

Earlier English learning in Finland from the teacher perspective:
evaluating the impacts to children with language-based learning difficulties

Outi Saarela
Master's Seminar & Thesis
English
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oulu
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1. Introduction

From Spring 2020 onwards, all Finnish first and second grade students have been receiving additional 1-2 hours of English teaching a year (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018). In this thesis the aim is to study the effects of starting English teaching and learning earlier in Finland, with the specific focus on the possible outcomes to children who are experiencing learning difficulties in writing and reading in their first language. It is understood that the skills in first language form the framework for learning other languages. Therefore, the potential correlation between learning in one's first language and learning in a second language, along with the possible benefits or disadvantages of earlier language learning, is an interesting subject and worth further research.

This thesis also reviews the ways that early English education is organised in schools and the type of materials and support teachers have at hand. Besides reviewing early English learning, the study also focuses on the impacts that this earlier language introduction may have on children who are experiencing language-based learning difficulties in their first language, and how teachers feel they might best be supported during their studies.

Additionally, thesis views personality, characteristics and child's family background, and which aspects may be influencing the overall learning process.

2. Description of materials and methods

This thesis is divided in two main sections: theoretical framework and the survey and interview results. The theoretical framework summarises the available research and studies regarding earlier English learning and teaching, looking at the key points that led to changes in the education system as well as the first results and feedback that teachers have provided since they started teaching younger students. The purpose of the research is to examine how English is being taught in schools and what kind of support, training, and materials teachers have within their reach when they start teaching English to younger students.

Besides reviewing the topic of earlier English learning and teaching, another main focus of this thesis is the research about language-based learning difficulties, especially the cases in which the child has difficulties in learning to read and write in their first language at the same time when they start learning a second language. The theoretical framework also reviews how children with learning disabilities may be best supported with learning and if personality characteristics have any influence on how children cope with these challenges. To map out the perspectives of teachers today, teachers of Finnish and English from grade 1 to 6 were surveyed and interviewed. For a detailed description of the analysis of their responses, see section 4.

2.1. Importance

This is a very interesting topic from both the linguistic perspective and that of children's development, and also quite meaningful as many people seek knowledge on how to support children's learning and how to understand the reasons behind the struggle some children have with tasks that seem easy to their peers. Learning difficulties are a challenge to the child in question, as well as to the adults who try to find ways to support the child. Teachers try to ensure that the child can pass the learning requirements set by the education system and try to find suitable ways to support children's learning together with parents outside of school. The type and amount of support is always depending on the resources that are available, and the level and method of support also depends on what kind of cooperation exists among school, children, their parents and other supporting functions.

Earlier English learning is also a relevant topic because since 2020, the English studies start already at the first grade and second grade in Finnish elementary schools. Some studies have already been conducted about the impacts of this change, but it is not yet certain if the research provides evidence on the impacts to children who face challenges with learning the basics of writing and reading skills in their first language. Furthermore, the relationship between language-based learning difficulties in

first language and the first foreign language introduction is interesting, as it might be understood that in case of language-based difficulties, it would be better to focus on learning the basics of first language writing and reading first, before being introduced to a foreign language.

2.2. Research questions

This thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How is the early English teaching organized in schools, and what kind of materials, resources and training are available to language teachers?
- Is early English learning considered as significant to child's language development?
- What are the benefits or negative impacts of earlier English teaching and learning, from the point of view of the teachers?
- Do challenges in first language impact in foreign language learning and is special support needed in such cases?
- Does personality impact the learning process and how children cope with learning challenges?

2.3. Methods

2.3.1 Systematic literature review

For gathering the theoretical framework for this thesis, systematic literature review is used to identify theories and research results about earlier English learning and teaching in Finnish schools, language-based learning difficulties, the learning process in general, and what kind of impacts the social environment or individual characteristics such as concentration disorders, for example, might impact the learning process. According to Munn et al. (2018), systematic review is “set out to identify and retrieve international evidence that is relevant to a particular question or questions and to appraise and synthesize the results of this search to inform practice, policy and in some cases, further research” (p. 2) Munn et al. (2018) continue by adding, that systematic review can be used for example to “confirm current practice” or to “identify and investigate conflicting results” (p.2).

Relevant to the present study is a body of research on early English learning both in Finland and abroad that shows how teaching is organised in schools and what materials are available to teachers. This thesis also examines if there is any conflicting evidence and data about the benefits or

disadvantages of early English learning. Currently in Finland, English is often introduced as a foreign language already in kindergarten and it is now being taught also in the 1st and 2nd grades in Finnish schools. For this reason, both of these learning environments are reviewed in theoretical framework if possible. The thesis focuses also on reviewing theories and research related to language-based learning difficulties and how they appear in first language as well as in learning the first foreign language. Additionally, the thesis will study learning process and a few aspects that either support or cause difficulties to it.

2.3.2 Survey and interview as a data collection method

To collect actual feedback on the research topics of this thesis, a survey aimed at teachers at 1-6 grades was conducted during late Spring 2021. The survey questions were formulated around the theories reviewed for this thesis to explore how the real-life feedback correlates with the relevant academic research presented in this thesis. To analyse the survey responses, this study uses thematic content analysis. Thematic analysis is an approach that allows the researcher to identify and analyse possible patterns that emerge from the results. (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013, p. 398-405).

Due to the nature of the research questions, qualitative research approach was chosen instead of quantitative one. While quantitative analysis might be useful method to analyse some of the survey responses to see, for example, how many of the participants replied “yes” or “no” to certain simple questions, majority of the research seeks to produce new insights through qualitative analysis. The purpose of gathering qualitative information is to identify how participants view their experiences and knowledge in teaching and the impacts of their opinions and feelings (Patton, 2002). With open ended questions, recipients were asked to describe their views and provide feedback to the specific questions. In the analysis part, the responses were examined to identify potential patterns, conflicts or enforcement of the theoretical background as well as differences and similarities in the views of teachers.

In addition to responding to the survey, three teachers participated in an interview which was carried out in the form of email exchange. The aim was to have a dialogue with the teachers on additional topics that emerged from the overall survey results.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Earlier English learning and teaching in Finnish schools

English is most typically the so-called A1 language in Finnish schools, meaning that it is the first foreign language Finnish children start learning at school. As mentioned earlier, all Finnish first and second grade students have received additional 1-2 hours of English teaching a year since the Spring of 2020 (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018). The arguments for this decision were that additional English classes bring more equality among children and that versatile language skills are among most important skills in future's growingly international world. In the afore mentioned press release, the education minister Sanni Grahn-Laasonen also highlighted children's remarkable abilities to learn new skills and pointed out that earlier language education is more effective thanks to children's specific developmental phase when their ability to learn is at its highest (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2018).

Banich and Compton (2018, p. 467) refer to studies on the subject of second language learning conducted in the United States, the results of which indicate that there is a link between specific sensitivity age of learning and the ability to acquire a second language. The ages before 5 to 7 have been identified as important; language learning started at this age may result in obtaining language competence similar to that of a native speaker. These studies also indicate, that after the age of 7 the ability to acquire grammatical competence in a second language decreases each year, which indicates a linkage to biological factors. (Banich & Compton, 2018, p. 467)

Nikolov (2009, p. 10) supports early language learning, and states that exposure to the language at an early age may provide some advantages, such as easier acquisition of the different sound system in the foreign language. According to Nikolov (2009, p. 10), there are indications that this may help reduce anxiety related to learning process among children and result in higher motivation as well as improve their cognitive development over the years.

Besides the biological factors, language skills are perceived as important in ensuring equality. For example, Carmel (Nikolov, 2009) refers to a study conducted in Israel, where the study group including parents, indicated that "learning English at an early stage in life means getting a chance for a better life and better opportunities in a global sense (p. 409).

3.1.1 Teaching methods

1st and 2nd grade children are rather young, and many of them have not yet achieved good skills for example in reading and writing. As with all ages and student groups, teaching methods play a key role in ensuring that learning outcomes are successful. Kallio and Koskenoja (2020, p. 47) summarise that the main objectives of language learning during the first grades in the Finnish education system are to encourage the child to interact in normal everyday life situations and to develop their linguistic abilities and competencies in communication. Kallio and Koskenoja (2020, p. 48-49) continue by adding that there is a lot of variation in children's ability to read and write during the first and second grades, which is why more functional teaching methods are recommended so that all children can equally learn English – through games, acting, singing, and playing.

Jalkanen (Nikolov, 2009, p. 103) describes English learning in English kindergarten in Kuopio and highlights that social interaction and negotiation of meaning are assumed to play a key role in language learning. Jalkanen (Nikolov, 2009, p. 103) refers to “Vygotsky-like pedagogy” in which the child learns in interaction with others. In this specific kindergarten that participated in the study, errors are approached in a more indirect manner, they are not corrected and a child's utterance is repeated in its correct grammatical form, for instance. Jalkanen (Nikolov, 2009) suggests that the child's fragile self-confidence needs to be protected (p. 103).

According to Jalkanen (Nikolov, 2009, p. 107) several studies related to children's cognition suggest that children can better understand the objectives on learning once they can use the language and have learning tasks that make sense to them. Finnish National Agency for Education (2019, p. 25) define that reading and writing skills are not a requirement for children when starting the early English and teaching methods need to be chosen to meet the requirements of students' development stage and age. Also, if needed, children do have the right for special support if needed and teaching needs to be differentiated as per children's capabilities (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019, p. 29).

3.1.2 Teacher's language skills

Fluency in the subject language of the language teacher is an interesting topic, especially because the teaching practices vary in many countries and local schools. According to Carmel (Nikolov, 2009, p. 405), The Ministry of Education in Israel promotes teaching English in the 1st and 2nd grades via so called “home-room teachers”. These teachers are not English language teachers but have experience in early childhood education and teach other subjects as well, such as mathematics (Nikolov, 2009, p.405).

In similar vein, Hahl et al. (2020, p.79) describe how earlier language teaching requires new skills from both classroom teachers and subject teachers, adding that currently language studies are not required from graduating classroom teachers. Even though early language learning is considered to take place through play, games and songs, language fluency might be expected from these language teachers. According to Bland (2015, p. 22), the two main things required from language teachers of young children are the advanced fluency in the subject language and secondly the ability to use teaching methods that are suitable for the student's age. Bland (2015, p.11) continues by adding that advanced fluency in spoken language, is very likely needed to succeed especially with younger learners.

