

**Breaking Language Barriers: Teachers' Strategies for Supporting
Immigrant Children with Limited Language Proficiency**

Lidia Andrés Bolado

Faculty for Education and Welfare Studies, Åbo Akademi University

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Supervisor: Annika Pastuhov

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Abstract

Abstract 1

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<p>In the multilingual world of today, many children from immigrant backgrounds are growing up learning multiple languages at once. However, for some, this can lead to linguistic challenges that affect their development. The increasing number of immigrant children in Finland makes it vital to increase awareness of language acquisition and support strategies among professionals in the field of education. This study explored how teachers in the early years and primary education in Finland comprehend and support immigrant children with language barriers, with a particular focus on their limited proficiency in their native languages. Data was collected from 10 participants working in kindergartens and schools in Finland through interviews, which were analyzed using thematic analysis. A phenomenological approach was used to interpret the subjective experiences of the teachers and understand to their methods. The study found that children with limited language skills faced communication barriers that affected their socialization, while teachers emphasized the importance of addressing these challenges and promoting strategies to improve children’s language and social skills. The study identified three interconnected themes: social, personal, and academic, with each theme having sub-themes related to language difficulties and teacher strategies. A holistic approach was needed to address language problems, considering social, personal, and academic situations. Scaffolding and the Cummins Model can help develop appropriate tasks for these children. Teachers should plan and set goals while considering children's abilities and needs. Cooperation is essential for effective support. The study suggests that in order to better support the educational outcomes of these children, significant changes need to be made in the Finnish education system, which would require additional resources for language education and professional development.</p>	
<p>Keywords: Language Acquisition, Limited Language Proficiency, Immigrant, Language barrier, Linguistic immersion</p>	

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1. Introduction

In today's increasingly multilingual world, children are learning multiple languages simultaneously already at an early stage. This is the case especially in families with immigrant backgrounds. Children from migrant families have to learn a different language in order to integrate into society and continue their lives while growing up and attending school. Languages play a vital part in everyone's lives, socially, academically, and emotionally. For some children, multilingualism can lead to linguistic challenges, in this thesis referred to as 'language barriers'. A language barrier occurs in a situation where people are unable to communicate linguistically due to speaking different languages (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021), which can lead to emotional stress and affecting a child's development, making their integration into the new country more difficult.

Immigrant children can be divided into two groups: 1) First-Generation Immigrants (FGI): children not born in Finland, and whose parents are foreigners, and 2) Second-Generation Immigrants (SGI): children born in Finland of foreign-born parents. FGI children face challenges in learning in an environment where they do not speak the language of instruction, while simultaneously learning the host language. SGI children may face challenges in acquiring and achieving the same level of proficiency in their mother tongue language as native speakers. Wang (2008) has explored some of the challenges faced by SGI in acquiring and maintaining their mother tongue language stressing factors such as limited exposure, reduced use, and language shift. Additionally, Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) discusses the challenges of mother tongue language maintenance, and how SGI children may struggle to achieve native-like proficiency in their parents' language. This thesis focuses on how teachers can support children who demonstrate limited proficiency in all of their respective languages.

At the beginning of 2011, more than 150 languages were used in Finland. At least 34 of them had more than 1000 speakers. In Finland, the education system remains monolingual, with Finnish and Swedish being separate languages of instruction. On the one hand, it is common that educational institutions frequently seek to immerse students in the dominant language, Finnish in this thesis. As a result, preparatory classes are offered for one year to train children with insufficient language skills before going to school. After that, the children barely have the skills to attain a school level. On the other hand, the Finnish system supports the development of the first language and the children who attend schools of the municipality have the right to access studies that support the development of their mother tongue (other than Finnish and Swedish).

During the last 10 years, the number of immigrant children has increased significantly in Finland, as observed in Table 1, Figure 1. Therefore, the probabilities of more immigrant children having limited language proficiency are quite high. Hence, it is vital to increase awareness of these language issues among professionals in the field of education. When children with limited language proficiency interact with professionals such as psychologists, special needs educators, speech therapists, and others, they might not receive appropriate support due to communication difficulties and language barriers. As a result, these children are often wrongly labelled as having learning disabilities, which highlights the importance of addressing language challenges in educational settings. It is important to discuss if teachers provide opportunities for children to learn and support them according to their development stage, and if the scaffolding provided is appropriate. This might not be possible for teachers to do on their own, so it would be useful to know if multilingual kindergartens and schools support these learning situations and the teachers, as well as other adults who participate in the education of the children. Latomaa and Suni (2011) believed that since the teachers are the ones exposed to school procedures on a regular basis, they may offer useful knowledge in addition to numbers and data. In their interface position between the educational organisation and the students, they can make observations about the attitudes and beliefs present at their workplace, as well as about the progress made by their students, and can then relate these to the language programs implemented there (p. 118).

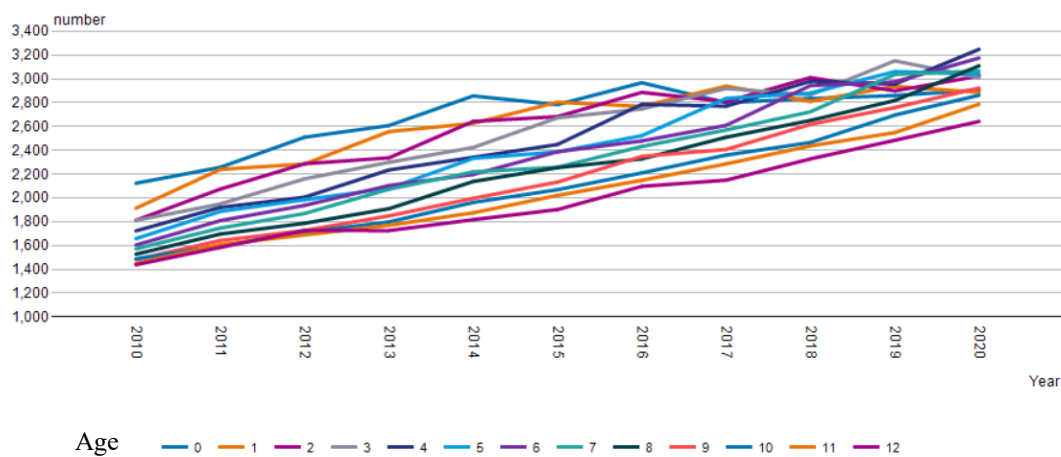
Table 1

Total foreign population in Finland between 0 and 12 years old

Table 1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
2010	2123	1913	1812	1811	1723	1658	1604	1572	1527	1483	1487	1449	1438
2011	2257	2240	2074	1949	1920	1886	1809	1746	1696	1642	1599	1608	1584
2012	2510	2285	2287	2160	2006	1985	1937	1869	1787	1726	1712	1689	1727
2013	2608	2557	2337	2299	2235	2080	2104	2073	1909	1849	1798	1770	1725
2014	2857	2627	2643	2424	2341	2332	2197	2219	2138	1997	1962	1875	1817
2015	2784	2804	2683	2673	2449	2387	2388	2258	2254	2133	2069	2921	1902
2016	2968	2769	2887	2748	2786	2523	2479	2432	2328	2349	2210	2148	2097
2017	2800	2940	2809	2920	2771	2837	2610	2571	2510	2407	2360	2286	2149
2018	2835	2811	3011	2866	2980	2881	2944	2724	2651	2618	2466	2437	2328
2019	2860	2938	2900	3152	2956	3062	2975	3038	2818	2759	2696	2549	2484
2020	2907	2887	3024	3010	3249	3041	3176	3067	3110	2924	2863	2788	2643

Figure 1

Total foreign population in Finland between 0 and 12 years old



The results of this research could be considered a great contribution to the field of education and society itself. This study will allow present and future generations of teachers to gain more knowledge, consequently facilitating the development of more effective strategies for addressing the language barrier issues. Furthermore, the findings of this research can provide helpful information for implementing necessary reforms in educational institutions, which can support teachers with additional resources, tools, protocols, and a better perception of the challenges FGI and SGI children face.

1.1. Aim and Research Questions

The research explores how teachers in the Finnish education system comprehend and support FGI or SGI children with language barriers, with a particular focus on their limited proficiency in their native language. This study will specifically concern teachers in early years and primary education in Finland. The aim of this thesis is to explore how teachers address the challenges of teaching children having limited language proficiency in their native language. Two research questions guide the study:

- How do teachers describe language problems?
- How do teachers support children with language problems in the classrooms (resources, tools, protocols...)?

The relevant theories of this research will be explored in more detail in the next chapter, which will help readers gain a solid understanding of the accepted ideas that serve as the guiding principles for this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical analysis

This chapter has been divided into several subsections, each including the three main authors (Krashen, Bruner and Cummins) whose theories are significant to the actual research.

2.1.1. *What is a native language?*

Different terms have been used to describe a person's first language or dialect, which they have been exposed to since birth (Bloomfield, 1933): first language, native tongue, mother tongue, or L1. The popular conceptions suggest that a mother tongue is the language one thinks in, counts in, dreams in, etc. This language develops the personal, social and cultural characteristics that make a child unique. Numerous authors have defined these terms (first language, native tongue, mother tongue, L1) and discussed whether they share the same meaning. Alan Davies (2003) even makes an attempt to differ dominant language from home language. Three of the terms he defines (first language, mother tongue and home language) are related with the tongue of the mother (biological or not), and in case of not being the mother, the father, grandparent, nurse, etc. "The first language a human being learns to speak is his native language; he is a native speaker of this language" (Bloomfield, 1933, p. 43). Chomsky (Paikeday, 1985) concluded that "everyone is a native speaker of the particular language states that the person has 'grown' in their mind/brain" (p. 58). Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) comments that "the language one uses most may be a different one at different stages in one's life". Depending on the criteria used, the definition of a person's mother tongue may also vary, even within a single moment (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981). What is questionable is which language would be the native language for numerous children whose home language is different from the language of their environment, hence, the importance of this research. Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) explains that defining a mother tongue is important as it contributes to the preservation of identity, cognitive development, educational achievement and social inclusion.

