusher (2010) introduce a study of teaching bilingualism to deaf students, who are learning American sign language and English. In the study, the teacher interprets a story written in English to the students. As she translates the story, she goes back and forth to the text and the signs, and she also discusses the story with her students. She involves her students, too: with her help, they interpret the story with signs that are meaningful to them. Thus, they become meaning makers between sign language and English (Andrews and Rusher, 2010). Andrews and Rusher (2010) call the method of going back and forth between languages codeswitching. They expand the study on codeswitching by employing the same

method in four different studies: learning vocabulary, comprehending fables, reading science texts, and various applications.

Graham, Courtney, Tonkyn, and Marinis (2016) have studied pupils' motivation in language learning. In their study, they examine the methods and materials used in classroom, and the pupils' opinions of them. Creative, playful and purposeful activities were mentioned to be the most enjoyable ones among sixth and seventh grade pupils (Graham et al., 2016, p. 696). Repetitious and too difficult tasks were seen as the least enjoyable ones. One thing that stood out in the study of motivation to study languages was the main reason to be motivated: knowing language would make traveling and meeting people across cultures easier (Graham et al., 2016).

Copland, Garton, and Burns (2013) introduce a study on the challenges of teaching English to young language learners. They have carried out their study by asking teachers about the challenges they might face. One of the biggest challenges that occurred was the teacher's own concern about their abilities to teach the learners to pronounce English correctly. As challenges, the teachers also responded discipline, motivation, and differentiation in students and their skills (Copland et al., 2013). Copland et al. suggest that better training should be given to the teachers in order to help them become more confident in English teaching and broaden their understanding of language learning.

Britsch (2010) has conducted an instructional project for pre-service teachers to combine photography and language learning. The project is based on theories of connecting visual material with language learning. It is especially targeted for young language learners. The project includes a walking tour where the leader instructs where to go and where they are. The children take pictures to show their perspective of the walk. Afterwards, the learners and the teacher go through the walk using the pictures and the language (Britsch, 2010). She concludes that teacher trainees need projects that combine visual material with language learning because that is something that curricula encourage to do: take new elements into language teaching. The project goes well hand-in-hand with the sociocultural and ecological learning theories, too, as it guides to use the whole environment as a means for learning.

3 Research approach

The goal of my study is to find out the ways that the sociocultural and ecological learning theories, and the national curriculum are visible in English teaching for the second grade pupils.

As my research method I used ethnography. Ethnography is a description of people (Angrosino, 2008). I observed an English lesson for second graders. To properly observe and describe human behavior, according to ethnography, the observer must detach themselves from the scene they are observing. I executed this by doing the observation sitting in the back of the class where I did not bother the teacher or the pupils. While the pupils were focused on independent work, I quietly walked around to properly see the task they were doing. Angrosino describes a process to consist of different elements which change and shift during the process (2008). An English lesson is such a process: learners, teacher, and the social interaction between them affect it. Teaching methods and materials are also a varying part of the lesson: when they change, the nature of the lesson changes. Ethnography seemed to be the most appropriate method for my study because it does not seek to find certain features of people or their behavior, but merely aims at describing them as they are.

As my research design I used case study. It is designed to examine a single phenomenon or person, but it can also inspect a relationship between different elements (USC Libraries: Research Guide, 2018). In my study, I use case study to explore an English lesson for the Finnish second grade pupils. I also review the teacher's role in the English lesson. My goal is to link these two with the national curriculum of Finland, sociocultural and ecological learning theories, and current perspectives on the teacher's role.

The principles of research ethics were considered carefully in the study. The city of Oulu requires a research permit for research conducted in its school network. It has however assigned the responsibility to school principals. A permit was acquired from the principal of the case school to observe the lesson, and the class was informed about the observation. The integrity of the research participants was respected throughout the study (TENK, n.d.).

I gathered my materials by observing an English lesson for the second grade students in an elementary school. I focused on the teaching methods the teacher used and made notes of them and observed the learning environment, whether there were objects that support learning. I also briefly scanned the book *Go!* and a couple of notebooks where the pupils had

done exercises. After the observation I conducted an interview with the class teacher. I asked open questions related to her views on teaching English to second graders, teaching methods she employs, teaching materials, and the ways the new curriculum is visible in her teaching. After collecting my data, I analyzed it in relation to the theoretical framework provided earlier in my paper. My goal was to gain a deeper understanding of my observations through the theories I studied.