3.1.3 Early English learning materials

In addition to teachers' acquired language skills, the teaching materials they have available to them and how teaching is organised in practice are also interesting subjects in early English learning. As early English learning is a rather new phenomenon in Finnish schools, only few studies have explored the topic. For example, Eskelinen and Tuupanen (2018, p. 53) note that some teachers in their research group were actually missing materials and/or enough sufficiently support to teach English in a standardised way in their school, which according to Eskelinen and Tuupanen, raises the question whether or not earlier English teaching can be arranged successfully and with sufficient quality.

Kallio and Koskenoja (2020, p. 49) monitored the classes of two teacher's, and their observations suggest that a more communicative teaching method was used in a class where the teaching materials were not readily available, whereas when the teaching materials were available, the structure of the class was formulated around the material, in a less communicative manner. This is an interesting observation, especially considering the view that early English learning should encourage students to be more communicative and learn to use the language freely.

In the start of the early English teaching change, Finnish National Agency for Education (2019) has organised webinars and shared suggestions for materials with helpful links to support teaching practices in the 1st and 2nd grades. Interesting aspect would be to view how many schools and language teachers have attended such trainings and how many are using the provided materials.

3.1.4 Other views to early learning benefits

The research on benefits of early English learning has obtained some mixed and even conflicting results. Hahl et al. (2020, p.99) refer to a few studies that have found that similar or even better learning outcomes can still be reached at later ages. However, they do observe that there are nevertheless many positive outcomes evident in earlier English teaching, such as children's enthusiasm and willingness to speak and use English (Hahl, Savijärvi & Wallinheimo, 2020, p. 99) Likewise, Cadierno and Eskildsen (2015) refer to studies that have indicated that early classroom learning does not have added benefits as later learners have proved to perform similarly as early learners, and there are possible indications that classroom learning might simply be too different for "naturalistic acquisition for age affects to be relevant" (p. 127).

As Bland (2015, p. 16) points out, the most impressive results in early language learning come from bilingual families where the child is in close and natural contact with the language, and from school environments where the new language is embedded to the entire school day, as opposed to limited classroom learning with large number of pupils involved. In Finnish elementary schools, first graders receive 1-2 hours of English classes per week, which means that their involvement with the second language is rather small in the school environment.

Especially with language learning, involvement with the language outside the classroom helps to develop language skills further. The research results obtained by Inha and Huhta, (2018, p. 6) provided evidence that first-grade students use English quite rarely outside the classroom, whereas third grade students claimed to use English several times during the week. Their research also suggests that boys are exposed to English language more often than girls are, through computer games, tv programs and social media. (Inha &,Huhta, 2018, p.6)

The English proficiency of Finnish pupils has typically been estimated to be good as it is, possibly because they are exposed to the language on multiple platforms early on. Early English learning is an interesting subject to study for this reason as well; it is debatable whether giving English classes to younger students is reasonable, especially if it means that these extra hours are taken from other subjects that might sometimes be more relevant. This thesis seeks to find out whether this added focus on English is perceived by teachers as helpful or harmful at this stage, especially if a child is experiencing learning difficulties in writing and reading in their first language.

3.2. Learning disabilities

Learning disabilities are reportedly increasing among school children and understanding the reasons behind the learning disabilities are of great interest. One of the reasons may well be that today, parents and teachers have a greater understanding of children's learning and capabilities, and awareness needed to evaluate it. Challenges in learning can be identified more easily. Challenges are possibly due that today's society is also much more complex than before, providing hundreds of ways for distracting your attention via mobile phones and different modes of virtual world and games which are especially targeted to children.

Our society sets rules in many areas for the so called "normal standards", indicating the range where the behaviour or development is seen to be right and anything below or above it is seen to be different, not according to the expectations. Especially children and their development are being monitored closely, both from the physical growth and from cognitive development side. As Waber (2010, p. 3) suggests, when the questions about learning difficulties are rising, they are difficult to the child in question, parents, teachers – all considering whether there is an actual learning disability and if and what should be done for it.

Waber (2010, pp. 3-8) describes that learning difficulties appear on child so that they seem to have to use considerably more resources and focus on a subject that appears to happen quite automatically and easily with other children. McDowell (2018, p. 1078) concludes that learning disability relates to a situation where child has "unexpected degree of difficulty acquiring learning in one or more curriculum areas" (p. 1078). Additionally, these difficulties are not able to be explained via any reasonable explanation, such as intellectual capacity. (McDowell, 2018, p. 1078)

Waber (2010, pp. 3-8) adds that the real challenge in defining learning disability is what it means to the child in question, understanding truly how this unique child is succeeding and to understand where they are struggling. Learning disabilities are important to be identified as early as possible, because they may have several negative impacts to the developing child and could possibly have long reaching coincidences impacting the whole life span unless treated and supported properly. According to McDowell (2018, p. 1078) learning challenges can impact in various types of harm as described in following the table as follows. Early support with learning disabilities is needed, to ensure small challenge does not grown into much bigger problem which can related to many aspects.

Type of harm	Description and examples
Learning	Slow rate of learning, poorer function in the affected area/s into adult life
Pedagogic	Default curriculum is not adjusted for actual level of learning (e.g. provided maths curriculum at grade 5 level when skills are grade 2). This further limits rate of progress in the affected area. The child may also suffer consequences of misunderstanding (e.g. detentions, additional work, public shame)
Collateral	Learning problems in one area may impact learning in other areas (e.g. weak literacy impact on maths and science learning)
Self-concept ^{4, 5}	The developing child not only has to deal with the learning struggle on a daily basis but also the accumulated load of harmful attribution (e.g. overall poor intellect, lazy, poor attitude) and its consequences (e.g. bullying)
Motivation	After time, there is a risk of losing motivation, giving up, avoiding hurt
Adaptive ⁶⁻¹¹	Maladaptive adjustment over time, such as behaviour that is disruptive or antisocial, or coping strategies such as substance abuse
Adult ¹²⁻¹⁶	Risk in many areas of adult function beyond learning, including mental and physical health, social relationships, vocational achievement, criminal behaviour

Figure 1. *Harm that may result from specific learning disabilities (McDowell, 2018, p. 1078)*

Waber (2010, pp. 12-14) claims that typically this definition or “label” is needed to arrange the right number of supporting actions for the child, but this definition is rarely useful to the child personally or to his/her development in learning. What is more, a child’s development is a continuous process, impacted by brain development, genes and the environment, and even seemingly minor deviations in development can result in cascading events further along in the process. (Waber, 2010, p. 69)

3.2.1 Language-based learning difficulties

When considering the early English learning, this thesis will look more closely to the connection with first language learning, and which possible challenges children may have in both languages. Language-based difficulties are typically related to writing and reading skills, so therefore this thesis will not review other forms of learning disabilities, such as those related to mathematics.

Molfese et al. (2006, p. 485) define the word “dyslexia” to mean the learning difficulties in especially in reading skills and “dysgraphia” is definition for the difficulties related to writing. Cadierno and Eskildsen (2015, p. 329) estimate 5-10% of the population to be affected by dyslexia and indicate also that many countries do not have the capabilities to research learning disabilities due to lack of awareness. Real percentage may be much higher. In terms of dyslexia and dysgraphia, Molfese et al. (2006, p.485) discuss about developmental and acquired disability; developmental relating to abnormal learning that occurs even if child has normal intelligence and learning opportunities, whereas acquired dyslexia and dysgraphia are typically consequences of for example brain injury, different neurological conditions or diseases.

Banich and Compton (2018, p. 472) claim that English language learning is especially challenging to children who have difficulties in “phonological awareness”, in connection to dyslexia, as this language does not have one clear mapping between letter and the sounds, basically on how words are being pronounced. Beside the phonological deficit, Farukh and Vulchanova (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2015, p. 331) mention dyslexia being connected to other problems such as “auditory sequencing, working memory, auditory discrimination, organization skills, speed of information processing, limited attention span, and impairment in visual processing” (p. 331).

Virtala et al. (2020) mention developmental dyslexia being the “most prevalent, heritable language-related developmental disorder”, and that this impacts app. 5-17% of children and causes difficulties in reading skill fluency (Virtala, Talola, Partanen & Kujala, 2020, p. 1). They also conclude dyslexia to be “mainly based on a deficit in forming robust phonological representations during native-language acquisition” (Virtala, Talola, Partanen & Kujala, 2020, p. 1). Further, Martin (2009) refers dyslexia may relate to other difficulties, such as “hyperactivity and low levels of attention for learning”, “low self-esteem, social, emotional and behaviour difficulties” (p. 95)

With a language-based learning difficulty, the child is having difficulties in formulating the structure for their first language in terms writing and reading. This challenge may increase once they begin to get familiar with foreign language, even if it concerns at first only play and songs in form of language showers. Children may need additional support, both in school and at homes. According to a study made by Farukh and Vulchanova (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2015, p. 341), increasing the language input can be a preventive factor in the case of reading disorder. “Quantity of exposure improves performance on measures of second language competence, specific exposure to a particular language skill that leads to better performance on that skill and also these two points apply also to children with reading deficit” (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2015, p. 341).

3.2.2 Correlation between first language and foreign language skills

Farukh and Vulchanova (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2015, p. 330-331) claim that child's good reading skills in the first language predict good skills also in the second language, however, depending on that both languages are sharing a similar orthographic system. This correlation between the languages is based on the "experience of intra-word analysis in processing alphabets" (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2015, p.331). A study conducted by Bylund et al. (2012, p. 234) indicates that instead of generalising the views of early language learning and fluency in bilingual skills to be related to certain age or development stage, the key is in individuals' skills and abilities on how they can adapt with the new language. Bylund et al., (2021) continue adding that there is great variation between individuals on how they can "acquire and retain linguistic knowledge", and it is not necessarily linked to the age of language acquisition. (p.234)

One interesting aspect in child's language learning are the studies regarding infants and their early communication experiences. Researchers aim at identifying which language-based challenges are biological in nature, and which might be explained with the events occurring during birth or in early childhood. For example, according to Golinkoff et al. (2015), evidence is clear that infant directed speech ("IDS") is directly linked to child' language learning outcomes; "IDS has perceptual, social, and linguistic significance for infants learning language" (p. 342). They however conclude that the research is not yet clear on what is in the core of language acquisition – infant directed speech itself, or the quality and quantity of it, or the social context where it is used (Golinkoff et al., 2015, p. 342).

