

The lived experience of language learning: A phenomenological study on  
Finnish upper secondary school students' language choices, attitudes towards  
language learning and language learning motivations

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## **Abstract**

This study investigated Finnish upper secondary school students' language choices along with their motivations and attitudes towards language learning. Phenomenology was employed as the research approach to provide a more qualitative and in-depth insight into the phenomena of language learning and language choices. The data was collected by interviewing four upper secondary school students. The analysis revealed that all participants had positive attitudes towards language learning, although some languages were considered less important and more difficult than others. A dream of living abroad and family heritage were shown to be the main reasons for choosing an optional language, whereas time constraints, poor selection of foreign languages and lack of encouragement were the main reasons for not choosing an optional language. Furthermore, motivation was shown to differ between languages with high integrative motivations and vivid ideal L2 selves directed towards studying optional languages, while instrumental motivations and ought-to L2 selves were more prevalent towards studying English and Swedish. Finnish upper secondary schools should take note of these results and promote the study of optional languages more so that the decreasing trend in optional language study in Finland could be halted.

## **Tiivistelmä**

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää, millaisia asenteita ja motivaatioita lukiolaisilla on vieraiden kielten opiskelua kohtaan sekä millä perusteilla he päättävät opiskella valinnaista kieltä. Tutkimuksen metodologiaksi valittiin fenomenologia, jotta saataisiin syvempi ymmärrys siitä, miten lukiolaiset kokevat kielten opiskelun, ja siitä, mitkä seikat ohjaavat heidän kielivalintojaan. Aineisto kerättiin haastattelemalla neljää lukiolaista. Haastattelujen analyysi osoitti, että kaikki osallistujat suhtautuivat kielten opiskeluun myönteisesti, mutta se, kuinka tärkeäksi ja helpoksi he kokivat kielen oppimisen, vaihteli eri kielten välillä. Unelma ulkomaille muutosta ja sukujuuret osoittautuivat suurimmiksi motiiveiksi valinnaisten kielten opiskelulle, kun taas ajan puute sekä puutteellinen kielitarjonta ja rohkaisu vaikuttivat eniten haastateltavien päätökseen olla opiskelematta valinnaista kieltä. Myös motivaatio eri kielten välillä vaihteli. Korkein integratiivinen motivaatio ja vahvimmat ideaaliminät kohdistuivat valinnaisten kielten opiskeluun, kun taas pakollisiin kieliin kuuluvien englannin ja ruotsin opiskelua ohjasivat vahvemmin instrumentaalinen motivaatio ja ”pitäisi”-minät. Lukioiden olisi hyvä huomioida nämä tulokset ja puhua enemmän vieraiden kielten opiskelun hyödyistä, jotta valinnaisten kielten suosion lasku saataisiin pysäytettyä.

## 1. Introduction

In the last decades the number of students studying optional languages has drastically decreased in Finland. While English has gained the status of lingua franca and students get familiar with the language already in early childhood together with the second compulsory language, typically Swedish, starting on 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the situation with other foreign languages is alarming. Only in the years 2014–2018 the number of students studying an optional language decreased by 10 per cent (OSF, 2019), and in the years 2011–2019 the number of students signing up for matriculation exams in optional languages decreased by 35 per cent (The Matriculation Examination Board, 2020). Although English has become the global language, other foreign languages are still needed in many professions. In fact, English skills seem to have become something taken for granted, and other foreign language skills are a great advantage in working life. While the importance of early language learning has been realized in Finnish education and children start learning foreign languages earlier, no such efforts have been made in upper secondary schools.

This declining trend in upper secondary school students studying optional languages raises the question of what exactly has caused it; are students no longer interested in language learning, or are there possibly other motives behind it? Surprisingly little research has been done to answer this question, and the few existing studies have only employed quantitative methods. To provide a more qualitative and in-depth view on this question, phenomenology and interviews will be utilised in this study. Furthermore, as the motives behind language choices might not provide a sufficient understanding of the phenomenon, students' attitudes towards language learning and language learning motivations will be investigated as well. Hence, the research questions will be the following:

1. What kinds of attitudes do Finnish upper secondary school students have towards foreign languages?
2. Do students' motivations for studying different languages differ and how?
3. What makes upper secondary school students choose or not choose an optional language?

The following section of the thesis will describe the analytic framework, including main concepts related to motivation, discuss previous research on students' language choices and explain how phenomenology is utilized as the methodology of this study. Section 3 will report on the participants of the study and the interviews conducted as well as describe the process of analyzing the interviews. The main findings will be presented in section 4. Finally, in section

5 the findings will be discussed further and connected to previous research along with recommendations for further research.

## **2. Analytic framework**

This section will present the analytic framework. Firstly, an overview is provided on language studies in Finland and definitions given for the main concepts in language learning motivation. This will be followed by a short review of previous research on language choices and finally, phenomenology as a methodology is described in relation to this study.

