Article

Teaching English as a Second Language in the Early Years: Teachers' Perspectives and Practices in Finland

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Abstract: Second language (L2) education in the early years has been steadily increasing worldwide. Since second language education at earlier ages is relatively new in many countries, not much research is available regarding teaching practices in this context. Likewise, limited research attention has been directed to teachers' perspectives on early L2 teaching. This study investigated what characterises teachers' pedagogical planning, teaching practices and assessment of language learning, and teachers' perspectives about the opportunities and challenges in early L2 classrooms within the cultural context of the Finnish education system. The data for this study were gathered through an online survey involving teachers of English (*n* = 49) as a second language in the early years of primary education in Finland. The results show that the teachers based their pedagogical planning on the curriculum, used a variety of L2 tasks and materials, which they often prepared by themselves, and they mostly used observation, instead of formal exams, for assessing the children's learning in L2. The results revealed that the teachers' perspectives to the early start for L2 teaching were positive, which stemmed from the children's enthusiasm for language learning. The teachers draw attention to challenges such as big group sizes, the diversity in children's skills (e.g., their prior L2 knowledge, social skills, learning capabilities), and the limited availability of teaching materials targeted for young learner groups in L2 education. The findings demonstrate the opportunities and challenges L2 teachers of early learners face in Finland.

Keywords: second language education; English language teaching; early childhood education and care; teaching practices; assessment in early L2 education

1. Introduction

Early second language (L2) education has been steadily increasing all around the world [1]. The European Commission [2] has underlined the importance of early L2 learning. Previous studies have demonstrated the benefits of learning a second language at an early age [3,4]. Young learners have been found to be better at achieving native-like phonology [1,5], and are good at learning analytical, cognitive, metalinguistic, and socio-cultural skills [6]. On this account, recent education policies and programmes in many countries emphasise starting L2 education early [7,8]. As policies and programmes change, the need for research in exploring the implementation of early L2 education programmes increases.

Regarding teaching L2 in early years, Nikolov and Laughlin [9] reported in their review including study contexts around the world that various approaches and methods such as content-embedded approaches, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), and immersion programmes are commonly used. The teaching and learning contexts and the goals of early L2 education have varied according to the curriculum and teachers' practices [10]. In Finland (the country in which this study was undertaken), CLIL, immersion programmes (English–Finnish), and communicative language teaching are often used in L2

education [11,12]. Also, the more digital tools are available, the more the presence of digital resources in L2 education is evident [13]. Choosing, implementing, and evaluating the appropriate methods, tools, and materials for children is not straightforward, so teachers' skills and agency are important for productive early L2 teaching [14–17]. Also, taking into account children's interest and parent's support are essential for the success of L2 education [18,19]. Therefore, teachers' proficiency in L2 education and their perspectives for teaching and learning, along with their pedagogical knowledge and practical skills, are highly essential for achieving the aims and objectives of language programmes [20–22].

The implementation of L2 education in the early years remains under-researched and, hence, more research is needed in this context, particularly on teachers' pedagogical planning, teaching practices, and assessment. To address this gap, this article describes an exploratory survey among 49 early years English language teachers in Finland. The Finnish education system creates an interesting cultural context to address L2 education in the early years due to its internationally unique approach emphasising teacher and learner agency, decentralised curriculum, and formative assessment [23].

The specific research questions for the study were as follows:

(1)   What characterises teachers' pedagogical planning, teaching practices, and assessment of language learning in early L2 classrooms in Finland?
(2)   How do teachers perceive opportunities and challenges in early L2 classrooms in Finland?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Second Language Teaching Theories in the Early Years

While rapid developments and changes in the modern world have impacts on teaching and learning foreign languages, there has been an increase in the early start of L2 education. Early years refers to the period from birth up to eight years of age [24]. In fact, the discussion about the benefits of early L2 education is based on the critical period hypothesis [25] and optimal age hypothesis [26], both of which essentially state that foreign languages are better acquired before puberty, for better learning of vocabulary and correct pronunciation. Further research has also proved the benefits of early L2 education in terms of cognitive, social, and cultural aspects [1,27,28].