3.3. Learning process and how to support it

With each child, it would be important to know the best ways to support their learning and to understand what their personal interests are. Language-based skills, such as reading and writing, are elementary skills that each child needs to learn to succeed in studies. In some cases, however, it may be difficult to find the reason why child is not learning or is struggling with tasks that seem easy to others. It is not always clear whether the question is about developmental based learning disability or for example, simply lack of interest from the child's side. Child's attention may be focused on other topics, such as friends, computer games, to their own imagination or possibly to family related topics. Especially with language-based learning difficulties, practice is the key. In their article, Molfese et al., (2006, p. 489) refer to the literature review made by Treiman in 1998, where he concluded that enforcing the child's abilities in spelling, benefitted the reading skills by improving phonemic awareness as well as segmentation in the reading. However, typical challenge is that child may want

to avoid tasks that feel overwhelming; instead of practicing which would improve, the child may choose to ignore the tasks given. Learning is highly impacted by motivation, or the lack of it. As Järvillehto (2014) refers to Arthur C. Clarke's quote, "When children are interested, they learn"; enthusiasm and passion are core elements of determined learning (p. 56). According to Devine (2016, p.13), "Teaching is so much about empathy and seeing how children see, so that you can learn together and explore hand in hand".

People have different personalities and characteristics, ultimately affecting the learning style; what is difficult and what on the other hand, is natural to us. Zoltan (2005, p. 121) refers learning style to include individual's unique approach to learning in overall and their most natural communication style within their "learning environment". This includes how we perceive information received, interact with each another and react to various events. Zoltan (2005) adds that beside the unique learning styles, another aspect is our unique cognitive styles we have (p.124).

Furthermore, Devine (2016, p. 13) claims visual learning to be a strong characteristic among children who face any learning difficulties and has indicated this being possibly linked to different way of processing and perceiving information, in addition to the different learning styles. People have naturally different ways to learn, which certainly becomes apparent in the classroom environment. Devine (2016, p. 18-19), refers to conclusion made by Carbo, Dunn and Dunn in 1986,

"Approximately 20 to 30 percent of the school-aged population remembers what is heard; 40 percent recalls well visually the things that are seen or read; many must write or use their fingers in some manipulative way to help them remember basic facts other people cannot internalize information or skills unless they use them in real-life activities such as actually writing a letter to learn the correct format".

Differentiating the learning requirements is one of the tools teachers are able use to also in language learning. According to Roiha (2012, p. 16), teachers in their study group understood differentiation meaning that child's uniqueness is respected and learning methods are adjusted for the children; both to the low and high performing students. This was mentioned to appear in classroom for example, so that children with learning challenges can use also Finnish for speaking during classes, but the high performing children are encouraged to use only English (Roiha, 2012, p. 16). Roiha's study is encouraging, as with differentiating tools, schools have practical tips for providing foreign language learning successfully to low performing students as well (Roiha, 2012, p. 17).

Schools and teachers do have also different levels of support that can be provided to children based on their difficulties and the severity level of the difficulty. Finnish National Agency for Education (2021) defines this support system has three steps; general support, intensified support and special support, the level of support intensifies on each step.

While it is said that computers and smart phones are distracting our attention, they can also provide excellent new tools to support children who have challenges in especially writing and reading skills and acquiring the phonetical framework. One such example in Finnish language is the *Ekapeli*, “first game”, which is an educational game that supports child’s ability to learn the basic of reading. The game is developed by Jyväskylä University and Niilo Mäki institute’s working team (Niilo Mäki-insituutti, 2020). The philosophy behind *Ekapeli* fits in with the view provided by Järvillehto (2014, p. 64), in that the teacher’s most important task is enabling students to be excited about learning both as individuals and as a group, and the variety of materials used may help to raise the interest towards the subject which children are about to learn.

3.4. Family’s involvement

When viewing learning disabilities or challenges in school, the social network around the child is quite important. In this thesis the approach is to review the school environment and family’s involvement. This thesis will not look closely to the support mechanisms which schools have available for children to support their learning, or the external networks that may possibly impact child’s learning. For instance, Närhi & al. (Ahtola, 2016, p. 205) summarise that partnership between school and the parents is always important and it is mandatory in supporting those children who require additional, individually targeted support. When adults are working together towards common targets, they can help the child to have a foundation where to develop their skills and learning towards the right direction (Ahtola, 2016, p.205). In the study made by Rintala and Nyqvist (2018, p.17), the writers likewise view teaching moving towards “kasvatuskumppanuus”, ‘partnership in bringing up/educating children’, which emphasize the linkage between school and home. Target for everybody is to support student’s growth and learning in the best possible way.

Parents, or other close adults, have a large role in supporting child’s learning. Parents can support child’s interests towards books, reading and writing skills and be an inspiration to the child. As Senechal and LeFevre (2002) conclude, if parents read stories to their children while they are at the age of decoding skills, this can predict “the acquisition of reading vocabulary and comprehension (p. 458). What is more, beside supporting child’s learning by reading and being involved with daily topics, the discussion is ongoing to evaluate whether family’s social status, parents’ education, welfare, and other similar aspects have any influence on child’s learning capabilities. Golinkoff et al. have questioned the implications of socioeconomic background of the family. (Golinkoff, Can, Soderstrom & Hirsch-Pasek, 2015, p. 343)

3.5. Child's personality

As discussed earlier, each person has unique learning style, personality and unique characteristics. According to Teglassi et al. (2004, p.15), learning is impacted by temperament, which defines how the individual can resist possible attractions, stay concentrated and how much effort is needed to handle the learned information. Especially the ability to self-regulate emotions is in key role, any problems in this area can reduce the learning capabilities as “emotions chronically leave the individual distracted by preoccupations, disinterested in the learning tasks, ineffective in responding to social surroundings, or frustrated in response to challenges” (Teglassi, Cohn & Meshbesh, 2004, p. 15).

Buonomo et al. (2017, 194) conclude that child's temperament has a key role in how he or she can cope with learning disability. Training children, for example on how they can regulate their emotional responses and how to appreciate their own resources might be helpful, as well as training parents in understanding how they can positively respond to their children's emotional challenges (Buonomo et al., 2017, p.201). For teachers, Buonomo et al. (2017, p.201) mention training that would help them to cope with the frustration of teaching children who are not learning as efficiently as others. In fact, many studies indicate that brains can adapt to responding differently to emotional situations, once people have been trained on emotional control and have adapted them (Banich & Compton, 2018, p. 385).

While temperament is understood to be important characteristic and to have an impact to learning, for example Keltinkangas-Järvinen (2016, p. 70-71) does not recommend setting up different learning groups based on temperament. Temperament's possible negative impacts to learning need to be understood, so that teachers can act to ensure individual differences would “disappear or at least be as small as possible” and support students in learning to work with different types of people (Keltinkangas-Järvinen, 2016, p.71).

3.5.1 Coping mechanisms

In addition to previously mentioned topics such as different learning styles, personality impacts the coping mechanisms a person is tempted to use while experiencing challenging events or emotions. They are an important element impacting the way child is handling for example the learning disabilities. While negative outcomes are easily connected to learning disabilities, it is the available coping mechanisms that make the difference on individual level and impact on the actual outcome towards adulthood (Firth, Greaves & Frydenberg, 2010, p. 42). According to Feldt and Mäkikangas

(2009, pp. 93-110), coping mechanisms are person's reactions and activity, how they they respond to the demands that rise from internal and external sources. When reviewing the factors behind coping mechanisms and behaviour related to strengths in different personalities, Vuori (2009, pp. 247-264) mentions three main themes: cognitive, management and motivational parts.

Available coping mechanisms may be partly determined by the personality, being related to the strategies the person has in use and how likely it is that these are successful (Gárriz, et. Al, 2014, p.96). Firth, Greaves and Frydenberg (2010) claim that passive coping mechanisms are a risk among students with learning disabilities, as they may manifest a "learned helplessness in the face of difficulty" (Firth, Greaves & Frydenberg, pp. 78-83). On the other hand, adaptive coping was identified as common characteristic with students who were successful despite their learning disabilities (Firth, Greaves & Frydenberg, 2010, pp. 78-83).

3.5.2 ADHD

When it comes to learning, lot of interest is nowadays being paid to children's ability focus and and concentrate in the schools. Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, is a developmental based disorder which makes the person in question to be inattentive, impulsive and hyperactive as compared to children of the same age. (Banich & Compton, 2018, p.474). According to Numminen and Sokka (2009, p. 99), attention deficit disorders are the most common neurological disorder among children and young adults, and it occurs in Finland among 3-5% of the population while a variety of symptoms occur among much larger group of people. The challenges related to attention deficit disorders can be evaluated for example through three dimensions; in behaviour, in learning and working style as well as in emotional level (Numminen & Sokka, 2009, p. 105) Banich & Compton (2018, p. 474) raise the concern, that there is high potential of over diagnosing ADHD symptoms as many of its characteristics are similar to common childhood behaviour.

Keltinkangas-Järvinen (2006, p. 177-178) question the over diagnosing of ADHD as well, indicating that changing the child's learning environment and using specific learning techniques, many seemingly ADHD symptoms can be reduced which therefore indicates the child's temperament is behind the behaviour. Actual neurological based conditions, such as ADHD, can only be altered via medication (Keltinkangas-Järvinen, 2006, p. 177-178). This is an interesting consideration for teachers and parents who are struggling with overactive children who are having difficulties to settle in school classes and teachers need to support them in succeeding in tasks that require ability to focus and work with others.

4. Questionnaire and interview results and findings

This section first sheds light on the purpose of the questionnaire and interviews as well as the recipients involved. After this, section will move on to analyze the survey and interviews responses.

4.1. Purpose of the research

The purpose of the survey and interviews was to collect feedback and observations from 1- 6 grade teachers about the research questions included in this thesis. Teachers are in key role in child's learning process, not just regarding the subjects they are teaching but also being there to support, inspire and challenge the children during the school year. Teachers as education professionals are also typically the first ones, beside the parents, to observe if something does not seem to be right in child's learning or to see that they are struggling. They are there to raise their concerns with parents and other support functions to ensure child receives the right type of support to succeed in studies.

As the subject of the thesis is related to first and foreign language learning from teachers' perspective, this research was limited to teachers' views. Full scope of the subject could be received by collecting feedback and the views also from children and parents and expanding the study to include them as well. Research study was decided to be conducted via electronic survey, as this was considered being best possible tool to reach teachers, allowing the anonymity of responses. Survey was planned from the beginning to include question to request teachers' contact details to expand the scope research to individual interviews as a next step have more dialogue with teachers.