### **2.1. Language studies in Finnish upper secondary schools**

Language studies in Finnish upper secondary schools consist of both mandatory and optional language courses. All upper secondary school students continue the language A, most often English, which they have studied since primary school. All students must also continue the language B1, which for most students is Swedish, the second official language in Finland. Upper secondary school students may also continue with optional languages, A2 or B2, that they have started in primary or secondary school. Students may also start studying a new optional language from the basics, language B3. Common B3 languages offered in Finnish upper secondary schools include French, German, Russian, Spanish and Italian. The selection of languages differs between cities and schools as some upper secondary schools offer also more uncommon languages, such as Chinese, Hungarian, Portuguese, Estonian and Latin (The Federation of Foreign Language Teachers in Finland, 2020). This study will focus exactly on the reasons for choosing or not choosing a new B3 language or continuing a previously chosen A2 or B2 language.

### **2.2. L2 motivation**

Motivation has dominated second language learning research for the last decades. The research has resulted in a selection of multiple theories and concepts, some competing with each other, some describing different aspects of motivation. It is not possible to describe all the literature on motivation in this thesis, but a few of the main concepts and theories will be explained as they will be referred to later in this thesis.

### **2.2.1. Integrative and instrumental motivation**

The concepts of integrative and instrumental motivation, developed by Gardner and Lambert (1959), have been on the frontline of L2 motivation for several decades (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 9). *Integrative motivation* refers to a learner's positive attitude towards the L2 community and an interest to communicate with them – even become like them (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 22). Hence, integrative motivation is a form of identification with the target L2 culture and language or values of that culture and language (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 22). A learner with *instrumental motivation*, on the other hand, studies the L2 for some practical reason, for example, because it is needed or useful for working life or getting into one's preferred college (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 26).

### **2.2.2. L2 motivational self system**

The *L2 motivational self system* is a model of motivation developed by Dörnyei as a result of growing dissatisfaction with the concept of integrative motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 23). One of the main issues with integrative motivation is the absence of a specific target L2 community in many learning situations, and hence, the focus of integrative motivation has been unclear (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 23). The L2 motivational self system model draws both on previous research on L2 motivation, e.g. the concept of integrative motivation, and theories of self in cognitive psychology (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). The L2 motivational self system is comprised of three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 29). The *ideal L2 self* is an image of what kind of an L2 speaker one would like to be or what kinds of characteristics or values of the L2 speakers one would like to have (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 29). According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009), the ideal L2 self includes the same characteristics as integrative motivation (p. 26).

The second component of the model, the *ought-to L2 self*, can be described as someone else's idea of the attributes one ought to have or one should achieve in the L2 (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 29). These could be, for example, getting a good result in an exam or learning a language just to please one's parents. In contrast to the ideal L2 self and its promotion focus (achieving the ideal end-state), the ought-to L2 self has a prevention focus, avoiding a negative end-state (Higgins, 1998, as cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 28). Moreover, the ought-to L2 self resembles the concept of feared self proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986), which can

be defined as what one does not want to become or is afraid of becoming (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 12).

The final component of the model, the *L2 learning experience*, refers to situated motives related to the actual learning environment and experience, including teachers, teaching methods and peers (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 29). Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) present six factors that can increase or decrease the motivational impact of the ideal and ought-to selves: 1. availability of an elaborate and vivid future self image, 2. perceived plausibility, 3. harmony between the ideal and ought-to selves, 4. necessary activation/priming, 5. accompanying procedural strategies, and 6. the offsetting impact of a feared self (p. 18). The findings of the present study will be discussed in relation to these factors in section 4.4.

### **2.3. On previous research on language choices**

Surprisingly few studies have investigated reasons for the decreasing trend of optional language study in Finnish upper secondary schools, and most of the existing studies have focused only on the teachers' perspective (Kiehelä & Veivo, 2020). There is one recent study that investigates both upper secondary school students' motives for choosing and not choosing an optional language: Kiehelä and Veivo (2020) report on this unpublished master's thesis in their article in *Kieliverkosto*. In the study, 495 students from five different Finnish upper secondary schools, 44,5% of whom had chosen an optional language and 55,5% of whom had not, answered a questionnaire about their motives (Kiehelä & Veivo, 2020). The results showed that the most common motives for choosing a B3 language were a desire to know languages, usefulness of the language and need for it in a future profession. Primary motives for students not choosing a B3 language included lack of time, too many other courses and lack of interest towards studying an optional language (Kiehelä & Veivo, 2020). Although the study provides an overview of upper secondary school students' motives, there is still a need for a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon, including elucidating on what exactly lies behind these motives.

Stewart-Strobel and Chen (2003) conducted a similar study in the United States. However, their sample included only high school students who had chosen an optional language. 152 students responded to a survey where they rated the importance of eight factors affecting their choice of a foreign language as well as their general attitudes towards learning foreign

languages (2003). The results demonstrated that the most important factors behind foreign language choices were interest in the language or culture, career advantages and perceived ease of learning the language, respectively (Stewart-Strobelt & Chen, 2003). Less important factors included friends taking the same language, liking the teacher, family heritage and school counsellor's advice (Stewart-Strobelt & Chen, 2003). Reflecting previous research findings, the students' motivations were mostly integrative, although girls had more positive attitudes and higher integrative motivations than boys (Stewart-Strobelt & Chen, 2003). As can be seen, the results of Stewart-Strobelt and Chen (2003) and Kiehelä and Veivo (2020) have considerable similarities. Both found the great importance of the same two factors – interest in foreign languages and career advantages.

Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) investigated motivations and attitudes of secondary school students in the UK. Their findings mirrored those of Stewart-Strobelt and Chen (2003) with girls having higher integrative motivations and more positive attitudes towards foreign language learning than boys. Interestingly, Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) also found that students' motivations decreased continuously in secondary school, suggesting that language learning motivation may decrease with age. Furthermore, their results demonstrated a higher motivation for German than French, especially among boys, which supports the view that motivation may vary between different languages. This, together with the finding that motivation is highest at the start of studying a new language, may have significance for the present study, which also investigates motivations at the start of studying a new foreign language and possible differences in motivations for different languages.

#### **2.4. Phenomenology**

Phenomenology will be employed as the methodology for this study. It is a methodology for studying “lived experience”, in other words, studying how people experience different phenomena and how they assign meanings to these experiences (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). It is most suited to answer research questions related to human experiences – to get to the bottom of the unique ways in which people experience various phenomena (Lavery, 2003). Frechette et al. (2020) describe how “exploring lived experience does not only allow the researcher to ascertain a series of events through time but also aims to elicit the meanings and interpretations that people attribute to these experiences” (p. 6). Phenomenology guides all stages of the research process from the researcher's stance and sampling to data collection,

analysis and presenting the findings. For example, phenomenological research is characterized by a small sample chosen by purposive sampling, a reflective researcher's stance, interviews as the primary data collection method and a back-and-forth process of analyzing data (Laverty, 2003). According to Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005), phenomenology is best suited for researching in "unexplored territory" where the research process is not limited by theories or hypotheses and, hence, may lead to unexpected findings (p. 23).

*Interpretive phenomenological analysis*, IPA, is a field of phenomenology that will be utilized in analyzing the data of this study. It provides detailed guidelines on how to analyze phenomenological data. While IPA encourages that a researcher adopts an emic, "insider's" perspective in the data collection phase, for the data analysis phase IPA encourages the researcher to look at the data also from his/her own "etic" perspective in order to make interpretations from the data (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Thus, the data analysis phase allows and even encourages the researcher to be self-reflective and reflect on the presuppositions that were set aside, or bracketed, before data collection. During the study reported on in this thesis, I took time to bracket my own thoughts, expectations and presuppositions on the phenomenon before data collection. I wrote down what I thought about the phenomenon, what kinds of experiences I have had with the phenomenon, why I thought the phenomenon was interesting, and what I expected to find out. After that, as recommended by phenomenology, I set these thoughts aside to be as open as possible towards how the interviewees themselves experience the phenomenon of language learning.

According to Reid, Flowers and Larkin (2005), there are three qualities of a successful interpretive phenomenological analysis: interpretativeness, transparency and plausibility. *Interpretativeness* refers to the subjective nature of the results; they are not facts but subjective interpretations that the researcher has made from the data (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005, p. 20). *Transparency* is achieved by grounding the interpretations on appropriate examples from the data and thus demonstrating how the researcher has arrived at these interpretations (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005, p. 20). Finally, the research can be deemed *plausible* if the participants, other researchers and readers agree that the interpretations and findings are appropriate, relevant and clearly founded on the data (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005, p. 20). The practice of bracketing is important for the transparency and plausibility of the analysis because the researcher needs to demonstrate and ensure that their interpretations are not based on bias or self-interest (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005).

I chose to employ phenomenology as the methodology for this study because of its focus on the subjective experience, which enables me to gain more insight into upper secondary school students' experiences with language learning than previous, mostly quantitative research has done. Because phenomenology intends to gain a deeper insight into experiences and being, qualitative research methods are the most appropriate. It would be quite difficult, for instance, to acquire in-depth descriptions about what kinds of dreams and goals a student has via a questionnaire or other quantitative data collection methods. Instead, qualitative, naturalistic research methods such as interviews and observations are more appropriate as they produce more than verbal information and allow the researcher to listen and observe the lived experience first-hand.

### **3. Data and methods**

This section will present the participants of the study and explain how they were chosen. This section will also describe in more detail how interviews were utilized as the data collection method of the study. Additionally, this section will describe how the interview data was analyzed through coding and thematic analysis. Short definitions will be provided for each, along with more detailed explanations of how the methods were utilized in the current study.

#### **3.1. Participants**

Phenomenology differs from most other qualitative methodologies by recommending small samples, on average 10 participants (Frechette et al., 2020). According to Polkinghorne and Vann Manen (1997, as cited in Lavery, 2003, p. 18) the aim of sampling in phenomenology is “to select participants who have lived experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience”. Upper secondary school students were selected as participants because not only do they have a chance to start studying a new optional language but they also already have extensive histories of foreign language learning and are hopefully able to discuss them profoundly. Four upper secondary school students with different language learning histories were selected by purposive sampling to produce a sample of maximum variation (Frechett et al., 2020).