The teaching methods in early L2 education vary, and it is clear that the methods and approaches are chosen regarding the aims and objectives of the lesson, tasks, or activities [9,29]. When it comes to classic approaches to examining this topic, the audio-lingual method [28–31], including repetitions through songs, chants, or rhymes, is used for teaching vocabulary and pronunciation. While Task-based Learning [32] provides children with the opportunities to use the language in an authentic way via a variety of tasks, teachers benefit from total physical response [31,33] when teaching children vocabulary or language concepts by using physical movement to react to verbal input. Early L2 education based on the natural approach [34] offers a comfortable environment for children by allowing the use of L1 along with L2 to promote communication and learning. As one of the more common approaches in L2 education, the communicative approach [35,36] focuses on learning a language through communication. In order to help to find a shared understanding in communication, narratives such as picture books, oral stories, drama, and role-plays are frequently used as well as flashcards, puppets, pictures, and real objects in early years. Likewise, play, an important element in the sociocultural approach, is a tool for children to construct the learning context and content by interaction, through which they go beyond their present learning process with the help of capable others such as teachers or peers [37–39]. In early L2 education, play creates opportunities for children to practise their language skills through spontaneous L2 use [40]. What makes early L2 education successful is the teachers' pedagogical knowledge and proficiency as well as their perspectives on language teaching planning, implementation, and assessment processes [20–22].

2.2. Second Language (English) Teaching in Finnish Context

One of the leading countries in education, Finland [41,42] starts L2 education from the first grade (age seven) as of the spring term of 2020 [18,43]. Traditionally, L2 education started at the age of nine (third grade) and was later typically moved to starting at the age seven (first grade) in Finland. Despite the promotion of a wide spectrum of languages, earlier studies reported that English as a foreign language is the most popular language choice in schools in Finland [44,45]. This is parallel to many other countries around the globe [46,47]. The shift to starting L2 education earlier has resulted in children's improved positive attitude and motivation to use L2 and also obtains better results in phonology and some other linguistic skills [1,3,4]. The context of the present study is early L2 education in Finnish first-grade classrooms during the piloting phase of the reform in 2018–2019.

The national core curriculum for basic education [18] emphasises the promotion of children's plurilingual and multicultural identity by building bridges between different languages. It also focuses on the language use between different situations, which is known as functional language teaching, such as listening to songs, watching TV programmes, talking to others, or playing games in English [45] In addition to functionality, the curriculum asks L2 teachers to support the development of children's language skills by creating opportunities for joy, playfulness, and creativity through a contextual pedagogy, in which authentic learning opportunities and diverse tasks, materials, and practices are used [48]. Although the curriculum for L2 education in Finland states the objectives for L2 education, it respects the agency and accountability of teachers in implementing the curriculum objectives in their practice [7]. Immersion programmes (English–Finnish), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), language showering (students becoming acquainted with the language through songs, games, play), and communicative language teaching typically guide L2 education in Finland [11,18,49,50]. Regarding assessment, the new curriculum emphasises diversity in assessment and assessment-promoting learning, along with regular feedback about children's progress in learning [18].

Languages are usually taught by specialised subject teachers, but primary school class teachers qualified to teach all subjects may also be responsible for L2 instruction in Finland. Teacher education in Finland is well regarded due to the research-based approach adopted as well as the completion of pedagogical study. Teachers can have other subject qualifications as minors if they want by completing additional pedagogical study [51]. In first-grade L2 teaching, the instruction may be carried out either by a subject teacher in the specific language, a class teacher, or it may be co-taught by them. When L2 education became compulsory in the first grade, subject teachers in English (despite being qualified to teach children across all the primary ages) were not used to teaching such young children, who are not all yet competent in reading and writing [51].

3. Research Design

3.1. Participants and Data Collection

At the time of data collection, the early L2 education was in the pilot testing stage in Finland, which some municipalities took part in; so, this study is based on a convenience sampling strategy. The data were gathered in the capital Helsinki region since all the first graders had started L2 education in the region. In this regard, research permission was provided by Helsinki City. The study followed the ethical standards of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Ethics and Data Protection Act [52,53]. To survey the teachers, a link to the online survey (including 49 ranking items under four main sections along with three open-ended questions, which took 10–15 min to complete) was sent to all 90 primary schools in Helsinki.