All terms mentioned previously are related to language. However, it would be convenient to point out the difference between language learning and language acquisition, in order to discuss how to support limited language proficiency children to develop language and communication skills.

2.1.2. *Difference between learning and acquiring a language*

Language acquisition is a subconscious process where the language is assimilated implicitly through meaningful interactions, whereas language learning requires formal

teaching by a conscious and explicit process. Language acquisition is related to the mother tongue, as it is frequently the first language children learn and the language that they are most exposed to during their early years of development. On the contrary, language learning is related to L2 or second language learning. Krashen and Terrel (1988) explain that language learning is a conscious and explicit process (p. 26-27) that involves "knowledge about language," "rules," or "grammar" as well as conscious practice and memory. Krashen believes that acquisition and learning are completely different processes, that learning cannot become acquisition, and that "no interface" exists.

According to Krashen (Schütz citing Krashen, 1981), the 'acquired system' and the 'learned system' are two separate systems for foreign language performance. The 'acquired system' is the result of a subconscious process similar to how children learn their L1. It is essential for the children themselves a meaningful interaction in the intended language - natural communication – where the focus is on the communication rather than the form of the children's utterances. The 'learned system' is a conscious process that results in conscious knowledge about the language, such as grammar rules, as a result of formal teaching.

“Language acquisition ‘begins’ before the child utters his first lexicogrammatical speech. It begins when mother and infant create a predictable format of interaction that can serve as a microcosm for communicating and for constituting a shared reality” (Bruner, 1978, p.31). Bruner contributed to Vygostky's theory by emphasizing that children acquired a language due to the interaction between them and their care-givers. Among Bruner's arguments we find that many of the children's activities are particularly social and communicative (1983, p. 27) and also, that the non-verbal interaction between the adult and child lays the foundation for verbal communication. While this theory notes the interaction with adults as a significant role, Chomsky believed that language is innate and that we have the ability to learn a language without the influence of the environment. However, despite the disagreements among scholars, Mehrpour and Forutan (2015) found in their research a hypothesis which proposes that language acquisition may be influenced by common cognitive capacities and the interaction between children and their surrounding communities. Overall, theories could possibly complement each other instead of favouring one over the others.

Bruner (1978) believed that for learning to take place, appropriate social interactional frameworks must be provided. However, according to a study of Kinzler et al. (2007), they show that, from an early age, human beings have a social preference for people with same native language group over members of a foreign language group (p. 12579). It raises a

question on how it would be for children with limited language proficiency, if the social interactions are barely happening because of race or language preferences.

According to Cummins (2000), learning a language refers to the conscious process of acquiring language skills through formal instruction, while acquiring a language refers to the more natural, subconscious process of acquiring language skills through social interaction and immersion in a language-rich environment. Cummins (2008) distinguishes between two types of language proficiency in language acquisition: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS refers to the everyday language skills that are acquired through social interaction, whilst CALP refers to more advanced language skills that are required for academic and cognitive tasks, such as reading and writing in a particular subject area. Cummins (2008) suggests that BICS can be acquired relatively quickly through a language-rich environment, while CALP requires more formal instruction and practice. However, it is important to develop both BICS and CALP in order to achieve full proficiency in a language.

There are many theories about how we acquire our first language, and all of them have their limitations and criticisms. Nor & Rashid conclude in their paper that “there is no one solid linguistic theory which can provide the ultimate explanation of L1 acquisition and L2 learning as there are many interrelated factors that influence the success of language acquisition or language learning”.

2.1.3. When is it L1 and when L2?

L1 involves all terms yet mentioned: mother tongue, first language, home language, native language. L2 means second language, referring to a language that is learned after the first – not that it is inferior in any way, just that it comes after the first in terms of learning time (Stern, 1983). Although, it is already established the meaning of L1, there might be situations where a person has limited proficiency in the first language acquired in early years and they start to use a second language learned, L2, as a first language. Stern (1983) suggests that then we must draw a distinction between L1 as a "first language acquired in early childhood" and L1 as a "dominant or preferred language." If one is aware of the ambiguity, the context usually clarifies the distinction.

2.1.4. Can you be native in a L2?

According to Krashen (1981), acquisition, which is the foundation for all L1 knowledge, is composed of a set of norms and values that are hidden away from the conscious awareness, so students who are taught in a formal, form-oriented manner learn the language but never fully acquire it. If a native speaker is a person who has a mother tongue, or a first language

acquired as a child, it is impossible to become a native speaker of a different language later (as an adult, for example), but allowing someone who may have multiple mother tongues and thus be a native speaker of multiple languages. White and Genesee (1996) compared the results of three groups (near-native English speakers, non-native English speakers, and controls) on two tasks designed to tap aspects of UG that have been claimed to be subject to critical period effects. On either task, they found no significant differences between the near-native group and native speakers, and they conclude that even older L2 learners can achieve native-like competence in a second language. So, it is possible, however, to achieve native speaker fluency in a language that is not one's mother tongue, and this is how linguistics describes the highest level of skill in a language.

Bruner (1983) argues that the ability to learn language is supported by the concept of scaffolding. Scaffolding is the process of guiding and supporting children while they acquire a new skill. It helps the children to build confidence and competency as they learn new abilities by breaking a complicated process down into smaller, more manageable steps. "Scaffolding refers to the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring" (Bruner, 1978, p. 19). Teachers use scaffolding as a way to support children's learning of language. It helps a child move from simple language to more complicated language and it can be an effective method for supporting language acquisition. The process of scaffolding can enable children to develop their language skills at their own pace. Bruner (1986) expands upon his theories of language acquisition and scaffolding suggesting that language learning is a complex and dynamic process that requires social interaction and support. This support can help the child gradually move towards larger independence and proficiency in the language. "The study of second language acquisition in children provides some of the most impressive examples of how much can be accomplished when one has access to a full range of learning strategies and is exposed to the target language in a communicative context" (Bruner, 1983, p. 135).

The common underlying proficiency (CUP) model of Cummins (1981) shows that children acquire academic knowledge and skills in their first language, but they also acquire language-independent information about those skills, that can be applied when learning a second language. Cummins (2000) has argued that it is possible to become a "native-like" speaker of L2, but this does not necessarily mean that a person has achieved the same level of proficiency in their L2 as they have in their L1. For example, it is possible for a person to develop native-like proficiency in BICS, but in CALP is more challenging and may require more formal instruction and practice.

2.1.5. How is conditioning L1 to L2?

Krashen emphasizes the role of input and the natural order of language acquisition. According to Krashen's theory of language acquisition (1982), the Natural Order Hypothesis explains that learners acquire parts of language in a predictable order. For any language, specific grammatical structures are acquired early, while others are acquired later in the process. This hypothesis suggests that this natural order of acquisition happens independently of deliberate teaching, and therefore, teachers cannot change the order of a grammatical teaching sequence.

“First language influence may thus be an indicator of low acquisition, or the result of the performer attempting to produce before having acquired enough of the target language. It is, not surprisingly, found most often in foreign language, as opposed to second language situations, where opportunities for real communication are fewer, and is only rarely seen in "natural" child second language acquisition” (Krashen, 1981, p. 8). Krashen explains that first language influence is more common in foreign language situations where opportunities for real communication are fewer, and it may indicate low acquisition or a lack of sufficient exposure to the target language. But Krashen extends his argument by proposing that first language influence is unnatural and that it is possible to produce sentences in a second language without any acquisition by using the surface structure of the first language and inserting second language content. This approach to second language production, however, is unlikely to result in native-like proficiency and is not an effective way to acquire a second language (Krashen, 1981, p. 68).

Bruner's theoretical framework is labelled as "constructivist" because it emphasizes the role of the learner in constructing knowledge. According to Bruner (1960), learning is an active process in which learners build new ideas or concepts based on existing knowledge, and they can use to make connections and build more complex ideas and concepts. When learning L2, learners build on their existing knowledge of language, which includes L1 and any other languages they may know. This existing knowledge can influence how learners approach the process of learning L2. For example, learners who have a strong foundation in their L1 may find it easier to recognize patterns and structures in the L2. At the same time, learning L2 can help learners become more aware of the grammar and structure of language. For example, a learner who is studying English as L2 may become more aware of the grammar and syntax of their L1 when comparing both. The relationship between L1 and L2 is complex and can be influenced by a large variety of individual, social, and cultural factors. However, the constructivist approach to learning (of which Bruner is a part) emphasizes the

active role of the learner in constructing knowledge and emphasizes the significance of providing learners with meaningful experiences in the L2 in order to ease the process of second language acquisition.

Cummins (2001) stated that “the level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development”. Children who have a firm foundation in their native language arrive to school with better reading skills in the school language. When parents and other caregivers (such as grandparents) spend time with their children, telling stories or discussing issues with them in a way that strengthens their mother tongue vocabulary and concepts, children arrive to school very ready to learn the school language and perform academically. Children's knowledge and skills transfer from the mother tongue they learnt at home to the language they learn at school (Cummings, 2001, p. 16-17). Accordingly, there is no denying that having a mother tongue facilitates the learning of other languages regarding understanding and abilities.

However, countless times families/caregivers want to support the second language by using it at home when they are not native or fluent in that second language, and at the early stages of the child, who is also acquiring the first language (L1). When parents with low levels of proficiency use the language of the surrounding society at home, the language development of their children is not optimally supported (Gathercole & Hoff, 2007; Hammer et al., 2009). Lemhöfer et al. (2008) said that “although influences across languages exist, word recognition in L2 by proficient bilinguals is primarily determined by within-language factors, whereas cross-language effects appear to be limited. An additional comparison of the bilingual data with a native control group showed that there are subtle but significant differences between L1 and L2 processing”. If L1 is acquired and L2 is learned, the significant differences would lie in the way how is processed: L1 in a natural way focusing in the communication and L2 in an instructed way focusing in the rules and norms of the language. For bilingual people, those who have linguistic competence in two or more languages seem natural and easier to find relationships among various factors between L1 and L2. For example, a native Spanish speaker fluent in English would try to find relationships between these two languages when learning it.