To follow the principles of anonymity and confidentiality, the participants will be referred to by the pseudonyms Laura, Sandra, Emily and Thomas. Laura, Sandra and Thomas are first-year upper secondary school students and Emily is a second-year student. Laura and Sandra have chosen an optional language, Laura Italian and Sandra Russian, whereas Emily and Thomas only study the compulsory English and Swedish. Thomas and Sandra have both studied French before and Sandra has also studied Sami. Having students from different upper secondary schools and both students who study and do not study an optional language makes the sample quite representative. However, the size of the sample is quite small and only includes students from one city, which decreases the representativeness of the sample and possibly the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the small sample may also prove beneficial as it allows to focus more closely on each participant. Hence, the findings might be

generalizable, for example, to upper secondary school students with similar experiences of language learning or who have made similar language choices. All in all, the richness of data in phenomenology compensates for the smaller sample (Mapp, 2008, as cited in Frechette et al, 2020, p. 6).

### **3.2. Interviews**

Interviewing was chosen as the data collection method for this study because it is one of the best methods for phenomenological research (Frechette et al., 2020) as well as the best method to obtain detailed, descriptive, in-depth data without a hypothesis or theory as the starting point. Furthermore, interviews allow researchers to present follow-up questions and ask for clarifications which increases the chance of getting fruitful answers to the research questions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they include both open-ended and closed questions, and hence, give the interviewees a chance to respond freely but also allow researchers to ask some specific questions. Most of the questions will still be open-ended to allow the interview “to stay as close to the lived experience as possible” (Laverty, 2003, p. 19).

Individual interviews were conducted with each of the four participants, recorded and then transcribed. Two of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and the other two on Zoom. The interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes and consisted of roughly 20 questions prepared in advance. The number of questions is approximate because some of the questions were dependent on how fully the interviewees answered them. Moreover, some interviewees were more reserved than others, and the interviews were therefore more interviewer-led. The questions were same for all interviewees, except for the questions related to the reasons of choosing or not choosing an optional language. The interviews mostly followed the same structure, but the structure was still flexible and open to changes. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ mother tongue, Finnish, but the most notable responses were translated into English. They are included as extracts in the findings section.

Previous research on L2 motivation and language choices was utilized in planning the interview questions, and some were prepared with specific research interests of the present study in mind. Approximately two thirds of the interview questions were open-ended and one third closed. To avoid exhausting the interviewees early on and to help them feel more comfortable, the interviews started with easier background questions, such as whether the interviewees had

studied an optional language before. Then the interview proceeded to more personal descriptive, experience and contrast questions, for example, why they had or had not chosen an optional language, what their opinions are on each of the languages that they study and their cultures as well as what kinds of earlier experiences with language learning they have had (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). The interviews went according to plan and the participants were willing to discuss their thoughts and experiences thoroughly. After all the questions had been asked, the interviewees were encouraged to add anything or ask any questions about their participation in the study.

### **3.3. Coding and thematic analysis**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis mostly guided the data analysis process with coding and thematic analysis as the main methods employed. *Coding* is a commonly used method in qualitative research and IPA. It consists of ascribing codes to pieces of data that are perceived important, notable or otherwise interesting (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) explain, a code can be any name or label that describes and categorizes a piece of data. Codes vary on their specificity and level so that they can be arranged in a hierarchy with superordinate and subordinate codes, e.g. the code 'frustration' under the code 'feeling' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). *Thematic analysis* is another frequently used method in qualitative research, and in IPA it usually follows coding. To put it simply, it means finding common themes in the data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). This can be achieved for example by coding; by giving codes to important bits of data and putting them into categories, usually a set of themes arises as a result.

In the current study, the first step of analysis was transcribing the interviews. When starting to analyze the transcripts, I read the transcripts carefully, underlining bits that caught my attention or that seemed particularly important while assigning codes and writing notes. Secondly, all the transcripts were compared. This consisted of first making the interview questions into headings, then writing the response of each interviewee under that question. One question at a time, I colour-coded, for instance, similar expressions or words used by all participants and assigned different colours to pieces of data related to language categorizations, language choices, motivation, dreams and goals, perceived reasons for the decrease in the number of upper secondary school students' studying optional languages and so on. This step took the longest but was the most fruitful as the categories became clearer and larger and important

connections and commonalities between certain categories became visible so that they could be organized into themes.

## **4. Findings**

In this section, the main findings of the study will be presented and described with relevant examples from the interview transcripts. The section will start by demonstrating how the interviewees categorized different languages and what kinds of attitudes they had towards them, and then move on to the different reasons for choosing or not choosing an optional language and motivational differences between languages.

### **4.1. Categorization of languages**

Coding of the interview data showed that the interviewees repeatedly used certain words to describe language learning or to talk about it in general. The most frequently used adjectives were “useful” and “important”, while “need” and “interest” were other terms abundantly used by all interviewees. Additionally, the interviewees described language learning as “smart”, “fun”, “nice” and “interesting”. This collection of most frequent words demonstrates how the interviewees had fairly positive attitudes towards language learning. Next I will describe in more detail and with relevant examples how the interviewees experience language learning and have made language choices based on their experiences.