This study is an exploratory survey study [54,55], which does not aim to draw conclusions, but attempts to probe L2 teaching in early years in Finland. Both being suitable for studies with fewer participants and allowing us to make inferences for the results, the exploratory survey fitted well to our study. Participation in the online survey was voluntary. Privacy assurances were provided to participants; their responses are anonymous and data

collected are confidential—they would not be shared with any other parties and are only accessible to the researchers. The survey, including five-point Likert scale items and open-ended questions, included (1) demographic information about the participants (age, gender, qualification, experience in teaching), (2) pedagogical planning, (3) teaching practices and choice of teaching materials, and (4) assessment methods. The quantitative items were supported by open-ended questions, focusing on the opportunities and challenges in early L2. Using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree/always to 5 = strongly disagree/never), the teachers were asked to rate their preferences regarding the above-mentioned areas. To add a qualitative dimension in the survey, the teachers were also asked to add comments to their rating if they had any. Providing reliability, the survey, prepared by the first author, was checked by another independent expert, cross-checked by the co-authors, and then field-tested with a small number of pilot study participants (n = 7). The survey was re-sent to the same pilot study participants after two months, and the reliability score was 0.85 between the two surveys. Later, the survey link to the web-based questionnaire was sent to all primary schools in Helsinki, including to a total of 90 English language teachers. Forty-nine teachers replied to the questionnaire, comprising female (N = 48) and male (N = 1) teachers working in primary schools across Helsinki. All the participating teachers taught seven-year-old first graders in Finnish primary schools. Most of our participant teachers were class teachers (N = 29) and subject teachers in English (N = 17). There was one pre-school teacher and two other teachers who did not specify their qualifications in the survey. Their ages varied from 20 to 60 and their experience in teaching language ranged from one to over 15 years. Except for one pre-school teacher who was qualified with a bachelor's degree, all others had a master's degree (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants (N = 49).

Numbers of Teachers	Age	Experience in Teaching	Qualifications	Highest Degree
48 female 1 male	20–29 years: 10 30–39 years: 11 40–49 years: 18 50–59 years: 9 60 and over: 1	Less than one year: 2 1–5 years: 13 5–10 years: 7 10–15 years: 14 15 years over: 13	Class teacher: 29 English teacher: 17 Pre-school teacher: 1 Others: 2 (the qualification was not specified by the participants)	Master: 48 Bachelor: 1

3.2. Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were quantitatively and qualitatively analysed to answer the research questions. The quantitative analysis included descriptive analysis, calculated using the SPSS program (25.0). It included percentage-frequency analysis of the Likert scale replies of the teachers [56]. While analysing the data, for reliability purposes, the categorical variable number was reduced from five to three; namely "agree" and "strongly agree" or "always" and "often" were taken as one group, while "rarely" and "never" or "disagree" and "strongly disagree" were accepted as one group. Also, mode and median values were calculated to be able to see the most frequent answers or the direction of the distributions. The number of the teachers is shown as "n" in tables and figures.

The data from open-ended questions, which asked the teachers to share their views about the opportunities and challenges in early English language teaching, were analysed with thematic analysis [57]. The responses were first read, categorised, and exemplified with excerpts from teachers' descriptions by the first author and later checked by the co-authors and the findings were reviewed.

4. Results

In this section, we discuss the results under four categories: (a) teachers' pedagogical planning, (b) teaching practices along with task and material choice, (c) assessment methods, and, finally, (d) teachers' perspectives on opportunities and challenges in early English classrooms.