2.2. Background research

Language attrition refers to the process of losing or declining proficiency in a native or first language, whilst limited language proficiency indicates a situation in which a person has never completely acquired a language to begin with. Although language attrition could be

considered a related area of research, this review will not include a discussion of this phenomenon. The reason is due to the challenge of identifying if children had acquired their native language and later experienced language attrition, or had never fully acquired it in the first place. If a person only had basic exposure to a language and did not fully acquire it during their developmental years, they possibly struggle with grammar and vocabulary among many other aspects. In this case, it may be more appropriate to speak of limited language proficiency instead of language attrition. This review will focus on other relevant areas related to multilingual children in Finland, as further investigation is needed into the factors that contribute to language attrition in young children.

Children with limited language proficiency face unique challenges in their academic, personal and social lives. Limited language proficiency can negatively impact children's learning, as language plays a crucial role in the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding. Limited language proficiency may also lead to social isolation and lower self-esteem among children, as communication difficulties can create barriers to building positive relationships with peers and adults.

Various factors may contribute to limited language proficiency. “Segmented assimilation theory expects biculturalism and bilingualism to be a major advantage for children of immigrants. This is particularly true for children of immigrants whose parents have low levels of human capital (who may not learn the new language quickly themselves) but who are surrounded by a relatively large co-ethnic group” (Kilpi-Jakonen & Alisaari, 2021). Children who come from families with limited resources or who have experienced trauma may be at a greater risk for limited language proficiency. Additionally, popular knowledge is that children who are learning a second language may struggle with limited language proficiency in both their native and second languages. However, “the evidence that exists supports Kohnert’s view that bilingualism adds no further cost to children’s achievement regardless of their initial levels of language and cognitive ability” (Bialystok, 2018).

Finland is a bilingual country (Finnish-Swedish) that has been increasing its immigrant population over the last 20 years. Considering the information obtained from the Official Statistics of Finland, in 2001, the percentage of foreign residents in Finland was 1.89%. 10 years later, in 2011, it increased to 3.39% (it almost doubled it). Finland is facing a significant challenge in dealing with multiculturalism, as the percentage increased to 5.34% in 2021. “Finland’s approach to multicultural education is far from the social justice for all focus of the critical multicultural education approach” (Holm & Londen, 2010). It is important for kindergartens and schools to consider not only language, but multiple diverse cultures,

because besides the confirmed numbers of foreign-born citizens, the SGI children have to be taken in consideration. In Finland, “teachers are not only encouraged but required to consider the diverse identities and backgrounds of learners when designing lessons and methods” (Alisaari et al., 2022). Teachers need to consider the child as a whole, and that the child might have a different background and beliefs, different values and skills that make the child unique, and this holistic approach is part of the Finnish National Core Curriculum (Early Childhood Education and Care 2018, Pre-Primary Education 2014, Basic Education 2014). The curriculum encourages students to learn how to live together in a multicultural society that respects human rights, to understand one's own culture as well as Finland's other major cultures, and to comprehend the many different aspects of cultural identity. In order for all groups to successfully integrate into Finnish society, these factors are critical for both the majority population and minority groups (Holm & Londen, 2010).

Language and communication is a very important part of the child's development and growth and speaking the language might help in many cases, although still there are cases and cases of segregation among Finnish people and foreigners. Hummelstedt et al. (2021), presented in their study a Finnish teacher who mentioned that “the most evident group divisions used in school were class divisions into A and B groups, based on Finnish as a first language or Finnish as a second language” (p. 154). It leaves certain doubts about how well integrated the group B is (Finnish as second language), which also matches the criteria of this research, as in the mentioned research “Finns here, refugees there” there is already a clear segregation. Creating a multicultural environment in the schools can unequivocally help the transition from segregation to inclusion and it helps to change “that mentality of seeing the immigrants as ‘the others’” (Holm & Londen, 2010, as cited in Sinkkonen & Kyttälä, 2014).

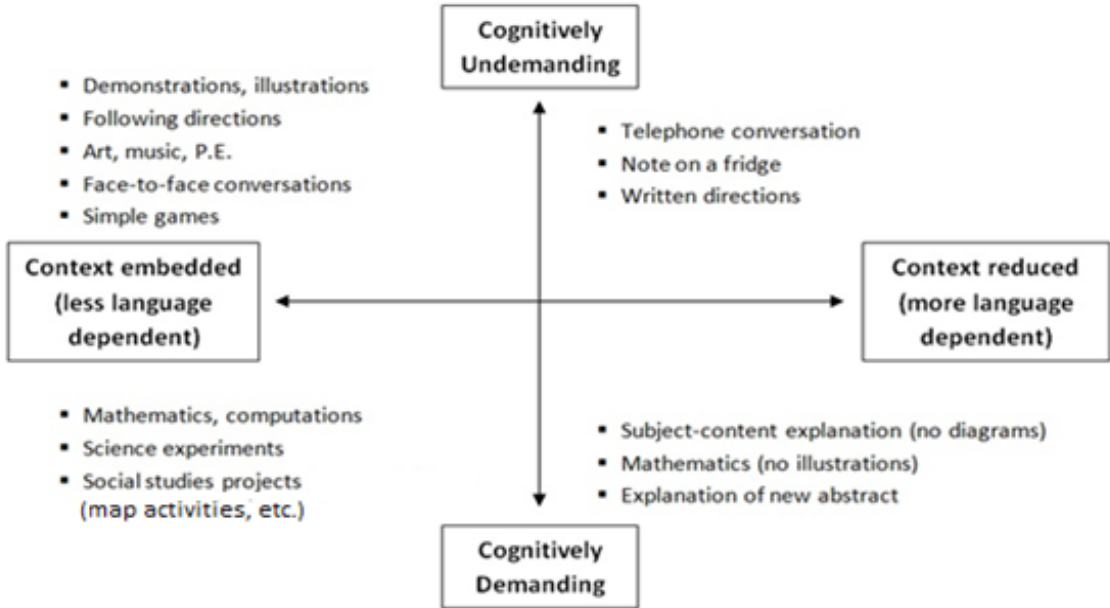
It is very common to ask teachers about their needs and wishes regarding their profession in the field from formal to non-formal education. Regarding multilingualism, Sinkkonen and Kyttälä (2014) presented in their paper the results of experiences of Finnish teachers working with immigrant students. The findings suggest that, besides proper linguistic assistance, fluent co-teaching and co-planning in schools, using school assistants' working time and abilities in varied and creative ways has proven to be successful for multicultural children's learning and social integration. It would be beneficial to add useful guidance and education in multidiversity as part of training of teachers. “Teachers who had 2-5 years of experience showed a better knowledge of language learning. The indication seems to be that current teacher education in Finland addresses issues related to language learning more than earlier programs did, thus newly graduated teachers are more knowledgeable in this

area” (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2020). It is possible that there are many experienced teachers that might lack an understanding of working in a multicultural environment (as there was not much immigration before). This fact could lead to segregation, demotivation, school absence, etc. Teachers may benefit from professional development on strategies for supporting multilingual children (including those with limited language proficiency). In line with this and based on the results of their study, Alisaari and Heikkola (2020) recommended professional development regarding language learning aimed for teachers who have been in the career for several years.

As teachers play a critical role in supporting children with limited language proficiency, it is essential for them to comprehend the significant impact language has on learning, and to be aware of the particular language associated with their teaching. This understanding allows teachers to design and implement effective teaching strategies that provide the necessary support for all students. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014). In this regard, Cummins (1984) introduced his framework for different types of language activities and it is proved to be helpful in identifying and developing appropriate tasks for bilingual children. For example, teachers might start with contextualized tasks and practical activities that are of low cognitive demand, such as naming items or a simple matching exercise. More proficient children would require contextual support, but would need more cognitively demanding tasks. For example, a child who performs well in one quadrant but struggles in another quadrant may need additional support to develop certain skills. Teachers may categorize activities as more or less language-dependent, as well as more or less cognitively demanding (Fig. 2). To support all children, teachers can include activities and interactive methods that are less language-dependent and less cognitively demanding, while still engaging and enjoyable for the students. In the same line, activities should be appropriately challenging for children. If a task is too easy, they may not develop their skills to their full capacity. However, if a task is too difficult, they may become frustrated and unmotivated.

Figure 2

Examples of activities by Cummins’ Framework of Cognitive Processing Demand and Language Proficiency



Numerous researchers (Alisaari & Heikkola, 2020, 2022; Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020; Repo et al., 2021; Vigren et al., 2022) have explored how Finnish language learners are understood and supported by Finnish teachers. Heikkola et al. (2022) found in their study that most Finnish teachers demonstrate a degree of linguistic responsiveness by frequently using “visual cues, giving both oral and written instructions, and putting directions on the blackboard or paper”. However, to further accelerate the learning of second-language students, teachers should implement more specific linguistically responsive practices, such as giving explicit attention to language, scaffolding learning linguistically and culturally, creating opportunities to interact with native Finnish speakers, and utilizing students' first languages as a resource for learning. These practices are encouraged by both the current core curricula and previous research, and can be effective in supporting the language development of multilingual learners. Vigren et al. (2022) reports that the teachers in their research were uncertain about the benefits of using their students' first languages in the classroom, and this conflicted with the approach presented in the current curricula in Finland, which considers all languages as valuable resources for learning. Both studies suggest that the use of students' first languages can be a valuable resource for language learning in multilingual classrooms in Finland. However, many Finnish teachers do not use it at all or use it infrequently in their classrooms. Additionally, even though the study conducted by Repo et al. (2021) suggests that

multilingualism can be a resource for learning, and that promoting linguistic diversity in the classroom can enhance students' language skills and problem-solving abilities; Harju-Autti and Sinkkonen (2020) states the difficulties on managing multilingual classrooms due to lack of resources and time, among other things. “One teacher in a group of 25 students with several different mother tongues and different kinds of previous school histories provides a challenging environment for both learning and teaching, and scaffolding every student is both time-taking and burdensome” (Harju-Autti & Sinkkonen, 2020).