#### ***4.1.1. Importance and usefulness***

There were great similarities in the interviewees’ responses to general questions about language learning. All interviewees, regardless of whether they studied an optional language or not, described language learning as useful. This can be observed in the responses to the first question, “What do you think about language learning?” Laura, who had chosen an optional language, responded: “Well, I think it is like really smart and important because you need it so much in everything”. Sandra, who studies an optional language as well, agreed: “Um, I think it is pretty like important, fun and useful”. Thomas and Emily, who had decided not to study an optional language had similar attitudes and also provided examples of where foreign languages might be needed. “Well... I think it’s pretty interesting to study them and I do believe it’s useful. So that if you go abroad or some foreigner comes here, you can communicate”, described Emily. Thomas emphasized the importance of English by stating that “it is a language that everyone should know in order to live normally”. When asked what he thinks about

learning other foreign languages than English, he argued that it is not necessarily something everyone should do but that it may prove particularly useful in working life and especially if one goes abroad to study or work. This analysis of first responses clearly suggests that all interviewees had quite positive attitudes towards language learning and understood its importance.

Although the interviewees were asked generally about their thoughts on language learning, later in the interviews it appeared that they were mostly describing their thoughts about learning English. The contrast was the greatest between English and Swedish, but also other foreign languages were deemed less useful in comparison to English. Laura's response portrays this contrast most vividly: "Well, English I consider very important, but Swedish I don't really... [laughing] I think it should be like not compulsory because I don't really need it so I don't really consider it that important". The other interviewees did not necessarily have as negative attitudes towards learning Swedish but this opinion that English is the most useful language appeared continuously in the interviews. Thomas stated that while Finnish and English will be very important for his future, Swedish and French presumably will not. The most significant reason why English was considered the most important language was that it is constantly needed in everyday lives. Sandra drew attention to this fact by saying that "English is one that you actually need really much. But then Swedish, I have never really needed it and I have been studying it for a few years already."

The above examples demonstrate how the interviewees determined the importance of a language based on how much it was needed, i.e. how useful it was. As Laura's response shows, she was the one who most explicitly categorized languages based on the need for using them. In fact, she seemed to not only correlate how much a language is needed with its importance but also with the motivation to study it. This connection is particularly visible in the following extract, where Laura answers the question of whether her motivation differs for different languages:

Well yeah [laughing]. Like Swedish and English, for example, because I won't probably need Swedish to communicate with people anywhere so I don't really think that you should even learn it and I don't even have motivation for it. Then, on the other hand, I have a lot more motivation for English so you do then learn it better as well.

Because she does not believe that Swedish will be useful for her she does not consider it important and does not have motivation for it. According to Laura, this lack of motivation also

makes her put less effort into studying it and impairs her ability to concentrate in the Swedish lessons at school. Again, she contrasted this tendency with English. Right after mentioning her difficulty to concentrate in the Swedish lessons, Laura explains how perceiving English as important facilitates her concentration in the lessons. Additionally, she says in the above extract that she learns English better because she has more motivation to study it.

The importance and need to have good skills in English was further discussed by Thomas and Emily. They described how they constantly “run into” English in their everyday lives – that spending time with the language is mostly unconscious and effortless. Again, there is a clear contrast with Swedish: while English is something that is “everywhere” and that one “runs into” frequently without intending to, learning Swedish requires conscious effort and concretely “finding Swedish”. Perhaps this helps to understand why the interviewees considered English so important and wanted to prioritize learning it.

#### ***4.1.2. Level of difficulty***

While Laura mostly categorized languages based on their importance and need, the other interviewees categorized them more by their level of difficulty. For example, Sandra described her views of the languages she learns as follows:

Well, for me at least English is like very easy, but then for example Russian, it's very difficult, but that may be because I have only just started it that it's still difficult. And of course English, too, was difficult when you started it but now that you have studied it for, um, almost ten years it has become quite easy now really, and surely it's like if you continue studying Russian and Swedish for a longer time they become a bit easier, too.

English seemed to be the easiest language for Thomas as well:

Well... Um... Probably at least with English it is like very... It has always been like a pretty easy language to me and I have learned it like pretty early outside of school. So it has often been like fun. A bit boring, maybe because it has been kind of easy and I haven't really needed to study almost anything.

Both Sandra and Thomas categorized languages based on their level of difficulty. English is the easiest language to both of them whereas Swedish and other foreign languages have caused them more difficulty. Additionally, it appeared that optional languages, Russian in Sandra's

case and French in Thomas' case, have been the most challenging. Also Emily categorized languages based on their level of difficulty but differed from the other interviewees in her opinion that Swedish was easier than English. Finally Laura, albeit she mainly categorized languages based on their importance, agreed that English is much easier than Swedish and additionally pointed out that this makes English lessons more enjoyable.

Not only were languages categorized based on their level of difficulty, but this categorization was also closely related to motivation. However, the way this relationship between level of difficulty and motivation was perceived varied between the interviewees. Surprisingly, both Thomas and Sandra argued that motivation, in fact, is mostly unnecessary when learning English.