4 Findings

In this chapter, I will introduce the findings of my study I conducted in the case school and raise some points which I will analyze further in the discussion part.

4.1 Learning through play

At the beginning of the English lesson, the children gathered around and sang together an English language song the teacher had picked out of YouTube. In the interview, the teacher told me it is an ordinary way for them to begin an English lesson. According to her, it helps the children to settle in for the following lesson. This can be seen as the beginning point for the children to start creating the space for learning (Sullivan, 2000). The song they sang was a children's song and it had a cartoon music video with lyrics on the bottom.

In the interview, I found out that the teacher stresses playful and creative teaching methods. She told me she rarely has "traditional" lessons where she talks, and the pupils sit and listen. She uses games, play, and crafts to teach. She had recently had a crafts project with the pupils in which they all could cut out pictures of furniture from magazines and advertisements and glue them in their notebooks to create a furnished room. According to her, there is a lot of material for creative teaching available on the Internet. She also emphasized the importance of the book *Go!*: she told me there to be a lot of playful materials, such as games. According to her, it is important that the book is filled with playful material, because as it is her first year of teaching English, she does not have a lot of material gathered. During the lesson, the children played a game in the book which included words they had learned earlier: the game included coloring pictures. The teacher claimed to have a folder with additional tasks, which often include coloring.

All of this goes hand-in-hand with the national curriculum and the sociocultural learning theory. In the curriculum, English teaching for pupils prior to third grade is described to be play oriented (Opetushallitus, 2014). Play is an important learning method for children, and can be especially useful in language learning. By employing playful methods in English teaching, the teacher helps the children go beyond their abilities and make meaning of the language on their own and in social interaction with their peers (Sullivan, 2000).

In the interview, I asked the teacher how she felt about second grade children learning a new language, when they might still have problems in reading and writing their mother tongue, Finnish. She admitted the biggest challenge to be the pupils who do not yet master Finnish, but here she stressed the importance of creative teaching methods, such as games: she said she would not want to pressure the learners who encounter difficulties in writing Finnish by making them write another language. We also discussed assessment and how it will be executed. She told me she would have to test the children's skills in recognition and vocabulary, as they often learn themed vocabulary:

(1) Olisi paljon optimaalisempaa, jos pystyisin pitämään kokeen suullisesti.

It would be more optimal to hold an oral exam.

The most rewarding thing in teaching English for the second graders is, according to the teacher, their enthusiasm and motivation to learn English.

(2) En muista ikinä pitäneeni tuntia, jossa oltaisiin oltu niin innostuneita, kuin ekoilla parilla enkuntunnilla.

I don't recall ever holding a lesson where they would have been as excited as in the first couple English lessons.

Motivation is known to be a factor to help autonomous learning (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009), and therefore lead to the pupil's learning agency (van Lier, 2000). The learner's motivation helps them to achieve the teacher's goal of her teaching: strengthen the pupil's ability to communicate in everyday situations. Playful activities are linked with motivation. In play, children use imagination, which "has been known to be related to motivation since the ancient Greeks" (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). People imagine themselves into situations and places they want to be in the future, which makes them motivated to work to achieve the image they had of themselves. In a study on teaching methods and motivation, playful and creative teaching methods were listed as the most enjoyable and motivating methods (Graham et al., 2016). For teacher, on the other hand, pupils' lack of motivation can be a challenge in the classroom (Copland et al., 2013).

4.2 Meaning making through multimodal resources

At the beginning of my observation, I looked around the classroom and found several themed posters with English vocabulary on them: there were months, weekdays, seasons, greetings,

colors, and simple questions. The resources provided by the learning environment play a big role in Van Lier's (2000) ecological learning theory. He claims that the learner makes meaning in relation to the sources in their environment. By placing themed vocabulary around the classroom, the teacher creates a space for meaning making. The themed vocabularies were often accompanied by pictures: for example, "autumn" had a picture of colored leaves next to it, and the color "red" had a patch of red next to it. This helps the children contextualize the words and connect them with the schemas they have of those words' meaning. In the interview, the teacher told me that she mostly focuses on vocabulary in teaching, and that she can pick the topics according to her and the pupils' interests.