This chapter explores the topic of language proficiency and highlights the importance of creating a supportive environment for language learning and acquisition. It emphasizes the impact of social interactions and the need for teachers to consider the diverse backgrounds of learners. While the theoretical background provides a general overview of language acquisition and learning, the background research focuses specifically on multilingualism practices in Finland. There is a need for a multicultural approach to language learning and acquisition and it this should be incorporated into teacher training to better support learners from diverse backgrounds.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Method and Approach

The present research is qualitative, concerned in exploring phenomena and understanding the data acquired and focusing on the different perspectives and experiences of the teachers. Based on these insights and experiences, the research is mainly subjective, as the teachers gave their input and share their own ideas and practices. Furthermore, they are familiar with the children's mother tongues mainly from the knowledge and assessment of their parents. Through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world , including the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work and the significance of the meanings that they generate (Mason, 2002).

This study involves exploring and interpreting the actions, behaviours and approaches used by teachers to support immigrant children with limited language proficiency. The phenomenological approach in this research involves an understanding of the subjective experiences and points of view of teachers, and interpreting their methods regarding the specific theme under research. Moreover, the aim of exploring the challenges faced by FGI and SGI children with limited language proficiency is to discover the implications of language barriers for both teachers and students.

“Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks, ‘What is this or that kind of experience like?’ It differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it” (van Manen, 2001). Van Manen (2001) stated that this approach “offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world”. Therefore, an interpretative phenomenological approach is considered the most appropriate for this research. The key is to realize the importance of viewing the phenomena as part of a larger context; it is impossible to analyze this phenomenon without developing a comprehensive perspective of the experience to which it is connected (Fuster, 2019).

3.2. Participants and Research Context

The research commenced with two children from families with one or more mother tongues who had also acquired one or more additional languages in their education. For more information on the languages, see Table 2. In these cases, families reported that the children were barely or not speaking the home languages. The children were between 4-6 years old. They had a language barrier in all aspects, so daily communication with peers and teachers became challenging and raised concerns among professionals and parents. The concept information on these cases was shared anonymously with a colleague working in a Finnish school in Helsinki. It was concluded that more children were in the same situation, mainly in primary and secondary Education.

Data was collected from 10 participants. The participants were teachers working in kindergartens and schools in Finland. For more information on the participants, see Table 3. They work in several Finnish, English and bilingual kindergartens in Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa; and two primary schools, one Swedish-speaking from Vaasa and the other Finnish speaking, with a bilingual program in Helsinki. Kindergartens and schools are natural settings and institutions where formal education is delivered; they are organized and follow the National Curriculum.

Table 2
Example of Children in Different Language Situations

Children	Languages at home	Languages at the daycare
Children A	Arabic	Finnish English
Children B	Punjabi Kosovo	Finnish English

Table 2

Table 3

Participants' Information

Participants	Position	Place	Years of experience
Teacher 1	Teacher	Kindergarten	18
Teacher 2	Teacher	Kindergarten	2
Teacher 3	Teacher	Primary school	7
Teacher 4	Teacher	Kindergarten	7
Teacher 5	Special needs teacher	Primary and Secondary School	11
Teacher 6	Teacher	Primary school	35.5
Teacher 7	Teacher	Kindergarten	5
Teacher 8	Teacher	Primary school	36
Teacher 9	Teacher / manager	Kindergarten	12
Teacher 10	Teacher / Manager	Kindergarten and Primary school	16

Table 3

Several forms of communication were used to reach potential participants: posting in a relevant social media group, sending an email and message and asking orally. In all cases, a summary of the research was sent to recruit participants who match the criteria for participation regardless of gender, age, nationality or years of experience. Some participants requested the interview questions (Appendix A) beforehand to facilitate a better understanding of the study and to provide a feeling of “calmness”, as for most participants, English is not their native language. The interviews not only gathered data for the study but also encouraged the participants to reflect on their actions and how these affect the children. The participants gave an inside view, discussed on their methods about helping the children with limited language proficiency, and shared their experiences.

3.3.Data collection

Interviews were used to collect the data to investigate the individual participants' perspectives, experiences, beliefs, and motives. The interviews mainly consisted of ten general, semi-structured, individual, open-ended and non-directional questions (Appendix A). The questions were translated into Finnish and Spanish. The interviews lasted 15 to 45 minutes, depending on how much each teacher wanted to extend on each question. All the interviews were conducted in English, besides one that was done in Spanish. The location where the interviews were held was primarily online and via email-, except for three that took place in one of the schools and a private place. The interview tone was neutral and mainly

focused on asking questions, but also providing guidance only in cases of hesitation or ambiguity regarding the questions asked. However, participants were also prompted to engage with follow-up questions when necessary to ensure a complete understanding of the topic being discussed.

3.4. Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of the interviews. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), we can obtain a purely qualitative, detailed, and nuanced account of data by using thematic analysis. Before analyzing the data, each interview was transcribed in different documents, including the interviewee's name, teaching position, grade, years of experience, and interview date. After transcribing each interview, all participants' answers which were narrative materials, were analyzed, looking for patterns from the interviews and reasoning inductively. Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although creating and allocating codes might be a challenging and lengthy procedure, it eventually helps limit the quantity of data that must be evaluated or considered in the final analysis. To develop the final codes, the initial codes were manually assigned and then subject to continued reading and analysis to establish more detailed codes that were deemed relevant and significant to the research. The final set of codes was categorized, and three main themes and two subthemes were identified.

3.5. Ethical considerations

Before each interview, each participant was asked if consent was given to record the interview, and the informed consent had to be signed in advance. The information from the daycares and schools used in the research is anonymous, and the teachers were not disclosing their students' personal and private information. The anonymity of the children is maintained. It is essential to clarify that any information provided will be kept confidential. The participants have the right to withdraw their participation from the study.

4. Results

Three main themes were clearly identified throughout all the interviews with teachers concerning their experience, perception, thoughts and feelings regarding immigrant children with limited native language skills: (1) social, (2) personal, (3) academic, with the academic theme being the broadest of the three. There will be reported findings related to the two research questions under each theme. Table 4 shows the distribution of the themes and sub-themes.

Table 4

Themes and sub-themes

THEMES	Social	Personal	Academic
SUB-THEMES	Language problems	Language problems	Language problems
	Teachers’ strategies	Teachers’ strategies	Teachers’ strategies

Table 4

These social, personal, and academic themes are interconnected and they can have a major impact on each other. In the following results section, under each of the three themes, both research questions will be addressed separately. The sub-theme *Language problems* is as equally important as the other sub-theme *Teachers’ strategies* because identifying the problems that children have regarding language and communication is the first step towards finding solutions and trying to prevent future bigger problems.

4.1.Theme 1: Social

4.1.1. Language problems

All participants agreed that the major problem is the communication. All teachers mentioned that, when a child is not able to make himself understood and he cannot communicate well with others (for example, missing vocabulary), other children might avoid playing or interacting with this child. This communication problem possibly affects the child’s ability to make friends and build different relationships in life.

Teacher 7: “The older the child grows, the more difficult language learning becomes. They even need more help with language so their learning is interrupted, in which case the friendships that have been developing with peers could be jeopardized”.

Teacher 8: “How can you understand? How can you build your world if you don't have the world's words? And this is the thing that we often are misleading because we think that they know all these things even though they don't even have a clue, it's very difficult to admit in front of the other pupils or other people, that you don't basically know a thing, you may have some kind of idea about it, but then what's inside? How do you really understand it?”

Teacher 10: “Learnt vocabulary can be crucial to a child’s development and that problem with the late development of a native language will mean that the brain will not usually be active in the Broca’s area which is important for language development. Children need a mothertongue to help them through psychological, emotional, and personality development”.

Struggling with language is not uncommon, so children who face this challenge will require additional support and understanding from all of us. Children often fear of making mistakes, and struggling with language simply makes things worse. They might worry about being laughed at, or embarrassed by others. It certainly adds more stress and anxiety to their language learning process, which can impact on their self-esteem.

Besides having difficulties on picking up another language/mixing languages, some teachers also pointed out that children probably only use their native language with the family, as is seen below:

Teacher 4: “That (bilingualism) does require, though, consistent and rich exposure to both languages. To get that kind of exposure to a language that very few people speak can be difficult. Also, if a child does have some language development issues, it can be more difficult to get the help needed in a language that is not the majority language of the country one lives in”.

In some situations (bilingual families), children acquires the different language that both parents speak to each other. It can happen that they are stuck with a bad common non native language and that will be the language they will carry on speaking at home.

4.1.2. Teachers’ strategies

When having children with language and communication difficulties in the classroom, it makes teachers wonder about the help they can provide when they observe situations where social skills can be affected. Most of the teachers emphasized the need of doing activities that involve all the children of the group in same way; helping each other while being socialized.

Teacher 1: “If I have a group of different ages, different abilities, I try to mix them up so I would have some children in each group that are stronger in the language, and some children who are struggling a bit, because I find the older ones or the more able ones like to help the others. And when some of the children are more able to cope with the language, more confident, it helps the others along, gives them encouragement.

Whereas if they are just in a group of everybody who doesn't really know anything, they tend not to be so confident and they don't want to try, and then they don't learn as well”.

Teacher 3: “And we also had asked some of the students in her class to be guides or friends to her when she arrived, because she didn't know the language. So, they showed her around school and showed where she could take food at lunch and how to behave when we had P.E., where to change and things like that. So we thought that she should get as fast and as much integrated as possible into the classroom”.

Teacher 8: “I feel that almost always, it's about to belong to the group. It is very important. So, that you are seen in this environment that you are living on a daily basis where you are living. So, it doesn't matter if you are at home or if you are at school. It's a basic need for everybody, for us adults too. The social skills are a kind of basic need. And bringing here that is affecting a lot; it is also the personality that you have. How outgoing you are or are you turning inside? This is the issue and here, I feel that, comes our professional skills in the picture. We need to know and we need to follow the situation”.