In Swedish [laughing], I don't really have so much motivation but then English is like, because you already know it so you don't basically need motivation to study it. But then I still want to study it because I know it's like useful. -Sandra

Well... English is like I know it pretty well and there's not really anything to learn. If there is, then you learn it. It's not like a big motivation necessarily nor lack of motivation, because it feels like there isn't really that much to study, at least in the level at which you usually go to school. -Thomas

To both Sandra and Thomas, learning English feels easier than that of other languages because they already have good skills in English and that makes learning new things easy and effortless. Sandra pointed out that although there is no need for a high motivation for English she still wants to learn it because she knows it is "useful". Thomas further elaborated this difference in motivation by stating that the "starting points" of learning English and Swedish are different. In the case of Swedish, Thomas plans to do the matriculation exam, which provides him with an explicit goal – achieving a good result in the exam. Learning English, by contrast, does not involve such an explicit goal but the motivation to learn is brought by the wish to maintain the good level in order to keep the language "easy".

Laura did not directly associate the language's level of difficulty with motivation but claimed that being good at a language produces the motivation in the form of better ability to concentrate in the lessons: "I believe that most of my friends are also better in English than Swedish and that's also why they focus better on English because they know it better." Emily was the only interviewee who did not see any difference in her motivation for English and

Swedish. Although she has to put more effort into English because it is more difficult to her, she wants to be equally good at both languages.

## **4.2. Reasons for choosing an optional language**

The analysis of the interviews showed that the interviewees had very specific reasons for studying optional languages. While responses to the other interview questions were often hesitant and required some pondering, the responses to the question of why they had chosen to study an optional language were given immediately and without hesitation. This indicates that the interviewees were very aware of these reasons and had thought about them extensively. This further suggests a presence of vivid ideal selves which will be discussed later in this section.

### ***4.2.1. Dream of living abroad***

Laura explained that she chose Italian because of her and her younger sister's long-term dream of moving to Italy. The following extract from Laura portrays how extensively thought-through and well-planned her dream is:

Well this is like, because me and my sister Alice, we have always dreamed that when I have graduated from upper secondary school and Alice has done the first year of upper secondary school, we will move to Italy to live there, just the two of us. I will study at some institute there and Alice will do a gap year. So I will now start to accomplish that dream.

Laura appeared to have a high motivation in that not only was Italian not offered in her school and she must complete the courses online but also that she does not know anyone else who studies the language. Because Italian is not offered in her school it requires a lot of effort on her part to find out how she can study the language in the online upper secondary school, what kind of courses are offered and how to complete them. Additionally, her integrative motivation was demonstrated by her will to invest her time and energy in online courses that she has no experience of and which may be challenging. Laura's high integrative motivation showed also in her determination to reach her dream:

I will move there [Italy] for like a year or two to study something for a while and then...  
[laughing], I have no clue what after that *but that's where I want to go*.

Although she did not know all the details, she was certain that moving to Italy is exactly what she wants and would not allow anything to hinder her from accomplishing that dream. For example, when asked about how many courses she wanted to complete and if she was planning to do the matriculation exam in Italian, she appeared not to know many of the details yet. However, she had decided when she would start the studies and planned to meet with her tutor before this. To conclude, her motivation appeared to be high and she was certain that everything would go well eventually.

#### ***4.2.2. Family heritage***

Sandra had a specific reason for studying an optional language as well, although it differed from Laura's. Sandra's family is partly from Russia, and she wants to learn the language to make communicating with her relatives easier. She was also interested in travelling to Russia someday to meet her relatives who still live there.

Unlike Laura, Sandra had already started her first course in Russian at the time of the interview. Although she had only studied the language for a few weeks, her motivation had decreased because she considered the language difficult. She was not confident that she wanted to continue studying it if it kept feeling so difficult. This is interesting, as other practicalities were perhaps easier in Sandra's case compared to Laura's. Firstly, Russian is offered in Sandra's school as contact teaching, which makes attending lessons easier and more comfortable. Secondly, unlike Laura, Sandra has many friends studying optional languages, some of who are even in the same Russian course with her. This she brings up herself, too, saying that it is nice to study together with friends. Nonetheless, although Sandra's motivation had decreased after the start of her first Russian course, she still remained fairly optimistic:

Well, Russian's [motivations] is not quite so good. But it may be that when you start to learn it and understand it, the motivation, too, may become like better.

Here again, the relationship between easiness of the language and motivation becomes visible. When Sandra was asked how long she was planning to continue studying Russian, she said that if it got somewhat easier she would continue at least until the end of this term, and if it got much easier she would even do the matriculation exam. Easiness and feeling skilled at a

language thus appeared to determine to some extent how long one has motivation and energy to study it.

### **4.3. Reasons for not choosing an optional language**

The analysis of Thomas' and Emily's responses showed that neither of them had chosen an optional language because they simply did not have time. Although both claimed to be somewhat interested in foreign languages and cultures, their hobbies and other school subjects prevented them from taking any additional subjects. The next sections will describe in more detail the reasons for not studying an optional language, both in the case of Thomas and Emily and other upper secondary school students as described by all interviewees. The analysis showed that there can be multiple factors at play at the same time.