After the class had sung the song together, they started repeating vocabulary they had come across in earlier lessons. The vocabulary was toy themed. To start the repetition, the teacher placed pictures of the toys they would study on the wall and the pupils had to match a corresponding word with the picture. Thus, they were using both visual and kinesthetic resources to learn the words. Later on, they added an audio source to the same words: first, the pupils repeated the words after the teacher who pronounced them in English, and then they had to guess which sound matched which toy. Again, the words for the toys were contextualized within the environment. The teacher utilized the learning space in creating meaning making systems for the learners with multimodal sources.

As one learning source for the pupils the teacher said she uses conversations with a partner. She told me sometimes she provides the learners with a set of lines which they have to go through with a partner that include simple phrases, such as greetings, and short sentences like "I have..." and "my name is...".

(3) Meillä tulee fraasit kanssa, tervehdykset ja muut, joita aletaan käyttää arjessa.

We will go through phrases and greetings, and start using them in everyday life.

In Van Lier's (2004) theory, conversation is a part of learning. According to him, in conversation, the learners create meanings with not only speech, but also gestures and expressions. In social interaction, the children can make meaning together. This goes together with Lave and Wenger's (1991) description of learning as an activity happening in social interaction. In conversation with their peers, young learners might even engage in verbal pleasure (Sullivan, 2000). This is especially true when there are children who have some knowledge of the language outside the topics that are presented to them in their tasks. In the

class I conducted my study, there was a pupil who had attended an English speaking preschool. The teacher told me the pupil often answers her questions when the other pupils will not, and that she sometimes asks a bit more difficult questions so that the pupil can show her knowledge.

4.3 Guiding and providing sources

In the lesson I observed, I noted that the teacher does not teach much in a traditional sense, but guides the pupils forward. When someone needed help, she went to show sources where to find answers. In the interview, she told me that emphasizes the pupils' activity in English lessons. In teacher expertise study, a teacher that uses active student involvement in teaching was appreciated by the students (Farrell, 2013). Learner's active participation in the learning situation is also a main feature of ecological learning theory (Koivistoinen, 2017).

One of the main tasks of a language teacher according to ecological learning theories is to provide pupils with an environment of meaning making. I asked the teacher about the sources and materials she uses to teach. She mentioned the book *Go!* to be of great help since it provides several tasks for the learners to do. She also said she has found a lot of material in Pinterest, a social media site where people can share for example pictures and links on a bulletin board –style wall. I also asked if she uses technology in teaching English besides the computer and the projector. She explained that they would use tablet computers and play with them when there will be more appropriate applications available. The teacher told me projects to be a part of their learning. By providing the pupils with projects and materials, she activates them and pushes them to create and figure out things themselves.

In the interview with the teacher, I asked her if she had taught English before, as she was a class teacher. She told me she had not. She had worked in Switzerland in an English-speaking environment, which made her confident in teaching English. In studies of language teacher expertise, knowledge and enthusiasm of language and the culture that goes with the language were appreciated features (Farrell, 2013). The teacher has personal experience of communicating and working in an English-speaking environment and living in a foreign culture. Having personal experience, I argue, helps her to take globalization and multilingual situation of the world into consideration in her language teaching. In the curriculum, learning about other cultures is mentioned, so I asked the teacher if they will get acquainted with any cultures, such as British or American cultures. She answered that they would not study much

culture yet, apart from observing and discussing pictures of different British landscapes, such as London. According to her, the pictures sparked a lot of discussion, since some of the pupils had been traveling there, and they recognized places in the pictures. They also briefly talked about how the cultures of Finland and England are different: they, for example, discussed about the school uniforms children in England wear.

An important feature that has occurred in language teacher expertise study (Farrell, 2013) is knowledge of the learners. In the interview with the teacher, we discussed individuality of the pupils and how to consider it in teaching. She told me she had not yet encountered big differences inside her classroom, except in projects: the fastest and most skillful ones manage to create wider and more versatile “outputs” than the other ones. The teacher claimed that the limitation they had time-wise might affect the fact that differences in skill-levels have not yet emerged. She claimed that she would like to keep the teaching in the creative and discursive area as much as possible, so that those with difficulties in writing, would not have to struggle with writing a whole new language. She told me her main goal is to create confidence in the children to use the language in real life:

(4) En itse hirveästi innostu siitä, että he joutuisivat kirjoittamaan virkkeitä. Enempi se, että he tunnistavat ne, tietävät ne suomeksi, ja uskaltavat keskustellessa sanoa ne ääneen.

I do not fancy making them write sentences. I think it's better if they recognize them, know them in Finnish, and dare to use them in conversation.