4.1. Planning in Early L2 Classrooms

The online survey focused on teachers' pedagogical planning in English lessons. In Finland, the national core curriculum (NCC) is a uniform framework to enhance educational equality throughout the country. The municipalities and schools utilise the NCC when preparing their local curricula, taking their local needs and perspectives into consideration [58]. Figure 1 illustrates the teachers' responses about pedagogical planning in their teaching. Most teachers reported that they read all the available curricula in their planning and that they based their teaching on the curricula (N = 41, 84% for reading; N = 32, 65% using NCC; N = 40, 82% for reading; N = 33, 67% using CC; N = 21, 43% using SC).
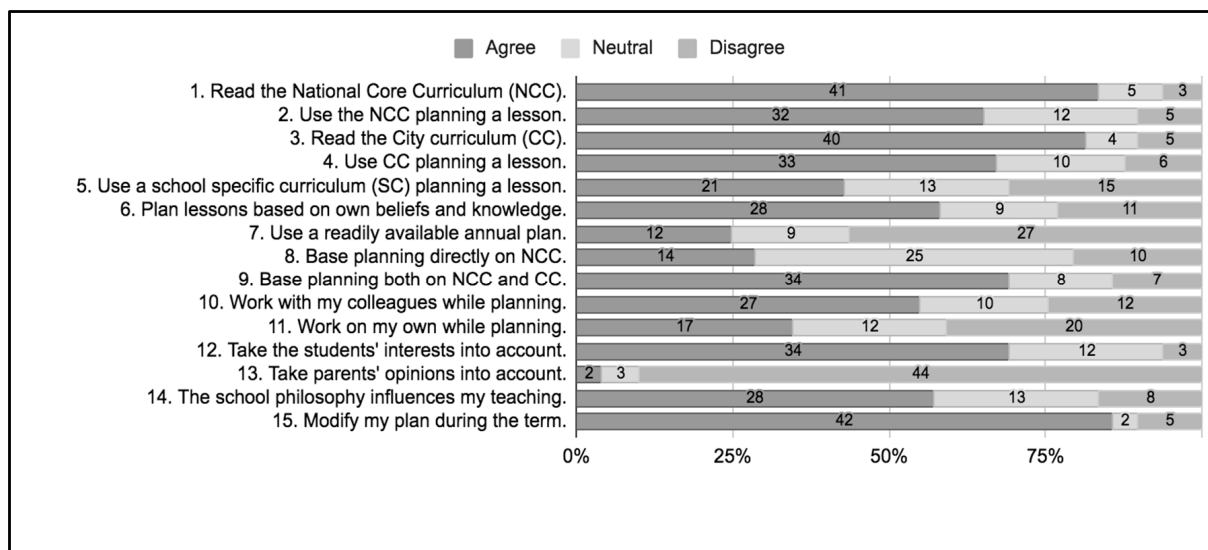

Figure 1. Teacher practices in planning (N = 49).

The Finnish curriculum gives freedom to teachers for its pedagogical implementation. The results also echo this practice, evidencing the teachers' own agency in planning and implementing L2 education (see item 6, N = 28/57% agree, item 7, N = 27/55% disagree, and item 15, N = 42/86% agree). The majority of the teachers also reported wanting to take their students' interests into account in their teaching (item 12, N = 34/69% agree). Yet, most teachers appeared not to take account of parents' interests or opinions when planning L2 education (item 13, N = 44/90% disagree). The teachers preferred to cooperate with their colleagues (item 10, N = 27/55% agree), and, hence, they were not eager to work alone (item 11, N = 20/40% disagree).

The teachers' responses to the open-ended questions underscored their agency in planning and implementing L2 education. For example, a teacher working in a special education class mentioned the importance of recognizing the children's abilities: "I have to base my teaching on the abilities of language learning in my special education class. All the children have severe learning disabilities in all languages, including their native first language". Another teacher stated that she uses social media (a social media platform for teachers like a Facebook group for teachers in L2) because there is no other language teacher at her school: "Social media is my colleague in early language teaching, since I'm the only one in my school".

4.2. Teaching Practices in Early L2 Classrooms

The results show that the teachers used individual, pair, and group tasks in L2 lessons, which reflected the use of communicative language, CLIL, and language-showering methods. Table 2 shows that most of the tasks and material were frequently used in early L2 classes. To illustrate, 55% of teachers (N = 27) used individual games, 80% (N = 39) used pair work, and 57% (N = 28) used group work in their lessons. The teachers preferred role-plays (N = 21, 42%) and board games (N = 21, 42%) in their classes. All the teachers

except one (N = 48, 97%) used music in their lessons. Activities that allowed children to move in the class were common (N = 40, 82%). The teachers preferred to have hands-on activities in their classes (N = 44, 90%). At times, the teachers also used handouts through which children could receive prompts for L2 vocabulary/sentence practice (N = 22, 45%). Drawing, colouring, and labelling tasks that did not require writing skills were often used by the teachers. (N = 40, 82%). The teachers also valued pronunciation tasks (N = 39, 80%) that evidence their preferences to L2 education based on the communicative approach. Activities which were not popular among the teachers were competitions (N = 20, 41%) and outdoor activities (N = 29, 59%).

Table 2. The frequency of teaching activities, tasks, and materials (N = 49).