Teacher 10: “We encourage other children to help communicate and be understanding to the children needing support”.

It is evident that creating a supportive and inclusive environment is decisive for children with limited language proficiency to feel valued and included. It is encouraging to see that the teachers are aware of the importance of mixing different abilities and ages to create a supportive learning environment where children can learn from each other. It is appreciated how the teachers have taken the initiative to assign guides or friends to help new students who may struggle with the language. As Teacher 8 rightly pointed out, the sense of belonging and being a part of a group is essential for children's growth and development. Teachers must make sure that all children feel included and valued in the classroom environment. Teachers should also encourage other students to help and communicate with children who need support.

Throughout the interviews, different kind of strategies, tips and advices were mentioned in order to help with the connection of language and social skills. For example, teachers were recommending encouraging hobbies, as children can connect the language to certain people or activities. They also mentioned that it would be beneficial to promote culture, have cultural trips and events.

Teacher 5: “That they interact with the environment, to speak, to go out... well, sometimes, for example, there are cultures that only interact with each other... but going out into the world and talking, reading... Many also come from different contexts, well, I would promote culture. The wonderful thing about Finland is that, at school, they go to the theatres a lot. Less now, but they were going out a lot to theatres and cultural trips and to see other things”.

Teacher 9: “Maybe organizing small groups where families could do like a reading club. Where the families could also be part of it and where we could share our resources and kind of encourage the families to be a part of the child's life in that way”.

Encouraging hobbies and promoting culture are brilliant ways of connecting language to real-life situations and creating a pleasant learning environment for children. Cultural trips and events can provide children with exposure to different languages and cultures, thus expanding their social skills and increasing their cultural awareness. Additionally, involving families can create a supportive and inclusive environment that encourages the child's language and social development.

4.2. Theme 2: Personal

4.2.1. Language problems

All of the teachers highlighted the problem of not being able to express feelings and emotions, not knowing how to ask for help, needs or wishes.

Teacher 1: "If they feel they don't have any strong language then they feel that they don't really have a language to communicate as their first language with all the emotions and everything they feel. They feel they know many languages but they don't know one language properly and they feel at disadvantage".

Teacher 8: "But if you don't have some kind of language that you can express your emotions, then in my opinion it makes the life quite difficult to live then. You don't belong anywhere if you cannot be connected to other people. If you feel that you are always an outsider, if you cannot make relationships that we normally have, friendship, love, and all these kind of feelings, and if you cannot express them somehow, how can you live full?"

It is important to recognize the impact that limited language proficiency can have on a child's emotional development. Without the ability to express their emotions and communicate their needs, children may feel isolated, misunderstood, and excluded from their peer group. This is a very important issue that needs to be addressed in the education of children with limited language proficiency.

It is important to note that children having feelings of stress and frustration, and low self-esteem, was identified as the main problem throughout all the interviews.

Teacher 5: "They are not aware that their vocabulary is not as strong as the rest. In fact, they have quite low self-esteem, because they realize about it and it affects their self-esteem a lot. Many of them consider that they are stupid, that they aren't as good as the others. And they don't know where the problem is". "Last year, I just had a small group of 5 children who had this problem, and you see that their expectations of life and their goals are very limited. They do not aspire to have a university degree or to be someone

great in life, but a footballer... you know what I mean, something that it doesn't require much effort. Roles they see in their daily lives: bus driver, cashier... I mean, they don't believe in their abilities and, that with effort, they could perhaps go further”.

It is quite concerning to hear that many children are struggling with low self-esteem and feeling like they are not as good as their peers due to their language abilities. As well, it is worrying to hear that the feelings of failure can lead to limited aspirations and a lack of belief in their abilities to achieve greater things. This highlights the importance of supporting the children to build up their confidence and self-esteem.

A participant commented about the conflict the children can have within themselves regarding their cultural identity if they don't speak their parents' language, as the children might feel they don't know where they belong to.

Teacher 4: “In my experience, it impacts mostly on the identity. Like cultural identity. I think, as a Swedish-speaking Finn, that language is an important part of identity”.

This is another challenge of the many that children of immigrant families face in navigating multiple cultural identities. It is interesting to note how language and cultural identity are intertwined, and how not being able to speak their parents' language can impact a child's sense of belonging and identity.

4.2.2. Teachers' strategies

As mentioned previously, social, personal, and academic skills are interconnected and can affect each other in various ways. Teachers, overall, find essential to help children develop and improve their emotional skills because they play a crucial role in their well-being and success in life. It was explained by some classroom teachers that they encourage the children to speak, no matter if words or grammar are wrong, and then to praise them.

Teacher 6: “You praise. I think if we would go that way, they will feel more secure. She heard me and she encouraged me to keep on doing it”. “And then they get comfortable and they get more aware of language. Kids often ask, how do I say this? Was this correct? And they can happily come and say a sentence in Finnish that they think is correct, and it might be so super wrong, but they are so happy to get the message across, and they don't care about grammar then because they took the giant step of trying to use the language”.

This approach seems to be a great way to create a positive and motivating classroom atmosphere. Utilizing positive reinforcement and encouragement to help children build their confidence in using the language, even if it's not perfect, helps to create a safe and supportive environment. This way the children can feel more comfortable taking risks and trying to

communicate in a new language. This approach not only helps with language development but also promotes social and emotional growth, as children learn to overcome their fears and self-doubt.

They also mentioned that it is important to get their confidence and security around the teacher, to establish a connection and build a relationship between teacher and students. This will improved the communication and learning outcomes, because when children have positive relationships with their teachers, the communication tends to be more effective and they are more motivated and engaged in the learning process.

Teacher 6: “But yeah, get them to feel safe and welcome and that. They can take part in what we are doing”. “And then you need to get, when the kid feels secure around you, you can get them to do certain things, but you can't stress them too much in the beginning, because they're meeting a new adult might be stressful and a terrible situation, because you don't know what they have met before, they might have had some tragic backgrounds, which some kids have had that I met and you just need to get their confidence”.

Teacher 8: “When we are talking about students, grade one to six, then basically the personal relationship that you are building with your students, this is the most important thing because every one of us, we want to be seen, we want to be a part of a group. And especially when you are a teacher and responsible to take care of the atmosphere and all the things that are happening in a classroom, all the kids, they need to have this feeling that they are accepted the way they are. 100% they need to be accepted the way they are and they need to be seen also. They need to have this feeling that every single day they are welcome and somebody has seen them and they are accepted the way they are. This is the most, most, most important thing. I cannot underline this enough. They need to feel safe. Yes. And they need to be seen. Yes. [...]. Just put your hand on the shoulder or shaking hands and taking this eye contact. They are most important things to build the relationship between you and students”.

Establishing trust and connection with the students will definitely facilitate to build positive relationships, particularly with those who come from immigrant families. Teachers need to be sensitive to their backgrounds and personal situations, and approach each student as an individual with unique needs and experiences.

Indeed, establishing a connection and building up these positive relationships starts by getting to know your students and their abilities.

Teacher 8: “Quite often we notice that there is no clue about the thing that they are talking about, but it's very hard and difficult for them to admit that they cannot follow, because the most important thing is that they are similar, like the others. So, basically you have to be very careful when you are teaching so that you really learn to know the children and the capability that they have”.

Another approach from a couple of teachers regarding the cultural identity is to continue learning their mother tongue and reading books in that language if there would be books available. It can help to strengthen cultural identity by preserving language, promoting cultural understanding and creating emotional connections. Also, the fact of learning together as a family could as well benefit this cultural identity and increased the children's motivation to learn languages.

Teacher 3: “perhaps the parents are also taking course language courses somewhere else and they can learn together. I would say that is one of the most important things”.

4.3. Theme 3: Academic

This theme was the broadest and the most commented on by each and every one of the teachers in this research. In this last theme, the focus does shift in some way towards the challenges of the Finnish educational system. One problem the Finnish education system may have is the assumption that all children have strong skills in Finnish language. It would make the children's language barrier wider and more difficult for them to fully engage in the classroom and achieve academic success. Furthermore, the pressure to assimilate into the principal culture at the cost of maintaining one's own cultural identity can also contribute to language problems for immigrant children in Finland.

Another problem is the lack of resources allocated to language support. Immigrant children may require additional resources to support their language acquisition and learning, such as language education programs, language specialists and access to language learning materials. However, these resources are generally insufficient in Finnish schools.

The lack of cultural sensitivity in teaching practices can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications, which can create barriers to learning and further contribute to language problems. Teachers may not have sufficient training in working with multilingual students, or may not be aware of the cultural norms and practices of different communities.

In order to address these challenges, the Finnish education system would need to take a more culturally sensitive and inclusive approach to teaching and learning. This includes providing more resources and support for multilingual children, such as language classes and

support from language specialists. It also involves fostering an inclusive learning environment that values and celebrates the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of all students. The Finnish education system could better support the language development and academic success of multilingual children, while also helping to preserve and celebrate their cultural identity.

Despite the lack of resources and the amount of workload that they are having, all teachers are working together towards helping children who are having limited communication skills in their native language.

4.3.1. *Language problems*

The majority of the teachers explained that it might take longer for children to speak when acquiring and learning different languages simultaneously, as they may struggle with mixing up words, be reluctant to learn a new language, avoid speaking the weaker language, or withdraw. Additionally, speech difficulties can arise.

Teacher 3: “I had one student in my previous school where he had two languages at home, but he also had learning difficulties, which made it so much harder for him then to take in the language of the school because that wasn't the same language as they had at home. And I think sometimes he struggled because he mixed them up. I mean, children do that otherwise as well. When they learn languages, it becomes an inter language where they mix them. But in that case, it didn't really develop some, sometimes you see that, that when they grow older, they learn to recognize them. But for example, spelling, and even in his speech, he mixed them up really much, even in 3rd grade”.

Teacher 7: “It is said about linguistic development that we can see later, that the child is still developing. So, the help is delayed, and the problems last longer. The waiting time is awfully long anyway to get any help. We receive advice and other different tasks that are familiar, we already have tried or currently in use”.