4.2. Survey and recipients

Survey was prepared by using Oulu University's program, Webropol and created in a form that allowed recipients to reply anonymously and survey itself was prepared in Finnish language. Survey link was shared in two Facebook groups, one dedicated to 1-6 grade teachers and one that was dedicated for special education teachers. Additionally, the survey was sent directly to few schools to increase the number of responses. In total 10 answers were received to the survey. The timing of the survey was not ideal for conducting the survey, as April and May are hectic times in schools due to school year ending.

However, considering the overall subject, the gathered responses provided good overall coverage of teacher's views about early English learning, learning disabilities and the other subjects included in

the survey. Survey and interviews provided quite sufficient data to compare the results to the theoretical framework gathered in this thesis.

One of the questions was formulated in order to ask teachers to provide their contact details, in case they would be willing to participate in a more detailed interview. Survey itself did not track any user data, so therefore this specific question was added to reach the volunteers. After collecting and evaluating the survey responses, it was possible to conclude few additional questions to specify teachers' perceptions of these topics. Survey, interview questions and responses are presented in the following sections.

4.2.1 Background

Due to data privacy issues and ensuring respondents remained anonymous, survey did not intentionally ask detailed information about respondent's personal details. Only the details about the teacher's role and their teaching experience were requested to have an overview of the teachers' background.

As a summary, total 70 % of the teachers were working as classrooms teachers, 10% as subject teacher and 20% as special education teachers.

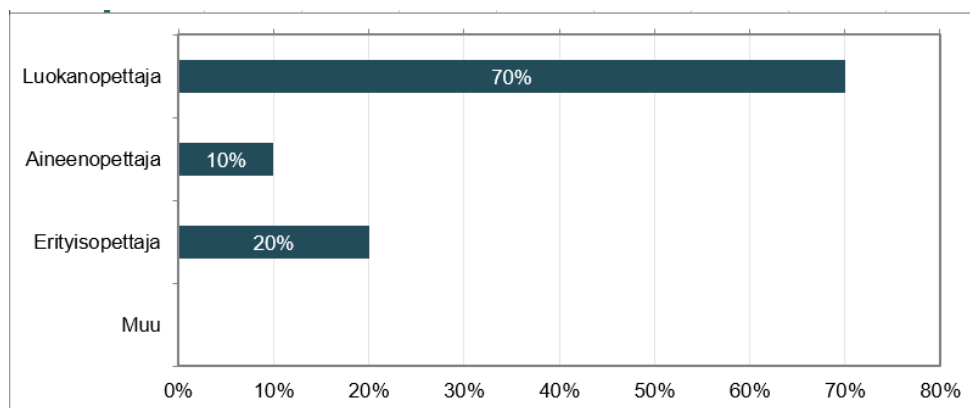


Figure 2. *Background*

4.2.1.1 *How long have you worked as a teacher?*

90% of the respondents mentioned having over 5 years experience working as a teacher, while 10% answered having 1-5 years experience.

Kuinka kauan olet työskennellyt opettajana?

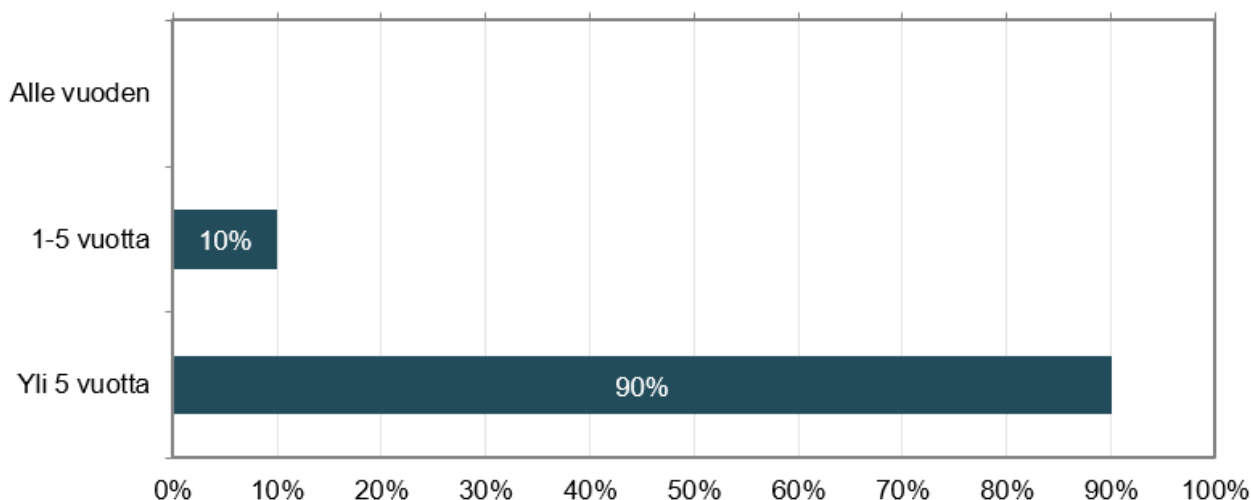


Figure 3. *How long have you worked as teacher?*

4.2.1.2 *Were English studies included in teacher's graduation studies?*

The role of teacher's language skills in early English teaching was one of the points reviewed in the theory analysis and some studies indicated to a requirement to have a fluency in the teaching language. For example, Bland (2015, p. 11) was among the opinion that studies do reflect fluency of the spoken language to succeed with the young learners. Nikolov (2009, p. 10) supported early language learning from the view that the exposure to the language at early age gives advantages, such as acquiring the different sound system in the foreign language.

The survey did not request teachers to evaluate the level and fluency of their English skills, but it did request teachers to share if their teacher graduation studies had included English studies. This topic would have been interesting to review in more detail, however, one additional question was added in the follow up interview regarding early English trainings to review this aspect further. As a response to this survey question, 70% of respondents said their teacher graduation studies had included English studies and 30% said their degree had not included English studies. Few teachers commented additionally the scope of English studies by saying such as *Mandatory studies*, *Public officer English* and *Studies included in Master of Arts (Education) degree*.

As the survey group included teachers with long teaching experience, it may well be that there are teachers whose graduation did not include English as it has not been a mandatory requirement. The information about missing English studies may well be due to the differences in the teachers' roles

as 70% of the survey group worked as classrooms teachers, 10% as subject teacher and 20% as special education teachers.

4.2.2 Early English classes

4.2.2.1 Organizing the 1st and 2nd grade English classes

Theory and available research about early English teaching indicated how there was a variety in the ways how teachers are planning their classes. Study made by Eskelinen and Tuupanen (2018, p.53) concluded how in some cases the materials and structured support was partially missing. Teachers certainly do plan their classes and learning curriculum for the students, however with the survey the aim was to review if there was a standardized structure existing for the early English classes. Therefore, teachers were asked to describe how the early English classes are planned in their school for the 1st and 2nd grade classes.

When analysing the 10 answers received, it was possible to see a variation in the responses. 50 % of responses mentioned they are following school, city or region Core Curriculum for Basic Education (“OPS” in Finnish) or annual clock guiding the early English class content. National Curriculum guides basic education in all Finnish schools, and all education institutions are expected to prepare local curriculum and be in charge for its development (Opetushallitus, 2014). Few teachers reflected this in their reply, commenting for example *I prepare [classes] myself according to curriculum (“OPS”), Regional OPS is being followed*. Teacher also added that *in city level we have annual clock which includes the key subjects. Teacher designs the classes based on it*.

40% of responses mentioned using additional materials for preparing the classes, these included early English books, materials from trainings etc.: *English teachers have been in early English trainings and they have prepared material based on the training*. Another teacher commented that *I am moving ahead also quite a lot according to the book series order* and third teacher referred using a combination of available materials: *We do not have our own plan/annual clock, but we follow region’s material. Also paid material banks available for 1st and 2nd grades*. 30% of the responses mentioned how the teacher has the freedom to plan the classes personally quite freely. One teacher commented for example that *Class teacher has quite free hands in small school Content is defined for example according to the time of the year, e.g., Christmas vocabulary during Christmas. I am moving ahead also quite a lot according to the book series order*.

Communicative nature of the classes was seen in answers such as, *School’s curriculum (“OPS”). Target is to keep the classes functional, participation, positive attitude and raising the language*

awareness. One of the teachers shared also information how the learning outcomes are evaluated in early English classes by writing: *Main focus is on communication. Topics are listed in OPS. Review process: “targets achieved/targets partially achieved” (“targets not achieved” is rarely used)*

4.2.2.2 *What type of materials teachers have?*

In addition to asking details on how the classes are organized, the survey included specific question to ask which type of early English teaching materials teachers have available. This was interesting as, for example Eskelinen and Tuupanen (2018, p. 53) had concluded that some teachers were missing structured support and materials to teach English in a standardised way in their school. Materials used will also provide an insight as to how largely the classes are focused on written materials, instead of the more communicative approach.

Teachers' responses indicated they have a variety of materials in use. Once reviewing the responses, conclusion was that 90% of the responses refer to materials that support functional learning and communicative approach, such as seen in answer: *Functional songs and playing*. 60 % of the answers indicated using publisher's digital materials, as well as variety of other tools, as seen in the commented provided: *High five digital learning material, notebooks, handouts, gymnasium, art crafts, sport equipment*. Another teacher said to be using: *Go-book and the related digital materials, different songs (Youtube), plays, coloring pictures, cards and games, Oxford-Owl*. and third teacher commented to be using another publisher's materials: *Jump in-digital learning materials + books to children*. One of these responses indicated also having webinar related materials available as well other additional regionally created early English learning materials: *Kohtaamisen Galleria-materials are used, as well regional and webinar materials provided*.

Teachers also reflected in their responses that they can or need to source the materials also by themselves, for example as seen in *Also search materials from websites. Exchange ideas with colleagues* and in, *Youtube videos are used a lot*. Only one of the 10 responses was missing reference to functionality and communicative approach, including only description of written material: *Only study book from school, small booklet that needs to cover both classes*. As a general view, it seems that teachers have a variety of materials in use and on the base of feedback provided to this question, teaching seems to be focusing on communicative methods and materials.

4.2.2.3 Is English learning on 1st and 2nd grade considered significant

In the theory section, early English learning was valued as important to young children's language development. This was the overall view, even though some debate existed, as to whether early learning really did have considerable benefits. Especially the ages before 5 to 7 had been identified to be important; language learning started at this age may result in obtaining same competence as native speaker (Banich & Compton, 2018, p. 467). Additionally, early language learning has been said to give an advantage especially in acquiring the different sound system (Nikolov, 2009, p. 10). However, not all are convinced that early English learning would provide significant benefits. Hahl et al. (2020, p.99) were on the opinion that same language skill level can be obtained also when starting the studies later.