		Always/Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never
Individual tasks	f	27	13	9
	%	55	27	18
Pair work	f	39	9	1
	%	80	18	2
Group work	f	28	18	3
	%	57	37	6
Role plays	f	21	13	15
	%	43	27	30
Competitions	f	14	15	20
	%	29	30	41
Music	f	48	1	0
	%	98	2	0
Hands-on tasks	f	44	4	1
	%	90	8	2
Handouts	f	22	18	9
	%	45	37	18
Move around class	f	40	9	0
	%	82	18	0
Outdoor activities	f	6	14	29
	%	12	29	59
Board games	f	21	20	8
	%	43	41	16
Draw, colour, label	f	40	6	3
	%	82	12	6
Pronunciation	f	39	7	3
	%	80	14	6

Most of the teachers stated that their priorities are listening and speaking skills. Writing has very little place in the lessons; instead, the teachers preferred to engage children in drawing (such as drawing what you hear to practise numbers, animals, etc.) and colouring activities (such as listening to the teacher and colouring the correct picture to practise vocabulary) or matching L2 vocabulary and pictures through handouts. Many teachers reported that they often combined songs, games, and physical activities and they used repetitions and oral practices. They reported that their preferences were on playful and creative lessons.

"What I use depends on what we're practising each time. For 1–2 graders I try to include some new content every time, but not too much. We have shared activities, pairwork and individual exercises.

Speaking and listening at first, then recognising words and then learning to write.

Mainly pictures, songs with choreography, small dialogues. Lots of listening, repeating and using the language orally. Also, games and exercises."

Figure 2 shows the teachers' use of technology in their teaching. The teachers stated that they used internet sources for songs, videos, and pictures, both to present and practise

L2 form, vocabulary, and pronunciation and to create materials for handouts. Overall, the majority of the teachers relied on technology with 83% (N = 41) using internet-based materials, 49% (N = 24) utilising technological devices, and 88% (N = 43) incorporating web sources like YouTube and other websites. However, computer programs such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint were not as popular, being used frequently by only 10 teachers, occasionally by 14, and never by 25 teachers.
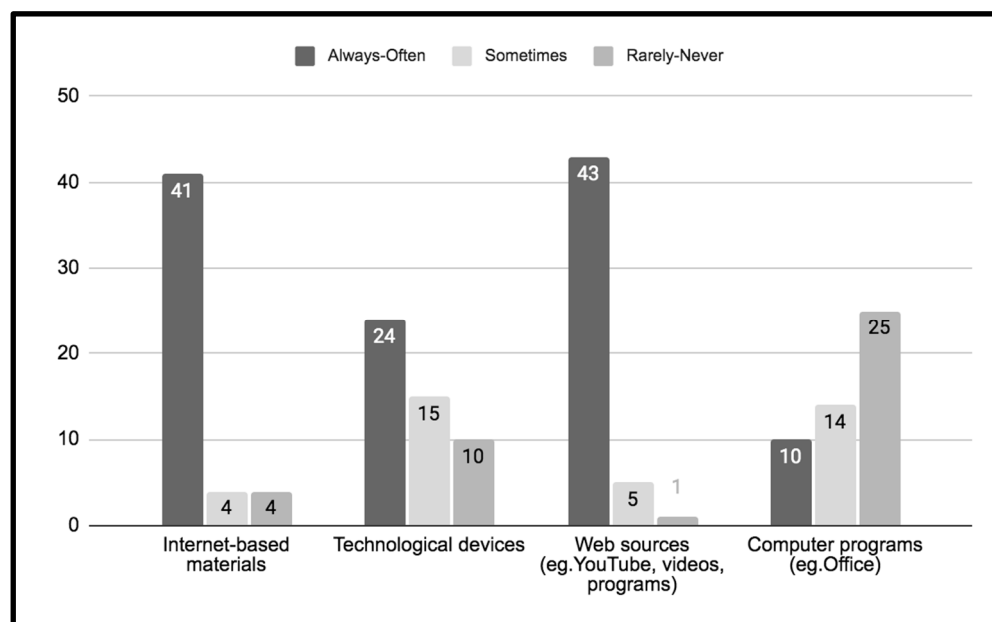

Figure 2. The use of technology by the teachers (N = 49).

Despite language showering or immersion being used in Finland [11,50], half of the teachers expressed that they used mostly Finnish as their instruction language (N = 25, 51%), while some teachers (N = 12, 24%) preferred to use English language as shown in Table 3. Interestingly, more than half of the teachers reported that they either 'rarely' or 'never' use English while teaching (N = 28, 57%).

Table 3. The instruction language (N = 49).