In the national curriculum, language teachers are guided to encourage the children to use the language in an authentic environment (Opetushallitus, 2014). The theory of situated learning also emphasize the role of authentic learning environment in learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The teacher told me that as a part of their morning routine, the class goes over date, weekday, month, season, and the weather together in English. Thus, the teacher creates an opportunity for the children to use English outside an English lesson. This, too is encouraged to be done in the curriculum: English should be included in other subjects (Opetushallitus, 2014). By having this habit of starting mornings with some English, she fulfills her goal to strengthen the learner's confidence in using the language in everyday life situations. As the teacher encourages the pupils to use language in everyday life by employing it on a daily basis, I

argue that she regards the role of English as an "indispensable vehicular language in international interactions" (Leppänen et al., 2011). She told me she had also noticed that several children knew some English before they started to study it at school which reveals signs of globalization: English can be heard for example in television, radio, music, videos that children watch online (vlogs or some funny videos), or on the street spoken by exchange students, immigrants or tourists.

5 Discussion

Playful teaching methods are stressed by the teacher I observed and interviewed. It makes the young language learners more motivated to learn the language: just as Graham et al. (2016) found out in their study, creative and playful methods were seen as the most enjoyable ways of learning. Play gives room for imagination, too, which is an important part of child development. In play, as Sullivan (2000) puts it, children create a space for learning. In that space they have their own meaning making systems and they use their own schemas to interpret and deal with language. Play is also a social practice, and even though it is often a made-up situation and world, it imitates real life situations. Thus, learning in play can be seen as an apprenticeship-like learning situation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Play can be guided or even started by an adult, but it is constructed by children. According to many sociocultural and ecological learning theories, the learner should be actively participating in creating the learning situation. This happens in play that is built and maintained by the children. Passive children, who are more bystanders, than active participants, are not taken in the game, and miss a meaning making situation. In a game that is supposed to be a meaningful learning activity, it is important that there is a teacher to supervise it, and motivate the passive children to participate more actively, or give them another activity with the same learning affordances that the game would have. Singing can be seen as a playful learning method, too. The teacher started the lesson by showing a video on YouTube, which included a song and a music video and the children were eager to participate in singing the song. Music can be useful in learning a language: for example, alphabet is often learned with the help of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" tune (Barker, 1997). Just as the alphabet is later on connected with the tune, vocabulary can be memorized similarly: in the form of a song.

Meaning making happens in the whole environment available. The teacher I observed, utilized the whole learning space, her classroom. She had placed pictures and words around the room, for general use and for the lesson. Some of the pictures were available all the time for the children to see. As children often are curious, I believe they might observe the themed pictures and words with their peers when they are playing or perhaps out of tasks to perform. The teacher told me that the topics they go through as a part of their morning routine, are found in their classroom walls with the words and the pictures. Thus, the children do not have to remember the meanings by heart, but they can find them in the classroom. This is an

example of how a learner can make meaning by utilizing their cognitive skills and the environment (van Lier, 2000). Meaning making can happen at the pupils' homes, too. They might, for example, watch YouTube videos or television series in English. Many of them might also have connections with people who do not speak Finnish: either relatives, or perhaps an exchange student or an aupair.

In the observation and the interview, I found out that the teacher uses multimodal resources to teach English to the second-grade pupils. All of the tasks performed during the lesson included visual, kinesthetic, and some even an auditory aspect. Often the pupils could perform the tasks together, thus the tasks had an interactive side to them. By employing all of these four methods of learning, the pupils can make up schemas of the words by using their own strengths: whether they remember better auditorially, visually, or kinesthetically performed tasks. When the class was discussing together pictures of London, some of the children already had their schemas of the city. In the classroom, they could expand their schemas and connect the city with the language they were learning: learn that London is the capital of an English-speaking country.