With the survey, the aim was to review teachers' perceptions of whether they did consider early English learning to significant to children's language skill development. Conclusion from responses was that majority (78%) saw early English learning to be significant, while 22% did not consider it to be significant. Only 9 persons replied to this question, and therefore the percentages varied slightly compared to other questions. As this was a simple "yes", "no" or "cannot say" type of question, teachers were not asked to describe how and why they consider so.

Koetko englannin oppimisen 1. ja 2.luokilla merkittäväksi lasten kielitaitojen kehittymisen kannalta?

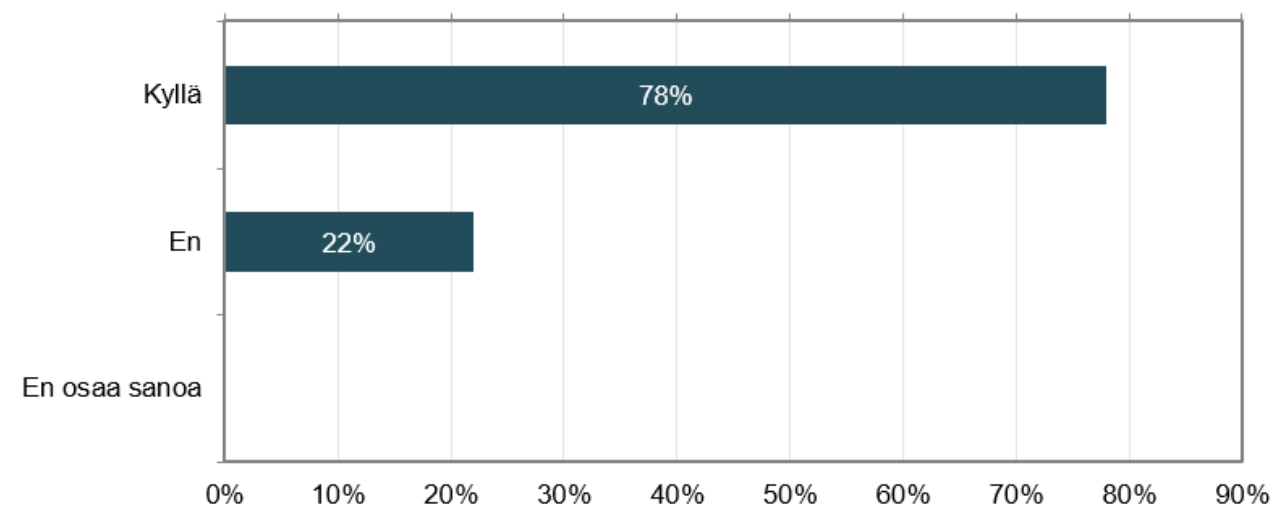


Figure 4. Is English learning on 1st and 2nd grade significant to the development of children's language skills

As the early English learning has just started in Spring 2020, teachers do not yet have long-term experience from the actual results of this change. However, the respondent group teachers had all long experience from teaching (90 % with over 5 years-experience), therefore it is very likely that their background gives ability to estimate the impacts realistically.

4.2.2.4 Possible benefits of early English learning

As the teachers are in close daily contact with their students, the survey approached to review their perceptions of possible benefits they can see children have once starting the early English learning on the 1st and 2nd grades.

Answers were reviewed firstly on the basis of how many saw benefits and which of them could be connected to the communicative and functional side of early English learning. By using this view, responses indicated that 90% of responses saw early English learning to have benefits linked with it. 80 % of the responses provided were linking the benefits especially to the communicative side of learning: *Children can take their time to learn speaking while they do not need to take pressure of writing. Kids like it a lot. Pronunciation learning was said to be easier as well: Practicing the pronunciation takes place via songs and poems. Children are very eager to learn new. Even a tiny language skill is eagerly used.*

Teachers also commented that learning is motivational, and children are eager to learn, they are enthusiastic and have courage to try learning. This is evident for example in the responses such as, *I have had 1st grade students. They are really motivated and active in trying to speak English and Vocabulary increases even by a surprise. Courage to speak increases once you play in English.* And another response highlighted additionally *Courage, enthusiasm, learning the right pronunciation.*

It was possible to conclude that 30% of the responses indicated specific benefits coming from the specific age of learning, using the comparison to the 3rd grade learning as an example. This was seen in *Increasing motivation, learning the words so that starting and learning is easier on the third grade. We also get the chance to play along with learning the language.* Similarly, another response highlighted *Awakening to language consciousness and multiculturality. Children do not yet have too many failures, so their confidence on themselves and their learning is stronger. At the third grade you are much more aware about making mistakes which may prevent someone from even trying.* A third teacher commented also how the language learning is simply easier at these grades: *They can more easily learn the target language.*

One of the responses indicated there would not be any significant benefits in early English learning which was commented to be linked to the amount of learning *No major benefits actually, they do learn the language but so little so that it does not make major difference.*

4.2.2.5 Possible disadvantages of early English learning

Beside the benefits, the survey asked the teachers to describe if they see any disadvantages to children about the early English learning. Firstly, 40 % of teachers indicated that they have not either observed any disadvantages related to the learning, left the the question unanswered or replied *Difficult to say.*

One thing rising from responses was that this added input to English seems to be reduced from other important studies: first language and mathematics, as well as from English on the third grade. *Study hours were taken away from the most important, so from the 1st grade they removed one hour of mathematics. From 2nd grade both mathematics and first language. English teaching is therefore weakening children's reading and writing skill development significantly.* The reference to third grade English studies was seen in *One English hour was removed from the third grade.*

Additionally, one person recommended that the early English teaching might be better to use in first language learning, in case child's reading capabilities are on low level, *When there are severe challenges in mother language and the reading capabilities are on the level of learning the letters, then early English takes child's energy. Better would be to use the class for learning first language. Student's memory gets overloaded from memorizing and learning foreign words while the child has full task to learn mother language words. Mother language does not support the foreign language learning, so child will not become bilingual but instead half-lingual.*

The above comment reflected another topic that was repeated in many of the responses: few responses reflected that early English learning was seen burdening to child's memory. 30% of the responses mentioned the challenges with memory, as well as the issues with disappointments. Such comments included *Memory gets overloaded, English learning is considered difficult* and additionally, *Disappointment to those students who cannot memorize words easily. I am supporting everyone in all games and tasks but certainly they require students to memorize few words.*

There was also additional response made that reflected how functional teaching may be challenging for the teacher if the class includes very active children. *In very lively class, a functional English is really hard to teach, if you are not even the own teacher for the class. I have this kind of situation; I teach to 1st grade once a week. Most of the children are very active and most of the time is used for*

raising and disciplining. At the first grade, some children have really hard time to focus, and they forget the use of English or they do not want to use it.

4.2.3 Learning disabilities

4.2.3.1 Do you work with students who have first language related learning disabilities?

Beside viewing the early English teaching and learning, the aim of the survey was to review topics related to language-based learning difficulties. Teachers were asked to reply if they work with students who have first language related learning disabilities. This result was clear, 100% of the respondents replied yes to this question, so being involved with learning disabilities is part of these teachers' daily work. One additional question for future research might include asking their estimation of which type of percentage of the students are experiencing challenges in learning.

Työskenteletkö oppilaiden kanssa, joilla on äidinkieleen liittyviä oppimis- ja hahmottamisvaikeuksia, kirjoittamisen ja lukemisen parissa? Jos vastasit kyllä, vastaathan myös seuraaviin kysymyksiin.

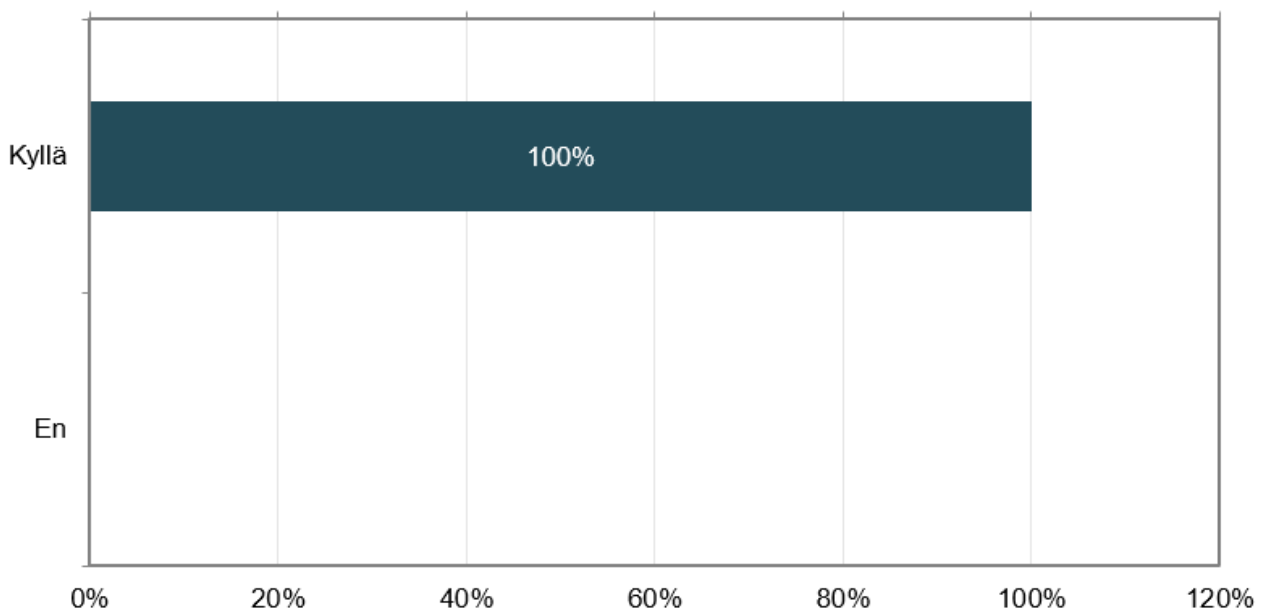


Figure 5. Do you work with students who have learning challenges in writing and reading?