Language		Always/Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never
English	f	12	9	28
	%	25	18	57
Finnish	f	25	16	6
	%	51	33	12

At the time of the study, there were no textbooks/workbooks assigned for children to use, but there was a guideline for teachers about which topics/objectives to cover. Table 4 shows the materials the teachers used in their L2 teaching. The teachers reported that they did not follow one specific textbook in their L2 teaching; instead, they used a variety of textbooks, teachers' manuals, or online materials as sources for planning and/or preparing tasks. The majority of the teachers stated that they prepared their own materials such as handouts, puppets, flashcards, or presentations (N = 35, 71%). While some teachers had a ready material pack (a pack including a textbook, a workbook, flashcards) for early language education in their school (N = 16, 32%), many teachers reported that they needed more materials (N = 32, 65%). Consistent with the response for the use of technology above, the majority of the teachers stated that they rarely or never avoided using the digital materials (N = 44, 89%); however, the difficulty of preparing digital materials has also been stated. Finally, the teachers had almost equal preferences for using a classroom or a

language lab (where computers, headphones, and other materials are readily available for children) for L2 lessons (N = 14 always/often, N = 19 sometimes, N = 15 rarely/never).

Table 4. The materials (N = 49).

		Always/Often	Sometimes	Rarely/Never
Using one specific textbook	f	13	14	22
	%	27	28	4
Using several textbooks	f	22	12	15
	%	45	24	31
Using own materials	f	35	11	3
	%	72	22	6
Using a ready material pack (including a textbook, workbook, flashcards, etc.)	f	16	10	23
	%	33	20	47
Need more materials at school	f	32	9	8
	%	65	18	
A classroom/language lab need	f	14	19	15
	%	29	40	31
Avoid using digital materials	f	2	3	44
	%	4	6	90

4.3. Assessment Methods in Early L2 Classrooms

The findings in Table 5 show the teachers' assessment practices in early L2 classes. Less than half of the teachers (N = 20, 41%) reported that they keep a weekly or monthly record for each child's progress, which documents what children have achieved (e.g., counting 0–10, asking a friend's name). Most of the teachers preferred to use observation for assessing the children's performance without keeping written records (N = 46, 93%). Almost half of the teachers believed that it is rarely difficult for them to remember every child without a written evaluation (N = 24, 49%). The teachers said that they report children's development to the parents on scheduled assessment meetings, in which the teacher and the parents discuss the progress of the child's L2 learning (N = 11, 22% agree N = 27, 55% disagree).

Table 5. Teachers' assessment practices for English language lessons (N = 49).

Assessment of Teaching		SA/Agr	Neutral	Dis/SD	Median	Mode
1. I assess the students' performance regularly and keep track of the results.	f	20	15	14	3	3
	%	40.8	30.6	28.5		
2. I monitor the students' performance during the lesson and help them when they need it.	f	46	3	0	5	5
	%	93.8	6.1	0.0		
3. It is difficult for me to remember each student's improvement in the lesson without a written assessment.	f	13	11	24	3	2
	%	26.5	22.9	48.9		
4. I report the students' assessment to the parents between the scheduled assessment talks.	f	11	10	27	2	2
	%	22.4	20.8	55.1		
5. I discuss the students' learning with the other staff and collaborate with them.	f	29	11	9	4	4
	%	59.1	22.4	18.3		
6. I collaborate with other language teachers at the school regarding teaching content, teaching activities, or assessment.	f	34	6	9	4	4
	%	69.3	12.2	18.3		
7. Two hours a week for English language lessons is enough at early ages.	f	45	3	1	5	5
	%	91.8	6.1	2.0		

Regarding teachers interacting with colleagues, the teachers often cooperated with other teachers (N = 34, 69%) and with other faculty at school (N = 29, 59%) to assess the children's progress in learning if they needed to. This may not be for all children, but

particularly for the children who did not have motivation, who had difficulties in learning, and so on. For example, the language teacher could cooperate with a special education teacher for children with special education needs or with the children's class teacher or a school psychologist if needed. These multi-professional teams arranged a different teaching programme depending on the children's need in L2 (similar to how this is dealt with in other school subjects) to support the children's learning. The allocated time for lessons may affect assessment; therefore, we also asked about the teachers' opinion regarding weekly lesson time. Almost all the teachers thought that two hours per week is enough for children (N = 45, 92%). Supporting this quantitative result, the teachers expressed that two lessons (2 × 45 min), which is the allocated time weekly for L2 in grade 1 in Finnish primary schools [59], was enough for earlier ages. Yet, they stated that it would be better to have even shorter classes more often during the week. Other points raised by the teachers further illustrate their orientations and perspectives on assessment in L2 education. Most of the teachers valued formative assessments; in general, they thought that early language learning should be more about gaining familiarity with the language and enjoying it, instead of focusing narrowly on skill development. The teachers expressed the value of teamwork for planning and assessment, and also having enough time for assessment. The statements are as follows:

> "I don't think strong assessment is necessary with 1–2 graders. More important is to get to know the language and enjoy it.
>
> I would like to collaborate more with other teachers in planning and assessment methods but usually they don't have the time.
>
> Two hours per week is pretty decent as long as it's not in a 90 or two 45-min blocks. At least the other 45 min needs to be spread out along the entire week in 5–10-min blocks."

4.4. Teacher Perspectives on Early L2 Education: Opportunities and Challenges

The final question in the survey was open-ended and was about the teachers' perspectives on opportunities and challenges in early L2 classrooms. We received 32 replies from the teachers. The first notable result is that most of the teachers considered that the children were often enthusiastic, motivated, and energetic in early L2 classes. The teachers believed that there was plentiful room for interaction in early L2 classes, which provided children with opportunities for L2 practice. While interacting with their peers, children actively practised L2. The teachers also stated that the children had a lot of fun during playful interactive tasks in L2 and they were motivated to join in the activities. The children helped each other develop a shared understanding of the language, thereby supporting each other's L2 learning. In addition to L2 development, the children found friends and socialised easier during interaction, which helped them improve their social and communication skills, as the teachers stated.

Another notable finding was that the teachers expressed that young children often learned quickly and easily. The teachers also reported that vocabulary learning and improving pronunciation were important at earlier ages. Also, the teachers found the lessons with children enjoyable. Some of the statements from the teachers are as follows:

> "There are fewer negative attitudes towards language learning.
>
> Learning pronunciation and vocabulary items easily.
>
> Children are enthusiastic. They are very motivated to learn a new language.
>
> Teaching English to younger children is very rewarding, because they're keen learners."

In relation to challenges, the teachers stated that "The differences between skills among the kids are huge. The challenge is to find/make good material for the first graders. I find it difficult to teach English to the whole class at the same time. A lot of work it is, you need to come prepared". Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the challenges in

early L2 education are associated with; (a) group size, (b) variety in children's skills, and (c) materials available for children. Firstly, teaching L2 in a big group was seen as a problem by the teachers. In Finland, the group size of grade 1 is an average of 19.6 pupils [59], but in reality, this can go up to 25 at some schools. The teachers thought that directing children's attention to the tasks and finding enough time and space for each child to practise were difficult to achieve in big groups. Secondly, the teachers stated that children's language proficiency skills both in their native language and in L2 varied because of the differences in their background knowledge. According to the teachers, the children's concentration during tasks and difficulties they had while learning were also varied. Finally, finding appropriate materials for children in L2 education was a challenge; some materials included a lot of reading/writing and the teachers needed to modify them to use for first graders who were just starting to learn to read or write.

5. Discussion

This study investigated early English language teaching in Finland regarding pedagogical planning, teaching practices, and assessment methods by first-grade English language teachers, along with their perspectives about L2 education in the early years. In pedagogical planning, the curriculum is the basic source for teachers and most of the teachers stated that they were familiar with and based their teaching on the curriculum. It is an expected result since, in Finland, it is the teachers' responsibility to follow the curriculum. Previous research has also shown that the success of educational programmes is directly related to the knowledge and acceptance of the programme and the curriculum by the implementers, namely the teachers who choose the appropriate methods and teaching practices [15–17]. Additionally, in Finland, teachers have flexibility in the pedagogic implementation of the curriculum objectives and in their own teaching practices, including assessment [7]. Our study is proof of this flexibility; most teachers stated that they based their teaching on the curriculum and they integrated the curriculum goals and contents to their teaching in contextually situated ways by taking account of the child's interest. The teachers were also found to be motivated to create their own materials for teaching, which is also evidence of teacher agency.

Increasing children's participation in the learning process is emphasised in the Finnish national core curriculum [18]. Similarly, parental involvement is seen as significant for children's learning in early years of education [19,60,61]. Despite the teachers' efforts in making children active in L2 classrooms, most teachers expressed that they did not involve parents' opinions or support in children's L2 learning. Also, no additional comments were made about parental support in children's learning. Parents' involvement in collaborating with L2 teachers in Finland, hence, requires more attention in the future.