#### ***4.3.1. Time constraints and prioritizing***

Both Emily and Thomas explained how busy they are with upper secondary school as it is, and with hobbies and other schoolwork they simply do not have time for any other languages than the compulsory English and Swedish. Thomas described how he cannot study optional languages because "there are so many other things to do that it's really difficult to fit anything in there". However, he mentioned that he had thought that it would be nice to know other languages as well and that he could, perhaps, study some other languages in the future if "there's time and resources for that". Emily's response was similar. She has a hobby that takes most of her free time and, mirroring Thomas, she stated that if she had more time, she would consider studying some additional language. These responses indicate that, indeed, Emily and Thomas were interested in studying optional languages but simply had to prioritize.

All interviewees were asked the question of why *they* think fewer and fewer upper secondary school students, in general, choose not to take optional languages. I wanted to ask them this question because I thought their ideas of other students' motives might provide some further insight into their own motives as well. This was the case, and the responses reflected most interviewees' own reasons and attitudes at least to the extent that they mentioned them as possible factors. The responses indicated some uncertainty and unwillingness to present their ideas on other students' motives but they still suggested some interesting ones. Thomas and Emily presented time constraints as a possible reason why also other upper secondary school

students do not choose an optional language. Thomas described that upper secondary school is quite challenging for many students and because of this, they do not wish to take any “additional burden”. However, interestingly only Laura presented time constraints as the primary reason in the case of other students.

#### **4.3.2. Poor selection and lack of encouragement**

The matter of selection of foreign languages in upper secondary schools and encouragement for studying them was brought up by most interviewees without asking. It appeared that, in fact, Sandra was the only interviewee whose school offered contact teaching in her optional language. All other interviewees had either the option of going to another school for the courses or studying the language in elukio, an online upper secondary school that offers online courses in every school subject to everyone who has completed basic education, regardless of age (“Kuka voi opiskella?” n.d.). Laura had decided to study an optional language regardless of having to complete the courses online, but she still described it as “annoying”. Furthermore, Thomas stated that although his schedule was too busy during the first year of upper secondary school, he could consider taking some courses in an optional language later if they were offered in his school. This indicates that although time constraints are a significant factor in not studying an optional language, poor selection of optional languages plays a part as well.

Emily stated that although she would not have the time and possibility to study an optional language in any case, it might motivate other students to study them if they were offered in their school as contact teaching. In the same breath Emily also argued that “if they just promoted them more” perhaps more students would decide to study them. Emily brought up the matter of encouragement as well: “Because they haven’t –also I haven’t been told so much about them at school... Maybe on my first year in upper secondary school they did, that you can study them in elukio, but they didn’t really encourage it or so.” Also Thomas admitted that they had not really been encouraged to study optional languages in upper secondary school, although they had been informed about the possibility. Thomas and Sandra recalled that in primary and secondary school studying optional languages was discussed and encouraged; according to Laura, however, it was never encouraged and she claimed that she possibly would have studied Italian already earlier if she had known it was possible.

### ***4.3.3. English is enough***

The responses to the question “Is English enough?” showed that all interviewees believed that good language skills in English were enough. Furthermore, they had experience of other upper secondary school students thinking the same way. Whereas other foreign languages are considered important to some extent, for example, in working life or for travelling, many upper secondary school students do not yet know what they want to do in the future and because of this, they believe English is enough. Thomas described this in his response:

Well... It depends a lot on where you live. Let's say that if you live in a country and area where the main language is English, usually it would be quite enough. And on the other hand if you live somewhere else and only speak English, many languages are kind of that you learn them pretty quickly. Like if you live in an area where people constantly speak, for example German and you only speak English, you inevitably learn it at some point as well. But... language skills never do any harm but I do kind of believe that if you live in an area where let's say English is the main language and English is used at work it may be that you get on okay with just English.

To put it short, Thomas believed that English was usually enough, and if it was not enough in some place, one could learn the necessary local language easily. Emily, too, believed that English would be enough and that it would even be useful and practical if everyone spoke it as then we would not need any other languages and life would be easier. However, she still hoped that other languages would not disappear because it would make the world “poorer”. She hoped that other languages would remain important but thought that English would “take over” them. Also Laura and Sandra agreed that at least in the near future English would be enough. Furthermore, all interviewees seemed to believe that English would become even more important in the future.

Not only can one survive with English almost everywhere in the world, as mentioned earlier, but English also plays a significant part in upper secondary school students' everyday lives. Emily described this when talking about the possible reasons for not choosing an optional language: “But maybe it's just that the importance of English has increased so that – because you need it always you put effort into it. And you like... run into it everywhere, for example, if you're on your phone there's English. And I at least don't really find other languages anywhere.” Because English is “everywhere” and other languages are almost never needed, it

is understandable that many upper secondary school students do not consider studying other languages very important.

#### **4.3.4. Other reasons**

The interviewees presented some other reasons why upper secondary school students do not study optional languages and ideas on how studying foreign languages could be made more motivating. Firstly, Thomas argued that many students have bad experiences of studying an optional language in primary and secondary school, and this is why they do not want to continue it in upper secondary school. Thomas explained that after they had chosen an optional language in third grade, they were not allowed to give it up even if they were not interested in it anymore. Secondly, Sandra claimed that some students may not want to study an optional language because there are mobile applications and other ways to learn a language individually. As to how language learning could be made more motivating, in addition to discussing and promoting them more, all interviewees deemed the role of teachers and teaching methods important. It was suggested, for instance, that more active teaching strategies could be utilized in teaching languages, not just “sitting and writing essays”. Moreover, Laura suggested that arranging more native speaker visits to schools could improve students’ motivations.