4.2.3.2 *Supporting the learning process*

In order to look more closely the learning disabilities, survey included a question which asked teachers' perceptions on the type of support mechanisms they considered to be best for a child with language-based learning disabilities. As all the teachers in the group had experience in learning disabilities, all were also able to give their suggestions and ideas for the support mechanisms. In 50% of the answers the emphasis was on providing special education, enough adult support and having the teaching in smaller groups. These responses included for example, *Teaching simultaneously together with teacher and special education teacher. Small groups if necessary. Continuous support and Small group sizes, individual guidance. Special education. Games. Differentiating the teaching as per child's capabilities was referenced in 30% of the responses, such responses stated for example: Enough adults, using images as support, music and songs, right level of differentiation, giving time, dividing tasks, functionality. Another teacher commented to include Rehabilitating support in reading, downwardly differentiated texts. Third teacher saw the following support tools as important as well as the importance of first language, Concreteness. Pictures, games, songs and singing. Suitable demand level for the student, main focus in learning first language.*

Additionally, teachers were experiencing that repetition do support children in learning: *Repetition repetition repetition. In early English you go through the words in multiple ways, for example via pronunciation, writing, functionally playing. Also. another teacher responded in similar way, At least repetition, versatility and, as slow progress as is needed to support learning, songs and games as well as ensuring the main emphasis is in ensuring first language learning.*

4.2.3.3 *Is extra support or attention needed while starting early English learning?*

Survey questioned additionally whether extra support would be needed in early English, especially for those children who have language-based learning difficulties. Additionally, if they answered yes, the teachers were requested to describe what type of support this should be ideally.

Quite a few of the responses indicated that additional support may not be needed in the beginning of early English. One of the teachers commented by saying, *Not in early English, but on third grade yes* and another said, *Not necessarily in the beginning because it is learning the language via songs and games. The early English was considered to be easier learning format, as seen for example from the following response: Hard to say. I am always supporting if children feel the task is too difficult. In early English, I rarely have such classes, where such student would not be able to succeed. Early English has to be easy, fun and nice and vocabulary close to child's surroundings.*

However, one of the teachers raised the concern, that teachers need to make sure that such children feel they can keep up with the other students, and insisted that additional, more personal support is provide - *Yes, so that they can keep up with the other students and so that they do not feel that they cannot and won't learn. Additional support would be important for these children in the classes.* Another teacher commented also how differentiating the learning is important: *Yes. Demands based on child's abilities , enough support from adults, pictures as a support, more peaceful progress, and playfulness.*

Teacher's role is important indeed in ensuring the emotional support via encouragement and enthusiasm to all children. One teacher saw *Enthusiasm, versatility, helping the child to notice their own abilities* as important aspects and in another response simply stated that support is needed for all, not just the children with learning disabilities: *Encouragement and support to all.*

4.2.3.4 Do good first language skills result in good English skills?

Good first language skills have been said to predict good skills also in the second language (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2015, p. 330-331). Therefore, it was interesting to review teachers' perceptions of this topic. Survey requested teachers to answer if they see that good first language skills predict also good results in learning English.

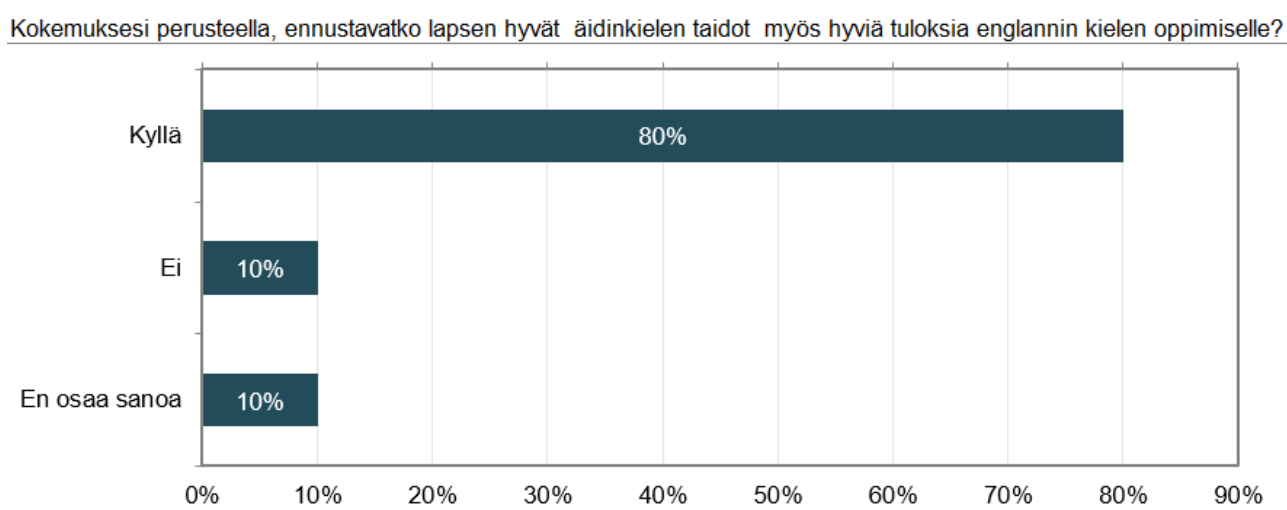


Figure 6 . *Based on your experience, do good first language skills predict also good results in English language learning?*

Based on the teachers' experience, 80% replied that children's good first language skills predict also good results in learning English. 10 % did not agree to this and 10% answered that they do not know.

4.2.3.5 Do teachers see any change needed in current learning environments?

Survey questioned if teachers were hoping to see any changes in school environment, in families' involvement or in other support mechanisms, which would therefore support better a child who is experiencing learning disabilities. This question received 7 responses, of which one indicated *Difficult to say*. Responses were rather clear: smaller classrooms, enough adults, peaceful learning environment would be needed: *Smaller classrooms would support the learning of all children, especially with those who have learning disabilities* and another response commented how, *Smaller teaching groups, Smaller classrooms, dividing classes helps always. Peaceful learning environment, enough adults, listening the parents*

As reflected also in theory, enough adults help to ease up the learning process as well as the co-operation with child's parents: *Support from adults important, special education teachers' support and co-operation with parents*. Theme was repeated also in other responses: *Especially enough adults would be important; this enables the quality of various support mechanisms. Open and clear guidance to parents who they can support their child for example in English homework*. Professional early education was highlighted in *Early education in the hands of professionals. Enough resources to early education*. Adults and parents are in core role in children's learning, and just as Ahtola (2016, p. 205) concluded, adults working together towards common targets, helps the child to have a foundation where to develop their skills and learning towards the right direction.

4.2.3.6 Possible changes in the quality or quantity of learning disabilities

Teachers who had several year's work experience (app. 5 years or more), were asked to reply if they had noticed any changes in children's learning disabilities, either in the quantity or quality. Only one of the persons stated that they had not seen any changes in learning disabilities through the years, and total 8 teachers provided feedback to this question. 90% of the answers confirmed that situation with learning disabilities has changed. As as one of the teachers simply stated, *Yes, they are increasing and getting more difficult* and another teacher added, *In a usual class you have more students who have challenges in learning or neurological problems*.

Two main themes were visible from the received answers: challenges in concentration as well as learning disabilities are indeed increasing. Teachers provided also some additional views they are seeing, such as *The challenges in concentration seem to be growing. Interest towards reading and writing is reducing. Playing and working with digital equipment seems to interest children.* One the teachers commented interestingly as well that, *Learning disabilities are recognized earlier and right type of support is available The need for the support has increased and during recent times, there [among students] is also desire for comfort. Voice books are required by parents as children do not want to read long texts.* As the responses highlight interest towards digital equipment increasing while concentration issues are increasing, you might consider if there is possible correlation between few of these aspects.

4.2.4 Personality and characteristics

Temperament impacts the learning process, as it defines how person stays concentrated and can resist attractions and, as well how much effort is needed to handle the learned information (Teglasi et al., 2004, p.15). This survey aimed to collect feedback on how teachers perceive personality and characteristics influencing children's capabilities in coping and handling learning disabilities. This was interesting section of the survey and could have been expanded to include additional questions which would have helped to dive deeper to the topic. For example, one of the teachers replied also that s/he could have provided much longer response to this, but due to time limitation, was only able to give a short answer. In total 8 responses were received for this question.

Indeed, all responses confirmed in one way or another, that personality and characteristics do have influence on how children are able to cope with learning disabilities. Few responses highlighted the role of strong emotions *Strong emotions around disappointment may be preventing learning* and another commented how *Characteristics and personality impact also how strongly child experiences challenges and how quickly they can overcome the emotion.* Personality's role was seen also in the response *Yes. Voluntariness ("Omaehtoisuus" in Finnish) prevents typically learning. Characteristics and personality impact also how strongly child experiences challenges and how quickly they can overcome the emotion.*

Strong emotions can also be linked to the different personality types, certain personalities are for example naturally more tuned to be extremely self-critical, which may increase the intensity of negative emotions. *Some children do not care, and they do not mind. There are just too many fun things to do in life. Conscientious instead feel anxiety about their challenges.*

As the teachers commented, perseverance is one positive characteristic that helps children to overcome their challenges, while some children are tuned to give up easily. This is sometimes said to be a characteristic especially for kids with learning disabilities, as they are more familiar to work harder than others. *Very often they are persistent as they have been forced to cope in topics that others may have not. Persistence is highlighted maybe in school, at home the might then lose their nerves is tasks are difficult. Persistent copes better than the one who gives up easily.* Positivity was also a characteristic being highlighted, indicating that it supports learning. *Yes. With positivity you can do more tasks. In my teaching I am always aiming at supporting the child.* Certain type of characteristics was seen also as benefitting child to share their struggles to teacher: *Braveness and vigor help in practicing so that problems are no kept secret.*

4.2.4.1 Additional information or important observations

When asked if respondents with to give any additional information or important observations, only one person replied how *children do play a lot nowadays and therefore expect immediate rewards.* Tendency to look for immediate reward may have quite negative impact to learning, as learning requires typically lot of repetition and rehearsing, and the progress and results are not always seen right away.

4.3. Individual interviews

Survey included a question where respondents were asked if they would like to volunteer in providing their contact details for a separate interview. 30% of the respondents provided their contact details, so therefore three teachers were interviewed separately. Interview took place in email exchange.

Following additional questions were provided to the teachers and how each of the three teachers responded.

4.3.1 Social background

One of the issues raised in analytical framework, was the importance or relevance of child's social background. This topic was raised as one of the questions in the individual interviews to see how the teachers viewed family's social background and the influence, if any, to how child's learning capabilities can develop and how the child is able to succeed in their studies.