Studies on language teacher expertise have yielded similar features as result, as other teacher expertise studies. For example, knowledge of the students, people skills and a sense of humor are characteristics that an expert teacher possesses (Karlsson-Fält & Maijala, 2007; Farrell, 2013). One thing that is a specific feature of an expert language teacher, is enthusiasm and knowledge of the language and the culture behind the language. The teacher I studied told me that she had lived in Switzerland and worked in an English-speaking environment. Thus, she had real-life experience of the language. Even though she had not lived in an English-speaking culture, her experience of a foreign culture is important. The experience makes the teacher more aware of the importance of the ability to speak different languages, and it also makes her confident in using English language. Language teachers' lack of confidence on their own skills is one of the biggest challenges among European language teachers (Enever, 2014). Traveling, and the chance to speak with people across cultures, is seen as one of the biggest motivations to learn a foreign language in Graham et al.'s (2016) study on language learning motivation. The teacher can share her own experience with the pupils, and feed this motivation by making them aware of the possibilities they might have in their life. That, therefore, would be authentic situation where the teacher participates in the lesson without the intention to teach.

The teacher's own experience helps her to take the globalized world situation into account: her living and working abroad in a country where English is not an official language, and being able to communicate in English, is a good example of what globalization is at its best. Learning about cultures is encouraged by the curriculum, and also very beneficial considering the movement around the globe that globalization and immigration cause. In the interview, the teacher told me they had not yet learned much about cultures except by looking at images from London and talking about those. So far, the discussion on culture the class had done was limited by the workbook *Go!* the pupils had in use. The new curriculum guides the language teachers to teach multiculturalism and understanding of the variety of cultures. It takes into account the role of English as a lingua franca, and does not limit the discussion of cultures to those traditionally known as English speaking areas: The United States, The Great Britain, and Australia. Combining the teacher's and the curriculum's aim to have the learners use the language outside the classroom context, the technological resources could be employed. The class could contact another class in another country, and they could either chat or talk face-to-face in English. This, though, would be a rather difficult task for the second grade pupils who have just begun to learn English. Too difficult tasks in a classroom reduce learner's motivation (Graham et al., 2016).

The teacher mentioned one of her favorite things about teaching English to the second graders to be their enthusiasm about the subject. Motivation plays a big role in learning and also teaching. Lack of pupils' motivation is a challenge for the teachers (Copland et al., 2013). It can be hard for teachers to engage pupils into activities if they are not interested or motivated to learn the subject. However, it is an important skill for a teacher to motivate learners. A language teacher, who is very enthusiastic about the language they are teaching and has for example lived in the country where the language is spoken and thus has real-life experience of it, is certainly more motivating and encouraging than a teacher, who teaches a language they do not know very well, and who teaches language in a formalistic way. The methods that are employed by the teacher of my study, are the ones that make the learners most enthusiastic and motivated to learn the language: creative and playful methods (Graham et al., 2016). By using these methods, the teacher feeds the motivation that the pupils already have.

The new curriculum has changed aspects of language teaching, which are visible in the English lesson I observed. Compared to the earlier curriculum, the themes of globalization, international cooperation, and language variation are much more present in the new

curriculum (Opetushallitus, 2004 & 2014). Also, courage to use language in an authentic environment is stressed much more. In the earlier curriculum, there was a guideline of how to teach English to pupils younger than third graders, but nevertheless it was not very common to teach English before third grade. What comes to teaching methods, the guideline was similar to the guideline that the new curriculum gives to teachers. The new curriculum has also changed aspects of teaching itself: it emphasizes learner's activity and the meaning of group work as a socializing and tolerance teaching method. Teachers are also guided to teach facility to act in an internationalized world (Opetushallitus, 2014). In the discussion the class had had about the pictures of London, the global perspective came up in the form of pupils' travel experience. They are learning to be "global citizens" from their childhood, and now they are encouraged even more at school.

The teaching methods employed by the teacher are also familiar from the times of older curricula. Conversations with a partner, and tasks that focus on vocabulary rather than action have been used in language teaching before the sociocultural and ecological learning theories became mainstream. The theories encourage to change activities in a way that the pupils' perspective and activity are in the center. Teachers might still see language learning in a certain way, especially if they have not received an education specified in language teaching. For example, the teacher seemed to feel obligated to give traditional writing tasks to her pupils, when in fact, the sociocultural and ecological learning theories, the base of the national curriculum, encourage teachers to use playful methods that she, too, stresses in her teaching. Koivistoinen (2017) took into account that a language teacher has to balance between the old and the new. This can be seen in the teaching methods and materials that the teacher employs: she activates the pupils by giving them playful and creative tasks, but fails to let the pupils be the agents of the tasks, which makes the tasks somewhat traditional.