The results show that the teachers used varied methods and materials in their teaching. The teachers employed individual, pair, or group tasks using different materials such as handouts, songs, games, role-plays, and also available contemporary resources like digital tools (e.g., software programs, internet sources for games, videos, music) and they believed such tasks were good for an enjoyable, interactive learning atmosphere. Using pair/group work through playful elements focusing on interaction showed the focus on a sociocultural approach. Likewise, the results show a pedagogical concurrence with the benefits of teaching pronunciation and vocabulary at earlier ages. Listening/speaking activities through games, music, and pronunciation tasks were evidence of the communicative approach and/or task-based learning, while the audio-lingual method was used for vocabulary and pronunciation. This is an essential finding for children's L2 learning since both pronunciation and vocabulary learning have been regarded as the most challenging parts of language learning [62]. On the other hand, previous studies suggest that teachers need to have good communication skills and to be good at pronunciation and grammar knowledge in L2 [21,51]. The results display that only a few teachers used English actively while teaching, although they think they are the model for L2. Considering the contradiction in these

results, it can be inferred that using L2 as an instruction language should be promoted among teachers to increase children's exposure to the language.

Digital tools offer various resources for L2 education [13]. However, teachers' challenges with digital teaching cannot be ignored. One problem stated by the teachers of this study was the long preparation time to search and choose the appropriate material for children or modify it if necessary (e.g., cutting/extending videos or simplifying the content). Moreover, educational digital sources, which are ready to use, require some budget. Although it was not stated in the survey, it is obvious that using the latest digital resources may not be possible for all schools. Overall, this study shows that the agency and freedom given to teachers in the Finnish education system to choose and develop teaching materials was, at times, also challenged by the teachers lack of time and/or resources.

When it comes to assessment, assessing children's knowledge and skills plays an important role in early childhood education [63]. The Finnish curriculum [18] emphasises the formative nature of assessment that supports children's progress in L2 in a supportive and safe atmosphere. According to the results, most teachers used observation for assessment; they monitored children's progress during the lessons mostly without keeping written records of assessment. First of all, observation is important and can be very useful when used effectively. Yet, observation requires documentation to be effective [64]. Documentation of the child's learning in L2 is also important for teacher–parent collaboration and planning of L2 teaching [18,65]. A wide range of alternative assessment forms, including digital ones and practical teacher training, could be offered to assist teachers [13].

The teachers appreciated children's enthusiasm for language learning and they used interactional tasks, in which children can practise L2 in playful ways. On the other hand, the challenges mentioned by the teachers need attention for early L2 education. For example, keeping group size small was considered important for children's active participation in L2 learning [66]. Some important challenges the teachers mentioned included; (a) diversity in children's skills, (b) not having enough suitable materials for young L2 learners, and (c) increasing collaboration among teachers. These issues are worth giving attention to support early L2 teaching.

6. Conclusions

The practice of starting second language education early has been increasing around the world; consequently, L2 education policies and programmes have been evolving and research is needed in this recent context. This study illustrated English language teaching regarding pedagogical planning, teaching practices, and assessment in early L2 classrooms, along with teachers' perspectives about early L2 teaching in Finland. The findings demonstrate the important role of the curriculum in guiding teachers' work as it relates to planning and implementing L2 education and assessing students' progress. Many teachers reported that early L2 education was useful and that young children were enthusiastic about L2 learning. At the same time, some teachers expressed their concerns about big group sizes in their classes and the difficulty in serving children's various needs resulting from differences in their skills.

Our aim is not to generalise the results. The results shed light on the pedagogical planning, teaching practices, and assessment methods of a group of first-grade teachers in Finland. This context-specific information is valuable for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in understanding the dynamics and conditions of L2 teaching in Finland. The findings offer practical insights that can be used by language teachers and educators to design effective and informed teaching for early L2 learners. Comparing and contrasting the Finnish practices with other educational contexts can offer valuable cross-cultural insights, by learning each other's approaches and adapting teaching practices and implications to their specific cultural and linguistic environments. Moreover, future research with a larger number of participants (which was the limitation in this study because there was restricted availability of participants at the time of the study) could allow

researchers to apply further statistical analysis, and also to study the difference between the teachers' preferences and the variations between teachers or schools in early L2 education.

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