First teacher's view to this question was quite clear, *I do see that social background is clearly visible. For example, in my area, there is high appreciation towards entrepreneurship, success without the wasted time in school.* Small students can also have rather strong attitudes towards school, “ *We are in Finland and we speak Finnish here! [comment made by first grade student]* However, on the other hand the support to early English comes through own experiences. One father commented that *It is great that you start on the first grade, I [the father] have wasted so many, even internal career possibilities because at my time, I did not understand the importance of studying.* Teacher continued, *I think in our town we have good resources to support children, however sometimes the child is not willing to take the support, or they may fear to be differentiated from the group.*

Second response followed similar lines as the previous answer. *From my view, child's school motivation and learning are impacted about how the parents see school in general. If the learning is perceived as important and parents are supporting the child, child's learning results are reflected positively.* Teacher added that *highly educated parents typically tend to react more positively towards learning.* Teacher continued that *Social status is not that clearly impacting learning directly, if the basic needs (food, clothes, cleanliness, at least one safe adult etc.) are in place.*

Third teacher's feedback highlighted the influence as well. *Social background has influence in learning capabilities. This can be seen for example in the way how family members are speaking to the child, if they are reading together or doing other activities such as observing the environment together, playing together, helping the child to identify different objects and situations. These all have significant impact.* Additionally, the respondent saw few additional key aspects that may limit parent's capabilities in supporting the child *If family has health issues or poverty, then possibly the mental capabilities are not adequate to spend the needed time with the child.*

All three responses were on the same opinion that family indeed has direct influence this learning process, especially through the attitudes the parents have towards school and education. Additionally, teachers indicated in the interviews that the positive attention and support parents are able to give to to the child, do indeed support also child's learning process in school. Also as indicated by one of the responses, health issues and poverty in the family, may limit parent's capabilities to support the child.

4.3.2 Co-operation between kindergarten and school

Second question asked the respondents to describe how they see the role of kindergarten in terms of children's learning. For example, do they view that the preschool system notices learning challenges well enough and is the information flow between kindergarten/preschool and school at good level?

First teacher responded to the question, *Preschool takes place in our school and communication/information flow is fluent. Special education teacher's support is available to preschool children also if needed. From kindergarten the communication is quite good as well, support is available with their own resources. I think nowadays they recognize learning challenges quite well in preschool*, commented the second teacher, and continued *They [preschool] address them as early as possible. Information is moving between preschool and teachers and school receives information about child's challenges and about the support tools which had been successful with the child. I see that communication between kindergarten and school is highly important.*

Third teacher commented that *Most certainly the difficulties are identified. Early education kindergarten teachers are strong professionals who recognize well any challenges in learning. During preschool, they do assessments with good coverage and they also have the three-step support system.* However, the person was not happy with the current communication between school and kindergarten. *No, I think the information does not flow enough to school. Parents can quite easily stop for example open information transfers if they choose so. Very often, learning challenges are addressed only during the preschool. Before the preschool, kindergarten groups can focus to different topics, one to sports and another one to art crafts.*

In overall, the teachers were quite united with their views as to see this co-operation is important and from their perspective were on the opinion that current situation is on the good level.

4.3.3 Awareness training about emotions and emotion skills

Third question tracked teachers' feedback on whether their school was providing children any additional support or training in about emotional awareness and, whether the teachers saw this as useful. Emotional awareness seemed to be a topic that the example schools are paying attention, and all teachers were able share example of their local practices. Emotional aspects were highlighted in the previous survey responses as well, and comments stated how emotions may set challenges to child's learning process; especially the strong disappointed emotions and if child is not able to overcome the emotion on their own.

First teacher replied *In our school we have emotional skills program that is led by our curator, and of course also classroom teachers use Yhteispeli as according to the training we have received.* Second teacher emphasized that teaching emotional skills is important and added *You have several ways how to do it [emotional skill training] for example KivaKoulu and Yhteispeli. We have these two programs in our school. Teacher can use both or just one of them, combine them or use something*

else they have identified to be a good tool. There is a high need in schools to recognize emotions and how to handle them. Similarly, the third teacher saw the emotional skills as important. At the moment, main topic in early education is the working with emotions, and in the schools, our town's welfare annual clock has one theme of that involves emotions and emotional skills. Person however admitted that Most certainly it depends on the teacher and the teaching group that how much they focus on the subject. This teacher provided also more detail about this individual's teaching style, I have handled these topics especially during the religion classes and always when certain theme rises that is good to discuss with the entire class. I do think we teachers could cover these topics more with our students.

4.3.4 Most important topic in learning

Teachers were asked, that if they could pick only one topic, what did they see as most important to help the children to get excited about learning? This is important question, especially considering that motivation and interest are in key role in the learning process. With this interview question, the aim was to see what kind of tools the teachers have and see most beneficial in teaching to children.

First response concluded *If teacher is enthusiastic about their subject, s/he can inspire the children as well to be enthusiastic. Also, when parents are interested about their child, it will have a positive impact. My students love signing and they get fully inspired when they have the possibility to sign English children's songs together.* Second teacher's view was *I have experiences that good practice to inspire children is that you "throw" yourself in with humor and enthusiasm. This is the way to typically inspire children too.* Third response followed the similar lines as earlier responses: *Teacher has such a highly important role in inspiring learning: encouragement and positive feedback always when it is needed. It has remarkably strong power.* Responses received were enforcing the earlier view that inspiring motivation and enthusiasm are important aspects in teacher's role to support children's learning.

4.3.5 Early English training

The last question asked if the teacher's school provided any special training on how to approach early English teaching with children who are experiencing challenges in first language. This question was added on the interviews to look more closely if there is country wide training available to all teachers, which would ensure the early English teaching is similarly across the schools.

First respondent mentioned, *I am trained both to early English and English teaching and working as a classroom teacher. I have been teaching English in primary school for several years. Our school participated in early language learning project that was led by Finnish National Agency for Education. This project had also resources for training the teachers. Our early English teachers have participated in all actively and we have also our own additional resource teacher, who beside being classroom teacher, is also an English subject teacher. If I have understood correctly, apparently as a result of this emphasis, early English studies are proceeding well also with the children who receive intensified support in first language. We have also special education teacher as a support. Our school is focusing on functional and communicate approach, pen&paper- work is brought only during late spring in the second grade. Additionally, we are not using reading or workbooks.*

The second teachers commented, *I have not heard that I in our town this kind of training available, however I think that those teachers who wish to train themselves in early English will seek to find such trainings by themselves.* Third response included *We haven't had such specified training, nor do the materials on the web sites support this. I personally feel that most important in early English is the waking up the motivation and interest. Even if the language skill would be really limited, we collect them [words and sentences]and create playful and active situation where all could have courage to use the language. And even if what is said is not fully correct, it does not matter, as long as they just pick up the courage to say something. During 1st and 2nd grade, I have not emphasized writing but instead the communicative skills.*

The comments received do tell that schools are possibly not in the same situation as per the training and resources they are provided to conduct the early English classes, however it is not clear if this is due to availability or by choice from the school or teacher's side. This does raise the question whether this could be improved and if training could be expanded to include all teachers and schools, especially as style and teaching methods are highly important in early English to ensure that also the low performing students can be equally have the same positive learning outcomes as more highly performing children.

4.3.6 Additional comments

One of teachers provided also additional information to the topic by describing the teaching experiences the person had had during this year. Person had been involved in teaching early English to both 1st and 2nd grade students and stated also additionally that neither of them was this person's own class. *The 2nd grade group worked like a dream; all were able to listen the instructions and*

there was no disruptive behavior during the classes. This enabled using a variety of functional plays and games and trying new things. The 1st grade group was however the total opposite. Same plays used for the 2nd grade group did not work at all. Group included several children who had challenges in concentration, listening guidance as well as handling their emotions. Classes were therefore tailored for this group; singing and simple games and plays to which each child could participate from their own seat.

Teacher concluded that one of the major issues impacting learning is the group in which the child is situated. For example, if good group atmosphere is lacking, it will prevent some children from using the language. Teacher also added This was highly disappointing to me personally as well.

5. Ethics related to data analysis

Research ethics are highly important when conducting surveys and collecting data from different individuals. The data gathering for this survey was created via Webropol, which is a technical survey solution that was available at Oulu University. Survey was created in a form which did not collect any personal data from respondents which would make them somehow identifiable when the survey results are presented. Survey did not track for example any data that would identify each response to specific school or locations.

Additionally, background information asked only relevant data to get the understanding about the length of the teacher's career or in which role they work as it can be considered to impact the responses. Survey was created in an open form, so anyone using the link was able to submit their answers, instead of sending the survey directly to individual email addresses.

The survey included a question that asked if any person was willing to participate in a short interview to discuss more about the topic. This question asked person to provide their contact details so that they could be contacted regarding the further questions. Interviews were conducted via email and each respondent was advised in the beginning about the research ethics and explained that all responses are treated confidentially and presented in form which would not reveal any data that would identify the responses. Additional comment was made, to explain that survey and interview data would be deleted once the thesis has been approved.

Few individual survey responses and interviews included detailed information that would have revealed geographic area or possibly the city of the respondents. This data was excluded from the published answers and responses were presented in more general format.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This thesis studied earlier English learning in Finland from the teacher perspective and evaluated the impacts to children who are experiencing language-based learning difficulties. Approach of this research was to review theoretical framework related to early language learning and teaching as well as learning disabilities, and additionally the potential influence of personality, characteristics and family's role in the learning process. Teachers' perceptions were gathered by conducting a survey and additional interviews to 1-6 grade teachers. Key idea was to review the theoretical framework in comparison with the survey and interview responses to identify similarities or conflicting results.

Early English teaching in Finland is an interesting phenomenon as it was implemented in schools in Spring 2020. Before this change, English teaching started officially in the 3rd grade. One of the core ideas behind early language learning is that when child has a contact with foreign language at an early age, it could ease for example the acquisition of the different sound system in the foreign language (Nikolov, 2009, p. 10). In the survey conducted for this thesis, 78% of the respondents indicated that early English learning is significant for developing children's language capabilities development.

Teachers in the study group indicated specifically that early English learning benefits children by increasing their motivation, awakening the language consciousness and multiculturalism. Young children were seen as very eager and enthusiastic to learn at this age; teachers commented children being brave to start using the language, how their vocabulary increases and they have the freedom of learning, as early English focuses on communication skills and not yet on writing skills.