Mixing up languages and struggling with speech difficulties can make language acquisition even more challenging. Language development is a complex process and children may need different types of support. Delays in receiving help and support can further prolong the difficulties.

Nearly all the teachers emphasized the fact that there are not enough resources to help in these situations, especially the classroom teachers.

Teacher 3: “We had maybe over a hundred students and we had a special education teacher two days a week for all of those students. Well then, because the special

education teacher was needed to help someone with math, help another one with Finnish or Swedish and do different kind of testing or assessment with other students, you maybe had the special education teacher 2 hours in your classroom per week, and then if you had a new student coming in with no language, you couldn't have any help from the special education teacher, you might have had one lesson or she gave books that were useful, but that was about it, unfortunately, and it was just down to resources”.

Teacher 5: “The Finnish education system has a lot of wonderful things. I don't know who should I point to: the Ministry of Education? It is clear that there is a lack of resources and the ones who are dealing with the families is us. Not even the director. Neither the Education Minister nor “Pepito”. We are standing there and there are no resources, -we have nothing else to give your son-. Do you need support? Yes, we have written loads of reports. We have sat down 80 times, but we have nothing more to offer. It's bullshit”.

Teacher 8: “The thing is that if Finland wants to be kind of top country in education, then we need to wake up because we need awfully, awfully, awfully, lots of special needs teachers. The thing is that we all need more resources. There is a screaming lack of resources all the time, especially special needs teachers. Smaller groups, smaller class, groups for example, at the moment I have 3rd graders and I have 27 now. So you can imagine what kind of work it is for me at the moment. I don't remember when I have been this exhausted after the working day when I go home”.

It is evident that teachers feel frustrated and overwhelmed by the lack of resources available to support students with different needs. Classroom teachers are regularly left to deal with the children on their own, often with little training or support. The teachers are committed to doing their best to support their students despite the difficult circumstances they face.

Furthermore, due to the difficulty of children not speaking any language fluently, teachers believe that professionals may not be properly trained nor may feel unmotivated, which can result in inaccurate assessments or a lack of assessments, and this can have a significant impact on the well-being and development of the children.

Teacher 3: “But the problem then was our school psychologist, who usually makes this kind of assessments with the children and she told us that results could not be trustworthy or reliable because she was unsure if he did understand the questions. So, there was the language barrier that, could the child understand the questions? Or is it

the incorrect answer? Is it due to the language or is it due to his inability to just calculate or answer”.

Teacher 5: “Teachers often have no training or don't know how to get to them (the children). And many psychologists don't want to get involved either because they don't believe that they have the tools to evaluate them. So many times, they don't know if it is dyslexia, if it is a learning problem... and to not rule it out, they don't get involved, because they think the problem is in the language”. “Many psychologists don't want to get involved because their tools are in Finnish, so they don't know how to evaluate these children. In my school, the psychologist does not take children to make an evaluation and give a diagnosis unless they are from the second to the third level of support, and the ones in the second level of support, he/she rarely takes them. In other words, they have to be in the third level, in special support already, if not, nothing happens, and the whole process that has gone through, and the time, and what you have tried, that is... it is outrageous”.

It is clear that language barriers can have a significant impact on the ability of professionals to accurately assess and diagnose children who do not speak the language fluently. This can impact negatively the well-being and development of these children. Also, the fact of not being properly trained or able to deal with these language barriers may lead to a lack of involvement in the assessment and diagnose process. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that the lack of access to appropriate tools and resources also affects these professionals who try to assess and diagnose children with language barriers.

Another significant problem that these children are facing is either not being diagnosed or being labelled too quickly with a learning disability without a proper evaluation. These could be due to the lack of understanding of learning disabilities among teachers and other professionals and the lack of resources.

Teacher 6: “There was one family with a younger sibling that was born here in Finland. They were using a completely different language at home and I know he was almost labelled also in kindergarten, that he was special needs or something, but it was just that, the only place where he got input of Swedish was in the kindergarten, a few hours. Otherwise, everything else was in another language. So, we just didn't understand what they were saying in kindergarten. Once he picked up more language, no worries whatsoever. So, I think that they are too fast of labelling kids. Okay. Because the logic of kids is something else that we think is logical sometimes as adults”.

It is essential to recognize the diversity of backgrounds and experiences of these children, as language barriers or cultural differences may affect their learning in ways that are not immediately evident.

The learning process for these children happens at a very slow pace; therefore, some teachers expressed different feelings because the set goals may not be achieved within a short timeframe.

Teacher 2: “It is obviously that there are feelings like frustration if you are looking at the goals, that they are not coming really fast, so you need to be patient”.

Teacher 3: “And then after some time you realize that, well there is learning happening. It's not perhaps at the pace that you... the other students are learning, but still they are learning something. And that's a huge step for those students who come in and don't have the language. Sometimes you need to just enjoy the smaller, smaller steps”.

It is important to acknowledge that the learning process for these children may happen at a slower pace due to the language barriers they face. Teachers need to be patient and recognize that progress, even if small, is still progress. Celebrating the smaller steps can have a positive impact on the child's confidence and motivation to continue learning.

Some teachers expressed that there probably will be limitations in the children's future and they will not be able to follow the continuous learning. Children who do not speak any language fluently may face additional barriers to accessing education, which can limit their opportunities and potential for success.

Teacher 1: “They are limited as to what they can study, where can they study it, and how much in detail they can study because they are always at some level struggling with the language”.

Teacher 7: “The beginning may go well, but problems arise when subjects become more difficult, vocabulary becomes more difficult, or it is completely new to the child.

Children might need easier subject/course materials and have to practice longer, which might end up being a burdensome”.

Obviously, the limitations in their learning ability and the extra barriers they encounter can lead to a shortage of opportunities and impede their future success.

4.3.2. Teachers' strategies

All the teachers have shown only but support and dedicated hard work for these children with limited language proficiency. They are sharing their daily work regarding vocabulary,

ways of assessment and what it is really meaningful to them: working together as a team and cooperating with the guardians to ensure the success of the process.

The teachers, especially the ones in Early Years, insist on start by playing with the language: using constantly language for all routines, express orally all the actions, develop non-verbal communication, e.g. pointing and using body language, or make the language fun are some of the strategies they are already using in their classrooms. Additionally, other systems of support, for example, an augmentative and alternative communication system (ACC) with pictures, are being used in many places. The Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) supports are appropriate for students who are not able to use speech as their primary mode of communication to access the curriculum, either due to cognitive/language deficits or a physical impairment (Beukelman & Mirenda, 1998).

Teacher 4: “There is a new system in Turku (where I work) called "Kielipeda-ty öv äline" to map and evaluate the learning of Finnish (or Swedish). There are also many "programs" and/or tools to help learning Finnish or any language really, for example “Kippisen perhe”.

Teacher 10: “We can adopt more visual tools and design tailored time tables using pictures to explain routines. We can demonstrate actions to the pictures for children to understand the demands they have in a group”.

The teachers are using a variety of strategies to support language development in children with language barriers. It is very positive to see the use of ACC systems to support those who may have difficulties with speech. There are programs and tools available to help support language learning that others might not know about, so this is a great opportunity for sharing this information of resources.

Teachers also encourage practicing vocabulary that will be needed in the future before starting new topics, so that when children begin the next unit, they are already familiar with the words they will be using. Besides vocabulary itself, they point out the importance on acquiring the language first, and learn the formal aspects afterwards.

Teacher 6: “You can’t work with formal aspects (grammar) if you have a young kid that is not a good reader or writer [...] they are so happy to get the message across and they don’t care about the grammar because they took a giant step of trying to use the language. Then, as they get older, as they have more language skills, then we’ll work with formal”.

Children need to become familiar with the vocabulary they will need in the future before moving on to new topics. This approach allows children to feel more comfortable using the

language and expressing themselves, even if they make mistakes with grammar. This is consistent with the strategy of praising children for attempting to speak, even if they make mistakes.

In fact, rather than just any kind of task, teachers advocate for teaching through meaningful tasks where the vocabulary is reviewed and taught in a relevant way.

Teacher 1: “Teach in a relevant way. So, if you're going to be talking about shoes, coats... do it when you're going outside and you're putting those things on so they can see the thing and it makes sense to them. Use the whole day to learn things. Learn things in a meaningful manner. Don't take it in an abstract way and just do it a little at a time”.

Teacher 3: “Sometimes in History they have the kind of retelling of stories that you, at the same time when teaching the subject, (let's say the Vikings), you also focus and ask the students to find out words that are connected to that text type. So in that case, you can sometimes try to take both the language learning and the content”.

By using relevant vocabulary in context, relate to real-life situations, children are more likely to understand and remember the words they are learning.

Few classroom teachers talked about planning different activities regarding language-dependency and cognitive skills. The strategies to support the children included: providing additional materials or scaffolding, visual aids (pictures, diagrams and videos) and collaboration and group work. It is noticeable throughout all the interviews, that teachers do consider the various levels of language among their students. They want to make sure that they participate and learn effectively, regardless of their language proficiency level.

Other strategy that could seem very obvious but it is essential to ensure the steadiness of the development, is to begin the process and continue it step by step. Teachers organize their time and space for the purpose of achieving the set goals.

Teacher 2: “Introducing things in our daily sessions without trying to break the routines of the kid at the same time that he's enjoying and having the normal activities”.

Teacher 10: “We use a makaton system and design an Individual Educational Plan with the parents and any speech therapists that may be needed, depending on the severity of the child's developmental delays. It would be age specific as the brain will also be possibly delayed and need an analysis on the where within a child's scaffolding they need support and how the framework can be affected using the environment and designed tools agreed with carers and third parties involved”.

When there is a plan for the support, it is more likely that the support will be more effective and successful.

Most of teachers believe in different ways to assess the students adapting to their skills and needs, focusing on the content more than in the language itself by using various resources or projects they have been working on, making videos, recording... anything that can show and demonstrate that they have achieved the knowledge.