Interference was one of the reasons for not studying an optional language according to Kiehelä and Veivo (2020) and the reason appeared in this study as well, although only in Emily’s case. While she did not present it as her main reason for not choosing an optional language, she did mention its influence on her decision. “I feel like that for me... Well, Swedish is like... it doesn’t feel as difficult as English, so then... well they get mixed up, too, so I haven’t really thought that I should take any more of them”, Emily explained.

#### **4.4. Differences in motivation**

All interviewees except for Emily showed instrumental motivation to study Swedish. The motivation for English was more integrative, and the most integrative motivation was for optional languages. In relation to ideal and ought-to L2 selves, the findings were similar, suggesting strong correspondences between the concepts of integrative and instrumental motivation and ideal and ought-to selves, as already argued by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009). Vivid ideal selves and weaker ought-to selves seemed to be connected to studying optional

languages. Ideal selves seemed to play a part in studying English as well, but ought-to selves had a significant role there as well, as shown for example in how English skills were perceived important especially for working life. The weakest ideal selves and strongest ought-to selves were presented towards studying Swedish, where the motivation was mostly produced by the mandatoriness of the language.

While there were strong similarities in the motivational differences, the levels of integrativeness and ideal selves varied between the interviewees. Laura, for instance, expressed a more vivid ideal self towards learning Italian than Sandra for learning Russian. Laura's responses showed acquiescence with all the central characteristics of a strong ideal L2 self, especially positive attitudes towards the L2 community (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). This was demonstrated, for example, by how she described Italy as her favourite country. Although Sandra did show a positive attitude towards the Russian language and its people and culture, her ideal self did not appear as vivid and detailed as Laura's. Moreover, while she had thought about visiting Russia after learning the language, she did not have any clear plan for accomplishing that.

Emily had a high integrative motivation and an ideal self for Swedish, whereas learning English was in her case more motivated by an ought-to self, a wish to pass the courses and get good grades. An ideal self, in her case, showed in her dream of moving to Sweden at some point in her life and her liking the language itself. Out of all interviewees, Thomas seemed to have the least integrativeness related to both studying English and Swedish. His responses showed a high instrumental motivation and influence of ought-to selves, as his learning behavior was mostly motivated by the goal of getting a good result in the Swedish matriculation exam and preventing his good level in English from deteriorating. Thomas did not show any specific dream or goal of living in the countries of his L2s or getting to know their speakers. Although Emily and Thomas did not have negative attitudes towards the L2s and their communities, neither did they have very positive attitudes and, for example, did not describe any positive attributes of the L2 communities or speakers, unlike the other interviewees. To conclude, it appeared that the most vivid ideal L2 selves were directed towards studying optional languages.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings reflect earlier research on many aspects of motivation and language choices. The motives found in this study were mostly similar to those by Kiehelä and Veivo (2020) and Stewart-Strobel and Chen (2003), including an interest in foreign languages and cultures and moving or travelling abroad as well as a wish to communicate with the speakers of the language. Family heritage and liking the sound of the language were found important as well, contrary to Kiehelä and Veivo (2020) where they were relevant only in 4 and 7 per cent of the cases, respectively. Interestingly, usefulness of the language was not deemed an important motive for choosing an optional language in the present study, although it was the most common motive according to Kiehelä and Veivo (2020).

As to why optional languages were not chosen, the findings align with those by Kiehelä and Veivo (2020), with time constraints and the great number of other subjects being the primary motives. Contrary to Kiehelä and Veivo (2020), however, lack of interest in optional languages was not found a common motive. Instead, it appeared that students were interested in studying foreign languages, but lack of time prevented them from studying them. Perhaps the finding with most implications is, however, that studying optional languages is not encouraged and promoted enough in Finnish upper secondary schools. Whether the reason for the lack of encouragement is that other subjects are perceived more important or something else, talking more about the benefits of multilingualism could encourage more students to take optional languages.

Regarding the motivations and attitudes towards language learning, all interviewees perceived language learning as important and useful, but their motivations to study different languages varied. The interviewees had high integrative motivation for optional languages and more instrumental motivation for English and Swedish. Similarly, ideal selves appeared to have a significant role in the study of optional languages, whereas the role of ought-to selves were more prominent in studying the compulsory languages English and Swedish. English was deemed the most important language by all interviewees.

This study provides valuable insight into how Finnish upper secondary school students experience language learning. Nonetheless, there are some limitations. The main limitations are the small and not very representative sample and possible bias in the interviews. For further research on the topic, it might be useful to select a more representative and larger sample and have more than one interviewer to avoid bias. Collecting more than one kind of data, for

example journals kept by the participants in addition to interviews, could be another way to counter the possible biases in the interview situation. Finally, more research on language choices and ways to enhance students' interest and motivation for optional languages is certainly needed to avoid students' language repertoires becoming poorer and to make language learning more motivating.

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