Based on the previous research about early English teaching in Finland, there were observations indicating that the teaching is not yet standardized in Finland in terms of materials and resources (Eskelinen & Tuupanen, 2018, p. 53). To review this further, thesis aimed in finding answers to how early English teaching is organised in schools, what type of materials and resources teachers have available and if specific training is provided to teachers. As indicated by the survey and interview responses, the results related to teaching materials and early English class preparations seem to be aligned with previous research observations referred in this thesis. Standardised approach is possibly missing, which does raise the same question which Eskelinen and Tuupanen (2018, p. 53) had on whether the quality of teaching is sufficient and is teaching successful. To add to this, the question is not doubting the professionalism or commitment from the teachers' side, but to question if anyone is coordinating similar teaching approach and methods to all schools. At least the survey and interview

responses indicated to a certain point that early English teaching methods and materials are different in the schools and how few schools seemed to have more specific early English training available.

Especially in terms of children who are experiencing language-based learning difficulties, the key question would be: is the early English teaching truly focused appropriately to communicative skills and functional learning, or are some schools and teachers focused on using written materials and following literally for example book series in guiding the learning curriculum? The survey results do indicate that English *reading* takes place in some schools in 1st and 2nd grade, which is a challenge to a child who has not yet acquired the basics of first language reading and writing. One of the follow up interview responses indicated that the teacher was working in school where teachers had received special training on early English teaching and additional tutorials and that they had various support methods in place to help children with learning challenges. Response defined how the training and materials had provided good knowledge to the entire school and organisation, which is then carried out successfully to school classes. One interesting point from this response was that they are not using books or study books for the 1st and 2nd grade English, which might interest other schools as well.

As previous research indicated, for example Waber (2010) described how child with learning difficulties needs to use considerably more resources and focus on the subject they are learning, while for others the same process seems to happen quite automatically and easily. As an example, dyslexia is related to phonological deficit which impacts language learning, while being connected also to “auditory sequencing, working memory, auditory discrimination, organization skills, speed of information processing, limited attention span, and impairment in visual processing” (Cadierno & Eskildsen, 2015, p. 331). Survey results indicated that few teachers saw that early English learning can be considered to take too much energy from a child and their memory may get overloaded and possibly lead in some cases to disappointments as children are not able to memorise the words. Especially the children with language-based learning difficulties are in a very vulnerable position unless supported with appropriate methods. In this survey, teachers highlighted such support mechanisms to include teaching in smaller groups, ensuring enough adult resources and focusing on the functional and communicative style of learning, instead of reading and writing.

However, beside the few negative aspects, early English does indeed have benefits according to the teachers, and they made some comparisons to starting the English on the third grade. As the survey responses indicated, few teachers raised the comment that children in 1st and 2nd grade are more eager to try and learn new language as they do not fear mistakes, which are more familiar to children in the 3rd grade. This notion of mistakes was seen as an issue that may prevent children to

try learning. Also, for example Nikolov, (2009, p. 10) concluded that there are indications that early language learning may help reduce anxiety related to learning process among children and result in higher motivation as well as improve their cognitive development over the years. 1st and 2nd grade are the steppingstones for children to get acquainted with the school system, but 3rd grade is quite different with considerably more emphasis on reading and writing related tasks and new skills required in all subjects. Therefore, in light of some of teachers' responses, properly organised, functional and communication focused early English in 1st and 2nd grade might improve child's situation in the the third grade English requirements.

On the downside, adding early English to 1st and 2nd grade seemed to lead in reducing time from other important basic skills: first language and mathematics studies. Few teachers indicated seeing this as significant negative impact to learning, stating that if the first language skills do not develop properly it may then influence also to the the foreign language learning. Teacher has also a highly important role in children's learning process, being there to motivate and inspire children, as the teachers commented. This is even more important nowadays, as many of the teachers noted that the difficulties in the ability to focus and concentrate are increasing among school children, and few commented as well how learning disabilities are as well increasing and getting more difficult. Beside learning disabilities, also possibly a "desire for comfort" is increasing as commented by one of the teachers as well as other comments stated.

With all these challenges, it is even more important that teachers can inspires the children to learn. According to Järvillehto (2014, p. 64), teacher's most important task is enabling students to be excited about learning both as individuals and as a group. The ability to inspire does require also understanding of the different personalities and temperaments, as for example according to Teglassi et al. (2004, p.15), learning is impacted by temperament, it defines how the individual can resist possible attractions, stay concentrated and how much effort is needed to handle the learned information. In the follow up interviews included in this thesis, all respondents were agreeing to this approach, and highlighting how enthusiasm is a key driver in learning process. In the survey responses, persistence was mentioned as one of the personality traits which helps to overcome the challenges in learning. Additionally, the personality question of the survey revealed in the results how strong emotions and overcoming negative feelings can sometimes be problematic in learning. As according to follow up interview responses, emotional awareness was being taught in schools the teachers were working.

Family's involvement was one aspect that became apparent via theoretical review and viewing the survey responses and was therefore included as question for the follow up interviews. As Närhi & al.

(Ahtola, 2016, p. 205) summarised, partnership between school and the parents is mandatory in supporting those children who require additional, individually targeted support. Follow up interviews with teachers confirmed the idea how parents' views on importance of learning and the attention they provide to child does have and impact to children' learning process.

This thesis was an interesting overview to the subject and raised lot of further questions which would be interesting to review further. One of the aspects worth reviewing would be the possibilities to improve early English awareness and trainings so that all teachers would have access to such materials to ensure 1st and 2nd grade students receive teaching that is appropriate to their age and development stage. First language is the framework to which other linguistic capabilities are based. Each child should have the needed time and support to ensure learning the basics of writing and reading in their first language, and the right to have differentiated teaching and learning which is suitable for their capabilities. As commented by the teachers in the survey, early English learning is indeed a subject that brings lot of joy and fun to children's school days, especially when appropriate functional learning and encouragement to communicate are in use. This earlier language introduction, when properly conducted, could be considered to smoothen the language development process in the later grades also with those children with language-based learning disabilities.

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APPENDIX 1

SAATEKIRJE

Hei 1-6 luokan äidinkielen ja englannin opettaja!

Olen Outi Saarela ja olen kirjoittamassa graduani aiheesta varhennettu englanninkielen opetus ja sen vaikutukset lapsiin, joilla on kielellisiä oppimisvaikeuksia. Lähestyn aihetta kyselyn avulla opettajien näkökulmasta ja toivoisinkin, että ennättäisit vastata kyselyyn ja kertoa omia havaintojasi aiheesta.

Vastaaminen vie noin 10–15 minuuttia. Vastaukset käsitellään luottamuksellisesti GDPR-käytänteitä noudattaen ja poistetaan kun gradu on hyväksytty.

Kyselyn vastauksia käytetään osana opinnäytetyötä, joka toteutetaan Oulun yliopiston humanistisessa tiedekunnassa englannin kielen oppiaineessa. Lisätietoja saa tai kysymyksiä tutkimukseen liittyen voi lähettää osoitteeseen:

osaarela@student.oulu.fi tai puhelimitse 0400 237 975

Linkki kyselyyn:

<https://link.webpolsurveys.com/S/8DC5B9C4FA18FC02>

Kiitos vastauksista jo etukäteen!

Ystävällisin terveisin,

Outi Saarela

APPENDIX 2

KYSELYLOMAKE

Varhennettu englannin opetus - kysely opettajien havainnoista

Kevät 2021, Oulun Yliopisto, Humanistinen tiedekunta, Englannin kielen laitos

Outi Saarela

1. Taustasi

- Luokanopettaja
- Aineenopettaja
- Erityisopettaja
- Muu

2. Kuinka kauan olet työskennellyt opettajana?

- Alle vuoden
- 1-5 vuotta
- Yli 5 vuotta

3. Sisältääkö opettajantutkintosi englanninkielen opintoja?

4. Kuvaile miten 1. ja 2.luokkien englanninkielen tuntien opetuksen sisältö on suunniteltu koulussasi?

5. Kuvaile millaisia opettamismateriaaleja sinulla tai kollegoillasi on saatavilla 1. ja 2. luokkien englanninkielen opetusta varten?

6. Koetko englannin oppimisen 1. ja 2.luokilla merkittäväksi lasten kielitaitojen kehittymisen kannalta?

- Kyllä

- En
- En osaa sanoa

7. Millaisia mahdollisia hyötyjä olet havainnut 1.ja 2.luokan oppilaille varhennetusta englannin oppimisesta?

8. Millaisia mahdollisia haittoja olet havainnut 1.ja 2.luokan oppilaille varhennetusta englannin oppimisesta?

9. Työskenteletkö oppilaiden kanssa, joilla on äidinkieleen liittyviä oppimis- ja hahmottamisvaikeuksia, kirjoittamisen ja lukemisen parissa? Jos vastasit kyllä, vastaathan myös seuraaviin kysymyksiin (11-15).

- Kyllä
- En

10. Millaiset oppimisen tukikeinot auttavat mielestäsi parhaiten lasta, jolla on kielellisiä oppimisvaikeuksia?

11. Koetko, että kielellisiä oppimisvaikeuksia kokevat lapset tarvitsevat erityistä tukea tai huomiota englannin opiskelua aloitettaessa? Ja jos koet näin, millaista tuen tulisi mielestäsi olla?

12. Kokemuksesi perusteella, ennustavatko lapsen hyvät äidinkielen taidot myös hyviä tuloksia englannin kielen oppimiselle?

- Kyllä
- Ei
- En osaa sanoa

13. Toivoisitko jotain muutoksia esimerkiksi kouluympäristöön, perheen osallistamiseen tai tukitoimiin, millä mielestäsi autettaisiin parhaiten oppimisvaikeuksia kokevia lapsia?

14. Mikäli sinulla on jo useamman vuoden työkokemus (n. 5 vuotta tai enemmän), oletko vuosien varrella havainnut muutoksia lasten oppimisvaikeuksien määrässä tai laadussa?

16. Oletko havainnut onko lasten luonteenpiirteillä ja persoonallisuudella vaikutusta siihen, kuinka he itse kykenevät käsittelemään ja selviämään oppimisen haasteista? Jos olet, kuvailenko tarkemmin miten tämä näkyy kouluarjessa?

17. Haluaisitko antaa jotain lisätietoja tai tärkeitä huomioitasi aiheeseen liittyen?

18. Olisitko kiinnostunut osallistumaan lyhyeen haastatteluun aiheeseen liittyen, jotta voisimme keskustella tarkemmin kysymyksistä ja näkemyksistäsi? Jos olet, lähetätkö ohessa joko puhelinnumerosi tai sähköpostiosoitteesi, jotta voin ottaa sinuun yhteyttä. Kyselylomake ei kerää osallistujien tietoja joten en tavoita muutoin vastaajia. Kiitos!