Teacher 5: “Students should be offered different ways of evaluation, not just pencil and paper and spit out what you know, but verbally or with helping notes. Well, there are many ways to evaluate, not only those, and many times those ways are not applied because it gives the teacher more work, and/or it is simply the ignorance or usually the lack of time”.

Teacher 6: “Now you can go to yourself as an adult and think, what could I do to help this kid? You know? Come get through. If you have a kid stuttering in class, it's difficult to assess their oral skills because in that kind of situation, they will probably get so nervous that they're definitely stuttering and can't get the message across. But then you kind of have to have activities that they don't even know that you're assessing them. Get them to feel safe and welcome. They can take part in what we are doing. Make learning understandable, but also teach them how they can show what they learned. So, assessing things should not only be on with paper or pen either. You can do it in many different ways”.

It is important to have a variety of assessment methods that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that suit their learning style. This can also help students feel more confident and motivated in their learning. It is encouraging to see that some teachers are still finding creative ways to assess their students.

Collaborating and cooperating together with their immediate team at the daycares and schools considerably helps teachers to support language and communication issues. In reality, they mentioned that they usually seek for guidance and instructions on how to handle different situations. Besides, classroom teachers expressed the benefits of having an assistant for a better support.

Teacher 2: “So you are coming to work and you are looking at it like it doesn't matter because we are going to work together and we are going to try to do our best. We have the resources, we have the knowledge, and we have a lot of help. It's not only the main teacher there. We had a special need teacher too there. So finally it's a world that we are

going to do all together. Of course you are there for the kids trying to have more time talk to, and trying to give your best”.

Teacher 5: “The first thing is to detect, talk to the tutor and detect that there is a problem and well, as a special education teacher, evaluate, see where the learning problems are and together you prepare the first pedagogical report so that it can go to the next level. The support that the tutor has given is no longer punctual, but is beginning to be repeated over time. It goes through the pedagogical team, and then the next phase would happen. From there, you start to try things. What works and what’s not? Different ways of evaluation, different supports, sitting place, what content we give in which level of support... So, you are trying, it is a trial-error, and from there, it is to try with materials, with times, with places, with everything”.

Similarly, working together in association with different professionals through observation, consultation, advice and meetings can also be beneficial for identifying and addressing language and communication difficulties in schools and daycares.

Teacher 4: “I have worked with a couple of families whose children had language development issues, did not speak their mothertongue almost at all and did not learn Finnish. They did progress when we got speech therapy and occupational therapy to help us [...]. But I think with help from speech therapist and working with the tips they give every child will learn their way of communicating”.

Teacher 8: “we are testing those children, what comes to their reading and writing skills, then we can use the services that special needs teachers can provide”.

Finally, forming partnerships with guardians, families and caregivers will support the children learning and development and will likely increase the opportunities for success.

Teacher 8: “And it means also that the families, they need to work together with me. Otherwise it’ll not work. How can I manage? Because there is so much work to do in a basic level, and then if I have students like this that needs special support, what comes to language... So, we need all hands on deck. Also, the parents, sisters, siblings, grandparents, and the whole community what comes to those people who are trying to adapt here”.

Teacher 10: “The carers would also need to be part of the program used to ensure that the common language used at home is help support the understanding of the pictures and what they mean”.

Cooperation with the families is vital in order to continue helping with the development and education of the student. It is also important for the child and families to feel accepted

and included, that the communication between the centre and the family would be in a common language. Effort would lie in the teachers as well, who would need to make an attempt of sending information more than in Finnish/Swedish.

5. Discussion

This research aimed to understand how teachers address the challenges of teaching children with limited language proficiency in their native language. The challenges were described under three themes - social, personal and academic - as well as the suggested strategies for addressing them. Even though the academic theme has more weight in terms of difficulties but also concerning strategies, it is clear that these three themes influence one another.

Next, I will present the relationship between the findings under the main themes as related to language problems and teachers' strategies, thus summarising the answers to the two research questions: how do teachers describe language problems, and how do teachers support children with language problems in the classrooms.

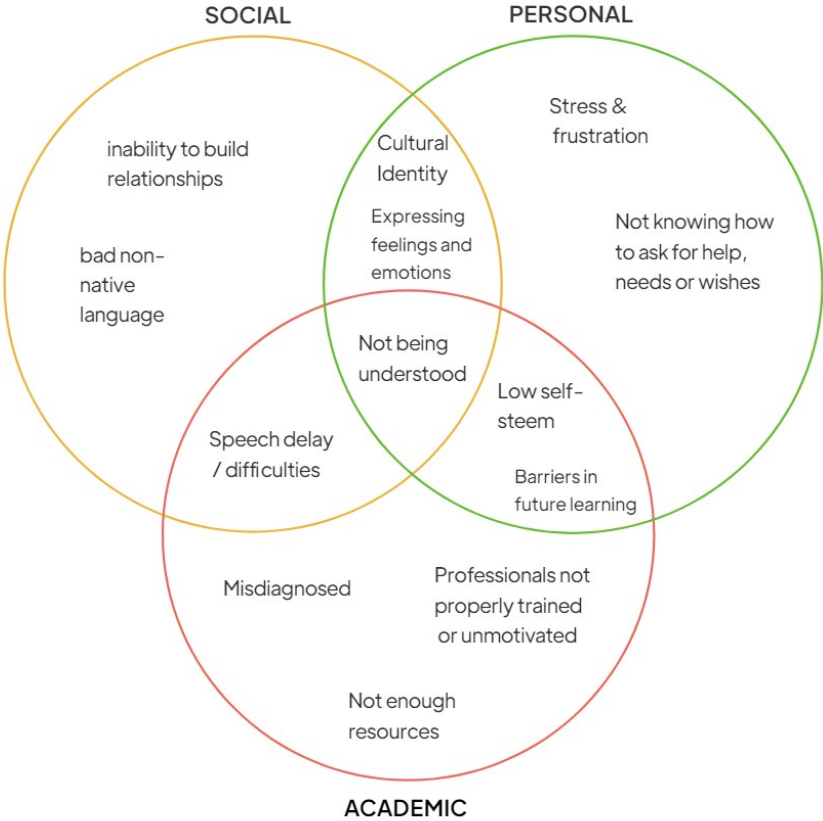
5.1. Language problems

Fig. 3 shows the connection of the sub-theme *Language problems* within the three themes. We can observe that *not being understood* is the central issue to all three themes. Furthermore, this problem interconnects most of the other problems. Socially, it can lead to miscommunication, misunderstandings and conflicts. For example, if a child is trying to express an idea, but others cannot understand the message, the child might feel frustrated. Personally, it can impact on a child's cultural identity and self-esteem. For example, if a child feels that own values, beliefs and experiences are not understood by others, it can increase the inability to build relationships. This situation would probably lead to loneliness and other mental health issues. Academically, it can affect the ability to learn and succeed. For example, if a child is struggling to understand the teacher but does not know how to ask for help, this child could experience a setback in the studies and feel discouraged.

Language problems are not considered independently but rather interconnected with one-another in a child's life. Besides, it is vital to consider any other factors that may be impacting the language development. Therefore, addressing language difficulties requires a holistic approach that considers the social, personal, and academic situations in which they occur.

Figure 3

Language problems interconnected within social, personal and academic skills



5.2. Teachers’ strategies

Fig. 4 shows the connection of the sub-theme *Teachers’ strategies* within the three themes too. As evident in Fig. 4, there are more strategies than problems because the focus is on solutions and ways to support these children rather than exclusively on the problems they face. While it's important to acknowledge the challenges that they encounter, it's essential to provide with a variety of strategies and tools to help these children overcome these challenges. Additionally, addressing one problem may require multiple strategies to be implemented and vice versa; one strategy can help with several problems. As explained before, everything can be linked together. For example, if the teacher learns the child's character and skills, the child could feel valued and important. A bond or connection might be established afterwards, which would help the child with the skill of building relationships. All of this can lead to improve the confidence and self-esteem, and, consequently, the child would be more motivated and encouraged in the language development and in the studies in general.

Figure 4

Teachers' strategies interconnected within social, personal and academic skills



The core of the themes is teamwork and to plan and set goals. As repeatedly mentioned throughout all the interviews, teachers find it essential to have a professional team which collaborate and cooperate together towards the well-being of the children. Teachers and other professionals need each other in order to develop effective strategies to support the children. Additionally, this collaboration is also extended to guardians and parents as part of the process of developing the language and communication skills. Planning and setting goals are a fundamental part of the learning process. When there are clear objectives and a plan on how to achieve them, it becomes easier to focus and develop towards the needed and wished results. Children could be also part of this planning and setting goals, as it could help them develop important skills (e.g. decision-making, problem-solving), and also it allows them to take some responsibility in their learning.

By establishing a connection with the students and getting to know their abilities and personalities, teachers can create a more supportive and personalized learning environment

that considers the particular needs of each child. This can be beneficial academically and personally for the children. In contrast, getting their confidence and security around the teacher primarily focuses on the emotional and psychological well-being of the child. While building trust and confidence with the teacher can certainly have academic benefits, it is primarily a personal issue related to the child's feelings of safety and comfort in the classroom.

Teachers have mentioned “acquire language first, and learn formal aspects later”. In line with Bruner's scaffolding, in language learning teachers provide children with the necessary tools and assistance to help them acquire language naturally. Teachers also mentioned starting from the basics and playing with the vocabulary. Support comes in the form of modelling, feedback, and clarification of language input. By providing this scaffolding, children can gradually develop their language skills and move towards more complex language structures (formal aspects). Similarly with Krashen's natural order hypothesis that children first acquire basic language skills before moving on to more complex structures, teachers expose children to language input that is appropriate for their level of language development. This confirms the viewpoint of starting from the basics and gradually building up language skills by playing with vocabulary and simple sentence structures. Both approaches support the idea of teachers helping children develop a strong foundation in the language and move towards more advanced language structures over time.

These results contest what Cummins has found earlier regarding Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) levels for language development. In Table 5, we can find the different strategies teachers encourage and advocate for under Cummins’ Framework.