In the interview, the teacher also discussed some challenges she faces in teaching a foreign language to young learners. She mentioned the skill-level of their native language, especially in writing. Finnish children learn to read and write relatively fast, especially when compared to their English-speaking peers. This is due to the regularity of the Finnish phonetic system (Huemer, Salmi & Aro, 2012). As the pupils that I studied were only second graders, some of them still had problems with writing correctly. That is why the teacher emphasizes interaction as a learning method, and provides the pupils with difficulties with a model when they practice writing English. She explained assessment to be somewhat inconvenient and that she

would rather hold an oral test for the pupils than a written one. The teacher does not experience similar problems with her colleagues in Europe, except for some skill-level differences. She does not have difficulties with her English skills: she feels confident to teach her pupils pronunciation. Her pupils do not lack motivation to learn, and she did not mention any problems with discipline in the classroom. She told me she had been the teacher of the same class since their first grade, which might positively affect her ability to keep discipline in her classroom.

In the study, I sought to find ways the sociocultural and ecological learning theories, and the national curriculum are visible in English teaching for the second grade pupils in Finland. When analyzing the study I conducted in relation to the theoretical framework, I found three themes to examine further. The first theme was learning through play. The teacher told me she emphasizes playful methods. She mentioned games, songs, and other playful activities. In play, the pupils create a space for learning (Sullivan, 2000) and keep up their motivation, which the teacher said to be outstanding, to learn the language (Graham et al., 2016). The sociocultural and ecological learning theories and the national curriculum emphasize the use of playful and creative methods, as they activate the learner to create and participate.

The second theme was also about the materials and methods that the teacher uses in teaching: it is called meaning making through multimodal affordances. I found out that the teacher uses multimodal teaching methods: when teaching something, she employs visual, kinesthetic, and auditorial sources. Using the three kinds of learning affordances in addition to conversation which the class did together, the pupils could make meaning on their own and together.

The third theme was about the teacher's role in the classroom: guiding and providing sources. The teacher of my study told me that they do not have many traditional lessons, where she teaches and the pupils are passive learners. Rather, she guides them to be active and participate in activities. She provides the pupils with sources to build games and projects. Doing such projects leaves room for imagination and pupil's own agency.

6 Conclusion

This study is a review of a way to teach English to second grade pupils, and how sociocultural and ecological learning theories and the national curriculum are visible in it. It is a case study conducted in an elementary school, and consists of an observation of an English lesson and an interview with the teacher. The findings of the study were analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework provided in the beginning of the paper. Three themes emerged from the analysis, two of which were related to the methods and materials employed in the teaching: learning through play and meaning making through multimodal affordances. The third theme concerned the role of the teacher in the English class: guiding and providing sources. The analysis illustrates how the theories are put into action.

The study has implications especially for the future language teachers. It shows how theory can be put into action, and gives an idea of the teaching methods that can be used with young language learners. The study is relevant for, for example, studies on teaching methods, language teaching for young learners, or English language learning and teaching in Finland. It provides development areas for the pedagogics of language teaching. The sociocultural and ecological learning theories could be emphasized even more in English teaching, especially in taking the learners' perspective and the learning affordances of the existing digital sources into account.

One of the study's strengths is its concrete ways of telling how theory and action go hand in hand. Another strength of it is its current interest: English teaching for second grade pupils has started very recently, and it has not been yet studied. Also, studies of language teaching for young learners do not exist in large numbers. The greatest weakness of the study is its limitedness. For further study, it could be expanded into a larger scale in Finland. A phenomenon to research further is also class teacher as a language teacher, and how much their teaching methods differentiate from their colleagues' who are qualified language teachers.

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APPENDIX 1. Interview questions

Haastattelu

2. lk englannin opettaja

Mitä välineitä käytät opetuksessa? Oppikirja, kirjallisuus, digitaaliset ympäristöt...

Millaisia opetustapoja suosit? Perinteiset (kääntäminen, kielioppi, sanasto...), luovat (leikki, tekstin tuottaminen, kommunikaatio...)

Mitä olet mieltä englannin aloittamisen aikaistumisesta?

Millaisia haasteita olet kohdannut kakkosten englannin opetuksessa?

Mikä on ollut antoisaa?

Opetussuunnitelmassa painotetaan opetuksen monialaisuutta, ilmiöpohjaisuutta ja yksilöllisyyttä. Kuinka toteutat näitä opetuksessasi?

Englannin opetus on myös sidoksissa vieraiden kulttuurien opetukseen. Kuinka paljon keskityt kulttuurien käsittelemiseen?