Table 5
Teachers’ Strategies under Cummins’ Framework

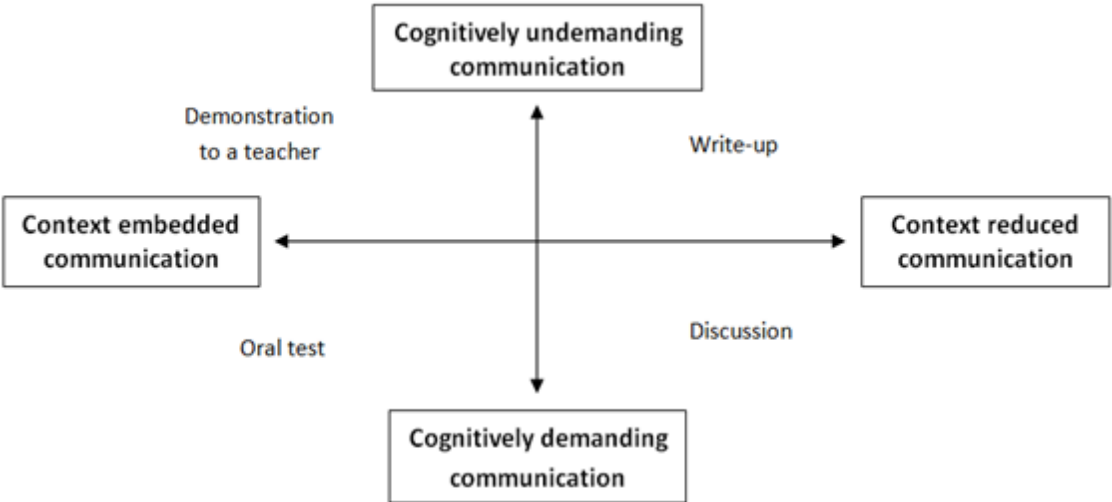
BICS level	CALP level
playing with language	visual aids (pictures, diagrams, videos)
visual aids (pictures, videos)	meaningful tasks (vocabulary is reviewed
using language constantly in all routines	and taught in a relevant way)
developing nonverbal communication	scaffolding
	collaboration and group work

Table 5

BICS skills can be acquired relatively quickly through everyday social interactions, whereas CALP skills take much longer to develop and require a more formal education. CALP skills are also needed for academic success, such as reading, writing, and understanding complex texts, which is why they are emphasized more in formal education. Additionally, the development of CALP skills is influenced by factors such as motivation and cognitive abilities, which can vary widely among individuals. Consequently, the teachers' strategies aim to help children with limited language proficiency develop their language skills and cognitive abilities by providing appropriate support, scaffolding, and relevant tasks. They align with Cummins's Framework of Cognitive Processing Demand and Language Proficiency, which emphasizes the importance of both BICS and CALP levels for language development.

Albert Einstein said once: “But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid”. As observed in Figure 5, Cummins's Framework once again emphasizes the significance of teachers understanding the different levels of language proficiency (BICS and CALP) and how they can impact academic success in supporting students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. By considering these factors, teachers create assessments that are more fair and accurate for all children, regardless of their language background. Teachers have discussed the negative effects of the traditional ways of assessing children (pen and paper), which does not take into account their linguistic diversity and may not accurately reflect their true knowledge and abilities.

Figure 5
Examples of assessment by Cummins’s Framework of Cognitive Processing Demand and Language Proficiency



5.3. Multicultural environment

The contradiction of the Finnish education system is that it supports the development of children's mother tongue while at the same time it puts pressure on them to learn the dominant language. This can create confusion and conflict in children, who may feel torn between their cultural identity and the need to assimilate into the majority culture.

The Finnish education system recognizes the importance of maintaining the cultural identity of the children and supporting the development of their mother tongue. This is especially important for children from immigrant families, who may face significant cultural and linguistic barriers when they start school. By providing support for their first language, schools can help these students maintain a connection to their cultural heritage and build their confidence as learners. However, there is also pressure on the children to learn the dominant language, which is Finnish, and to assimilate into the Finnish culture. This can create a conflict for students, who may feel like they have to choose between their cultural identity and fitting in with their peers.

The results of this study points towards a “mentality of seeing the immigrants as ‘the others’” (Holm & Londen, 2010, as cited in Sinkkonen & Kyttälä, 2014). Developing a multicultural environment in the schools can definitively help to create a more inclusive and welcoming community, where everyone feels valued and respected despite their background. When children are exposed to different cultures and languages, they are more likely to develop a positive response for diversity and an understanding of different points of view. Additionally, children would benefit from building positive relationships across cultural and language barriers, as they require social skills like empathy, communication and teamwork.

5.4. Limitations

The terminology related to language acquisition (mother tongue, native language, L1 and first language) has been part of debates among different authors, as discusses previously. This confusing terminology may have affected the study as the terms are often used equivalently, but they may have different meanings depending on the context. Participants may have understood the questions differently depending on their perspective of these terms.

To ease this limitation, this research attempted to clarify the terms and provide definitions from different known scholars. However, it is important to recognize that the terminology related to language acquisition is complex and still be interpreted differently by participants.

It was very complicated to find participants for this research. When different teachers were explained the aim and the criteria of the study, most of them were incredulous and/or sceptical

about the possibility of children who barely/do not speak their mother tongues. “Maybe people find it so abstract. They do not understand the concept of nobody having no mother tongue, that they do not conceive it in their heads. Maybe they haven't had children like these and they don't understand. This is really something super abstract, understanding that someone does not have a strong and internalized mother tongue and such” (Teacher 5). Clearly, it is not a problem that is common and/or generalized (at least in Finland).

Even though the research is based on FGI and SGI children, the 10 teachers that participated in this study have worked in only four cities of Finland, so there are possible limitations to this study regarding the sample size, lack of diversity or limited scope. Additionally, conducting the research in such a limited number of cities may not provide a complete picture of the context in which the phenomenon being studied happens.

5.5. Implications

The results have implications for educational policies, curriculum development and teacher professional development, focused at improving the educational results of FGI or SGI children in Finland. Addressing these issues would need fundamental reforms in the Finnish education system, like additional resources for language education and teacher training, and reconsideration of the principles behind the current educational model.

Additionally, there is a need to increase awareness in the field among different professionals about limited language proficiency. By raising awareness and providing training, teachers and other professionals can better understand the challenges faced by these students and develop effective strategies to support their social, personal and academic success.

It might also be beneficial to provide courses for parents to improve their language skills. Research has shown that the involvement of parents in their child's education can have a positive impact on academic results (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), and improved communication between parents and teachers can lead to better educational results for children with limited language proficiency (García, 1991). Supporting their language skills can make parents to become more involved in their child's education and improve their communication skills, as well as creating positive relationships between the school and home. “It’s really true and really important how the languages in our days are fighting with each other [...]. Families have different languages in same house [...]. So, it is really important that parents, families, schools... are concerned about how important is to have different protocols,

different resources, ideas... about how to help when the kids are growing with more than one language” (Teacher 2).

5.6.Recommendations for future research

It would be very important to continue studying about limited language proficiency and the challenges children could face up, as well as strategies and solutions to support them. Recent research (Hoff et al., 2012; Ware et al., 2020) has shown that acquiring and learning languages at once is not associated with speech difficulties or language delay. In fact, it has been shown that bilingualism can have cognitive and social benefits. However, it may create challenges in certain circumstances, such as when there is limited exposure to one or both languages, or when there is a significant difference between the language spoken at school and at home. For example, when there is limited exposure, it can be more difficult to develop proficiency in both languages, and it may be more challenging to switch between languages. If there is a significant difference between the language spoken at school and at home, this can create confusion and could be harder for a child to learn both languages simultaneously. For example, if a child is speaking one language at home and another at school, they may have difficulty keeping up with their peers and may struggle to understand the teachers. In addition, if the parents do not speak the language used in school, it can be more frustrating for the children as the parents are unable to comprehend their children's homework. In consequence, they are not able to help them if needed.

The practice of mainstreaming can be seen as an early attempt to provide inclusive education to students with diverse linguistical needs. Students with limited language proficiency may also require additional support to fully participate in the mainstream classroom environment. Therefore, as a recommendation for future research, the concept of "language mainstreaming" could be explored as a potential approach to inclusive education for students with limited language proficiency. This would involve examining how to best integrate various language support services into the regular classroom setting, so that students can access the same curriculum and opportunities as their peers. However, it is important to note that mainstreaming is not always sufficient to meet the needs of students with different linguistic needs and that further efforts are needed to create truly inclusive educational environments.

6. Conclusion

Ten teachers who work with immigrant children shared their views and experiences on the challenges of limited language proficiency and communication issues. They discussed how these affect children's life, including their social, personal and academic skills. The teachers provided a diversity of strategies to support the learning and development of these children, such as vocabulary-based learning, hands-on activities, and team work and guardians' cooperation. The data collected through the interviews also points out the consequence of professionals' involvement and collaboration in promoting children's language development and their well being. Additionally, the results stress the essential role of teachers as guides and support with learning.

The teachers' strategies of this study can help to develop language and communication skills and can have a positive effect on different aspects of children's life, including relationships, academic performance, and personal development.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Participant Information

Time:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

Teaching grade:

Years of experience:

Do you give consent to record this interview?

General Questions

1. What are the differences in the homes of same mothertongue families and different mothertongue families?
2. What are the difficulties that children with 2+ mothertongues encounter when learning in the host country language?
3. How it can affect the fact of not being “native” in any language?
4. What can be the impact in the future of children that don’t learn any language till “native” stage? How can these children get through the first grades of primary?
5. How do you feel when you have this kind of situation in your classroom?
6. What can you do to help these children that are having difficulties lacking native language or don’t have a strong language base? Is there any protocol? Do you follow any system?
7. Do you feel supported by the workplace, by the system?
8. How can we help immigrant children with that language barrier learning in a different language of instruction? How can teachers help students without any native language develop the host country language?
9. Anything you would like to add?